

Deepest Shade

by Jamie Grove

It wasn't Barbara's job to fix this crap. Some idiot put the tree in backwards and there were two figures in the clearing ahead instead of one. Maybe QA would catch the error.

Maybe.

Ali winked into the gallery next to Barbara. His avatar floated a few inches off the ground, dressed in black leather. The cheese stick Ali had for a head wagged back and forth.

"I thought I locked this gallery."

"Um, technically, I suppose you did. But this gallery resides in my allocated memory space so you can't really lock me out of here. Besides, being sysadmin has its privileges."

Barbara checked the time. She swore under her breath. She ripped out the tree and tossed it up and over the boundary of the gallery.

"Some people might call that littering."

"When did you develop a conscience?"

"After the last service pack, Baby."

"Baby? Did that come with the service pack too?"

"Oh, no. I've made a few modifications."

"Well, since you're all-powerful, maybe you could turn up the heat. It's freezing in here."

"Must be your apartment, Sweets. This gallery isn't equipped with climate control."

Barbara pulled pulled a fresh wireframe from the gallery's palette. White blossoms appeared on the tips of the branches. The flowers grew quickly, exploding into into puff balls, flowing over one another until the branches sagged. Barbara gripped the trunk and twisted the grid so that the canopy would arch just so over the garden path.

"This Samuel Palmer dude had some peculiar ideas about apple trees."

"It's called a romantic idyll."

"Yeah, I remember that line from the context file the V&A sent over. Usual crap vids and stuffy commentary it was too."

Ali cleared his throat. His voice, or rather the one he borrowed from the context file, resonated throughout the gallery.

"Calling themselves the Ancients, these artists sought to live close to nature and to paint and draw in a state of poetic rapture."

"Nice touch with the overlay. Certainly adds gravitas."

"Whatever. The whole thing sounds like bullshit to me."

Barbara glanced at his cheese stick.

"Good thing. Until you can figure out why it's not bullshit, I get to keep my job."

A little further along the path, the lonely figure of a lady stood in a clearing, her face tilted toward the sun. Ali drifted over and ruffled the train of the lady's rose-colored gown.

"Can you have sex with her?"

Barbara reset the figure. She made a show of locking it down.

"There was another figure here."

"It's not in the reference image."

"I know that, but it was here. Just before you winked in."

"There's nothing in the changelog, dear. Maybe you should take a break."

The colors in the undergrowth needed some massaging. Too bright. Barbara brought up the histogram in her display. She could see Ali's face through the translucent panel.

"You think I'm seeing ghosts again don't you."

"You're the only breathing person here as far as I can tell, Dollface."

Barbara shivered and rubbed her arms.

"I suppose a break wouldn't hurt. I'm almost done here anyway. Just some minor tuning left."

#

Back in her apartment, Barbara pulled off her goggles and rubbed her eyes. She went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. Outside, the sky was gray and thick with leftover clouds. Cars crawled through the slushy muck below.

Snowstorms in March. What she wouldn't give for a little sun.

Barbara finished the wine. She felt warm. A ping from her boss interrupted thoughts of sun and a second glass of wine. Barbara hoped she wouldn't slur her words too much or Lindsey would be too polite to notice.

"Shoreham Garden looks great."

"I need more time."

"Fiddle away, but I've scheduled Ali to chown rights to the client at eight sharp tonight."

"Translation: QA is already crawling all over the thing so don't bother."

"Hey, you're the artist. I'm just trying to run a business."

"And you didn't call just to give me a pat on the back."

"No. There's another rush job."

"I don't know, Lindsey. I'm really tired. I haven't been sleeping well. Ali thinks I'm seeing ghosts again."

"I understand, Barb. Really, I do... There's no one else I can trust with this work."

Lindsey passed over the background and the contract. There was a substantial bonus if Barbara could finish on time and a significant penalty for the gallery if she failed. An old photo showed the artist standing in front of a Victorian house, dark eyes averted from the camera.

"Is that Ella Schilling?"

"Yep."

"Are you serious? She has to be at least ninety."

"Ninety-four, actually. Her health is failing, and the client acquired what will probably be her last painting. He wants to flip it complete with a live capture."

"I'll bet she doesn't even own a pair of goggles."

"Maybe not, but from what I understand, she still paints every day. She even uses a shikkoku wall."

The gallery was across town. Barbara couldn't see the building but she knew roughly where it was. She wished that she could reach out tear the thing out of the ground, smash it to fucking bits.

"This isn't fair."

"I thought the quantum-dot might interest you."

"It's not the shikkoku. I'm half delirious. I'm going to regret this."

#

Barbara drove out of the city. She cranked the heat up and opened her ski jacket. An hour later she pulled into the gravel lane that led back to Alice Schilling's home. She passed beneath a canopy of bare branches. It was icy, and she kept a firm grip on the wheel.

Didn't look like anyone was home, but Barbara parked close to the house and hauled her bag onto the porch. A sharp blast of wind cut through her jacket as she leaned on the doorbell. Ali's words came back to her...

"You're the only breathing person here as far as I can tell, Dollface."

After few minutes of frozen silence, Barbara cupped her hand to the stained glass and rang again. The door swung open. A tall woman filled the frame, a shock of white ran through her black hair.

"Christ, you're impatient!"

"Sorry. I'm from the gallery. Ella Schilling's should be expecting me... Are you her daughter?"

"Not likely. I think I'd remember having children."

Barbara started to apologize but Schilling held up her hand.

"Hormone treatments are a wonder, but time has other ways of catching up."

Another blast of cold air swept across the porch. Schilling took Barbara's hand and pulled her inside.

"Goddamn winter!"

The artist led the way into the living room. Paintings covered the walls. Distant cities and landscapes, dark faces,

violent streaks of color and surrealistic shapes. There were gaps too. Ghostly outlines where pictures had hung for years. Schilling noticed Barbara looking at the blank spaces.

"I've been selling them off. The money's nice. Helps pay for the treatments. I was just giving myself an injection when you started pounding on the door."

"Sorry about that."

"You know, that's the third time you've apologized. Do you have a problem or something?"

Schilling took Barbara's hand again before she could answer.

"We'd better get to work. Clock's ticking."

#

They entered the studio. A gentle flurry started outside. Fifteen feet of seamless glass looked out onto the scene: a ruined barn, the woods beyond, snow swirling in random waves. Schilling waved her hand in front of the window and the snow collapsed into the polished void of the shikkoku wall.

The artist touched the glass lightly, then turned and walked over to a massive table littered with crushed paint tubes, brush-filled jars, and scraps of paper. There was a

sculpture in the center of the table, a candelabra constructed from large, rusted gears. Schilling lit the candles as Barbara unpacked her recording equipment.

"I brought along some goggles. They're a little old, so you'll have to relax. Otherwise, I'm not going to get anything but static."

Schilling sat down carefully on a sturdy wooden chair. Barbara fixed the thick, rubber goggles on Schilling's face.

"A long time ago, probably before you were born, I worked with a Japanese lacquer artist. I thought the technique for making the lacquer would be difficult, but it was relatively easy compared to the effort that went into working with the wood. The hard part was just getting past the idea of the darkness."

"Try to relax so the goggles can adjust."

"I heard you the first time. This is how I relax."

On the shikkoku wall, a swirling mass of purple crawled out of the abyss and began to resolve itself into a painting. The grim shape of an oak tree outlined by the colors of a faded sunset. A young man seated at the base of the trunk. Up in the tree, a second figure remained obscured by the branches.

"Tell me about the painting."

"We stayed out so late that night. I didn't expect I'd be able to see anything when I got up into that tree, but somehow it was like someone had turned on floodlights."

"So that's you in the tree?"

"Yes, I was fifteen. The boy's name was Cole. He would have been about seventeen."

Barbara tapped into Schilling's stream, winking into a warm, summer evening.

A group of children stood in the dim light. Cole stood on the porch. He was leading them in a game of hide and seek.

As Cole started counting, the children ran for the barn. Ella's long legs carried her quickly past the barn and up the hill. She slipped into the family cemetery through a low iron gate and walked between the headstones. At the base of the oak tree in the back of the cemetery, she slipped off her shoes. She climbed quickly into the mass of branches.

Ella could see the whole farm laid out bellow. Someone peeked out of the hay loft, then ducked back inside. The little cherry of Cole's cigarette bobbed along in the dark. He made a pass around the barn and walked out to the field. He stood there for a few minutes and then headed up the hill toward the cemetery. When he reached the oak, he sat down next to Ella's shoes and exhaled a wispy trail of smoke.

"Are you going to come down from there or do I have to come up?"

"The other kids are hiding in the barn, you know."

Cole laughed.

"Hiding? No, they're playing in there. I think they've already forgotten that we're playing hide and seek."

Ella swung down and sat next to Cole. He passed the cigarette to her...

Barbara rubbed her arms. A chill? Ella and Cole didn't notice anything except each other. Barbara looked around the cemetery. There was another figure standing near the gate. She left Ella and Cole and walked toward the shadow.

All around the shadow the damp cemetery grass had taken on a layer of frost. Barbara shivered in the cold. Her hand shook violently as she reached out to touch the figure.

"Who are you?"

The figure snatched Barbara's wrist. Burning cold. The sensation shot up her arm. She tried to pull away but the shadow held tight. Barbara felt herself drifting to the ground, guided by the pressure at her wrist. She stopped struggling and slipped into the cold void.

#

When she opened her eyes, Barbara was on the floor of the studio. Schilling was standing by the the shikkoku wall. The painting was gone. The glass was transparent. Outside, the snow had stopped. Everything was still.

"Is it usual to pass out during one of these sessions?"

"No, never before. I've been working a lot lately... seeing things that aren't there."

"What kind of things?"

"Figures. Shadows in the paintings. They aren't supposed to be there and then they disappear."

"Ghosts?"

"That's what Ali says."

She explained what happened while she was working on Shoreham Garden and then how the figure in Schilling's capture grabbed her. The chills. The pain. Schilling helped Barbara to her feet.

"Let's have some tea."

They went into the kitchen and Schilling put the kettle on. Barbara sat at the worn farm table, holding her head between her hands. Schilling moved to cupboard. She reached for one of the drawers, but hesitated before opening it.

"When I was a girl, we were told never to open this drawer. Ever. My father's been dead fifty years now, but it's not easy for me to open."

Schilling grasped the handle of the drawer and opened it. She reached in and pulled out a pistol.

"This is my father's gun. He had it that night, up in the cemetery when Cole and I were together. He stood at the edge of the tombstones by the gate and watched us. I don't think he ever said a word, at least I don't remember him saying anything. All I remember is seeing him standing there with the gun aimed at us. When I saw him, I shouted. He fired once. The bullet went through my wrist and embedded itself in the trunk of the tree."

Schilling put the gun on the table and showed Barbara her wrist.

"I was lucky to be able to use the hand again, but that's when I learned how to paint. It was supposed to be therapy and I guess it was in a way. What you described though, that burning chill, that's exactly what I felt when I got shot."

"And Cole?"

"My father only meant to scare him off."

Barbara looked at the gun.

"Do you think I saw your father?"

"I don't believe in ghosts."

#

It was past midnight when Barbara got back to the city. She set up her gear and pinged Ali. Told him to set up an empty gallery with climate control. When Ali was ready, Barbara uploaded the raw files from the shikkoku wall. She winked into the gallery and began working on Cole's shadowy figure.

Ali appeared beside her.

"You're not going to tune this by hand are you?"

Barbara teased the body from the background slowly, shaping the shoulders, separating his form and the mass of swirling shadows. She fed in the live capture until she reached the point where Ella had taken her first puff from Cole's cigarette. A chill entered the warm summer night. Barbara paused the feed.

"This'll take too long. At least let me do the first pass on the capture."

"What I want you to do is set up another gallery and load Shoreham Garden."

"I shipped that yesterday."

"If you don't do it this instant, I'll let Lindsey in on the fact that you're keeping pirate copies of galleries that should be single masters. Then, I'll tell her you've got a

backdoor into your source. She'll have those Czech programmers of hers in here tearing out your hooks before breakfast."

"Jesus! I didn't say I wouldn't do it. Which version do you want?"

"Set up the one prior to my final edits, when the apple tree was in backwards."

Ali winked out of Schilling's gallery, leaving Barbara alone in the cemetery.

She walked to the fence and began rolling the capture forward. A figure came up the hill. Barbara watched it move in a stuttery stop motion as she paused and restarted the feed. The temperature dropped.

"All done."

Barbara jumped. Ali stood behind her, his hands up in the air.

"Hey! Relax, Artzilla! The Palmer gallery is all set up, just like you asked."

She stopped the stream. The figure was gone. Barbara backed up but couldn't find it. The air felt warm and summer-like.

She switched over to Shoreham Garden, and Ali followed her.

The lady with the rose-colored gown stood alone in the clearing. A moment later a shadow appeared next to her. The shadow caressed the lady's hand then disappeared.

"What are you looking at?"

"You didn't see that?"

"What, the hottie in the fancy dress?"

"No, the shadow. It's gone now. You didn't see it?"

"Well, technically, I can't see anything, Babe. I interpret data, which I suppose might pass for visual acuity if you wanted to be abstract about it."

"So, you didn't interpret anything odd just now?"

Ali paused.

"The file size changed."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the gallery was about six terabytes when I loaded it. Now it's less than five... All the other archives have changed too. Seriously, this is fucking weird. I can't believe this happened."

"Technically, you can't believe in anything. You just interpret data. So, what's your interpretation?"

The wind blew through Shoreham Garden. The lady's rose-colored gown rustled. Barbara walked over and locked it down.

"I don't believe in ghosts, Dollface."

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