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The Velvet Fox

Catherine Fisher



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1



Seren Rhys is upside-down

Earth is up, sky is down.
See the world the wrong way round.

Seren's feet were wedged in the fork of a branch, so it was safe to let go with both hands.

She did.

Everything went giddy.

She was upside-down and fear squirmed through her stomach. Green grass swung above her head, with Tomos sitting on it. Clouds drifted at her feet. She waved her fingers and dangled straight down.

'Look at me!'

'Be careful, Seren.' Tomos sounded worried.

'You're supposed to be finding conkers. I don't see how you can find them like that.'

'It's great! You should try it.' Her dress was knotted round her knees – just as well, because otherwise she wouldn't have been able to see a thing. But now she could see Plas-y-Fran all topsy-turvy with its chimneys smoking, and sunlight on the windows, and birds on the roof, and the front door opening and someone coming out…

'It's Mrs Villiers!' Tomos hissed.

Seren gasped. With a great effort she swung herself up, grabbed the lichened branch, kicked her feet loose and almost fell into the heap of fallen leaves on the grass.

Breathless, she snatched a conker. 'Where's the needle? Where's the string?'

Tomos grinned. 'Don't worry. She's so short-sighted, she won't know it was you.'

'Is she?'

'Yes. And she won't wear glasses.'

Mrs Villiers stood on the step, shading her eyes against the sun. She said, 'Seren?'

Seren stood innocently. 'Tomos is teaching me how to make conkers, Ma'am.'

The tall housekeeper frowned. 'Well, don't get that dress dirty. Strange… I could have sworn I saw something rather peculiar in that tree. Some great bird, flapping its wings…'

Tomos and Seren stared wide-eyed up into the branches.

'Nothing there, now Mrs V,' Tomos said quietly. Seren giggled.

'Don't sit on the damp grass.' She went in.

'Do it like this.' Tomos pushed the needle expertly through the middle of the hard brown conker, pulled the string tight, and swung it round, making a soft whipping sound in the air. 'See? Easy.'

Seren frowned. Her needle was halfway but she couldn't get it to move forward or back.

'It's stuck!'

'Push harder. It'll go through.'

She put the conker down on the warm stone of the step and forced the needle through with all her strength. It went right in – and the conker fell apart in two perfect halves.

'*Blast*!' she hissed.

Mrs Villiers put her head back out. '*Seren Rhys*! What did you just say?'

Seren blinked. 'Er … I said "Rats", Ma'am.'

Mrs Villiers shook her head angrily. 'There are no rats in Plas-y-Fran, I can assure you of that!'

'No. I don't mean real rats.' Seren felt flustered. 'I mean, sort of – imaginary rats.'

She glared at Tomos, who was giggling.

'Your imagination is far too vivid, Seren. I never know what you'll come up with next. Have you finished Master Tomos's birthday card?'

'Yes, Mrs Villiers.' Seren looked down at her broken conker. It was her third try at stringing one but none had worked. Tomos had four already: fat, shiny brown missiles.

'So what do you do with them, exactly?' she muttered.

'Use them to smash the other person's. The one left whole is the winner.'

She looked wistful. 'That sounds fun.'

Tomos laughed and leaned back against the chestnut tree. The sun shone on his brown hair and cheery eyes. 'Haven't you ever played conkers?'

'There were no trees at the orphanage. Not many games either.' In fact, she thought, all the games she knew she had learned here. She was dying to try this one. 'Can we start now?'

'Not with mine!'

'But you're good at making them. Making all sorts of things.'

'Yes.' Tomos looked a little shy. 'Actually, Seren, I've made you something.'

He took a small object from his inside pocket and held it out and she stared at it with delight. It was a delicate bracelet of red shiny beads all strung together, with a real acorn painted gold in the middle. For a moment she was astonished. 'Oh, Tomos! It's lovely!'

'They're not real beads,' he said hastily. 'They're only dried hawthorn berries. But they look good.'

She took it and fastened it on her wrist. 'But it's your birthday, not mine.'

He shrugged. 'Well, I know. But it's just a thing to say that we'll always be friends. And on the back of the acorn I've put a secret sign in water from the spring. *S* for Seren. It's invisible. I've decided that you can only see it when the full moon shines on it. That's my magic.'

Seren couldn't see it at all, but she nodded, admiring the loose loop of beads on her wrist. 'It's lovely. It's the best bracelet ever.'

He jumped up suddenly. 'Good! Now let's run!'

Restless, he sped away towards the lake, where a faint mist lingered. As Tomos raced into the mist he seemed to disappear; Mrs Villiers cried out in alarm. 'Seren! Go after him. Quickly!'

Seren scrambled up. 'Wait for me,' she yelled.

Tomos's footprints were dark outlines in the dewy grass.

For a scary moment she couldn't see him at all. But then he was right in front of her, arms folded, looking annoyed. 'I'm fine!' he snapped. 'I'm getting sick of them all being so worried about me all the time. I can look after myself.'

Breathless, she shook her head. 'You can't blame them after what happened.'

Last year, Tomos had been missing for a year and a day. The house had been an empty place of sorrow, and his parents, Captain Jones and Lady Mair, had fled from the grief and bewilderment. None of them had known that Tomos had been a prisoner of the Fair Family, in their strange underground kingdom of snow. No one except Seren, and the Crow.

'You don't know what it was like when you weren't here.' Seren pulled a fallen leaf out of her

hair and threw it down. 'It was awful. So miserable!'

'Well, I'm safe now.' He grabbed her hands and made her dance in a giddy circle. 'And tomorrow is MY BIRTHDAY!'

His yell was so loud that it sent all the jackdaws up from the elm trees in a chorus of startled cackling. At the same time, the sun slanted through and drove the mist away, and there was the house, Plas-y-Fran, the right way up this time, golden in the autumn light, all its windows shining, and smoke rising in slim columns from its clustered chimneys. Seren stopped and stared at it.

She still couldn't believe she was living here. Sometimes, late at night, she woke up from a dream and thought that she was back at St Mary's Orphanage with the spiteful girls in the dormitory. But then she saw the curtains of her bed, and the cosy room with its fire and wardrobe, and remembered that it was all right, she was at Plas-y-Fran, she had rescued Tomos; she had a family. Now she stared up at the gables of the house and nodded firmly to herself. This was home now. No one would ever send her away again.

A whoop of delight came from behind her.

Tomos had found a pile of red and golden leaves as high as his head. He kicked them wildly; he spread his arms and dived in headfirst. 'Come on, Seren!'

She jumped in after him. At once they were pelting each other with fistfuls and there were leaves in her hair and eyes and even stuffed down her collar, so that she screeched and pulled them out. Tomos tossed armfuls into the air. 'I'm safe! They will never get me now! Never!'

As soon as he yelled the words a gust of cold wind came out of nowhere. It whipped the leaves, scattering them like red rags over the grass, flinging them angrily aside.

Seren shivered. It was a strange, icy wind. It smelled of danger.

'Tomos, I don't think you should…'

'We beat the Fair Family, Seren!' He laughed as the leaves fell on his upturned face. 'You and me and the Crow! We're safe from Them now! SAFE. *Forever!*'

The wind lifted the leaves. They swirled in strange patterns, high into the air. A vast arc of them gusted down the driveway, past the gate.

And Seren blinked. For the red and copper and golden leaves shimmered and transformed, condensed and clotted into a strange glistening mass; it became a red carriage with four wheels and two bright-chestnut horses, galloping towards her out of the swirl.

'HEY!'

The furious yell came from a very small man who had come round the corner of the house with a broom and a wheelbarrow. 'Stop that right now!' he roared. 'Standing there shouting about Them. Defying Them! Are you mad, boy? Is your head cracked?'

Tomos dropped a guilty handful of leaves. 'Sorry, Denzil… But They can't hear me…'

'Of course They can! Haven't I taught you better than that!' Denzil stabbed a finger at the woods. 'The Fair Family are everywhere. Hiding, listening, spying, watching. In holt and hollow, bark and brake.' He stepped closer and some of the anger went out of him. Seren saw he was really very afraid. 'Tomos, boy, you don't taunt Them. Never.'

Tomos looked upset. He and Denzil were always great friends. He took the broom. 'All

right, Denzil. I promise I won't ever do it again. And we'll sweep up the mess.'

Seren took the handles of the wheelbarrow and pulled it closer, though it was heavy. She began to pile leaves inside, great rustling wet handfuls of amber and gold, while Tomos swept the rest together, but over his shoulder she saw that the red carriage that had come so strangely out of the leaf-fall was now rumbling towards the front of the house. The icy wind had gone as quickly as it had come; it seemed only she had noticed it. But it left a worry inside her. Tomos shouldn't have shouted like that. He was so restless today!

Denzil turned, quickly. 'Who's this then? Never seen that rig before.'

Captain Jones had come out of the house. He stood waiting.

'Visitors!' Tomos muttered. 'Come on.' He dropped the broom and hurtled across the grass. Seren raised her eyebrows at Denzil and ran after Tomos, leaving the wheelbarrow half filled.

They reached the front-door steps just as the carriage rolled to a halt, the horses proud and whickering. Seren wanted to pat their soft noses

but she didn't have time because the driver, a small man in a hunting coat, jumped down and opened the door. He reached in and a hand wearing a red velvet glove came out and took his.

The carriage dipped. A large lady climbed out of it. She wore a travelling cloak and muff, and her dress was as russet and shiny as the leaves. As she looked up Seren saw she had a plump, round face, with small bright eyes and frizzy hair pinned back in a bun. On her hair perched a tiny hat.

'Oh, my dears!' she said. 'What a wonderful house! What a palace!'

She shook out her skirts; the fabric was creased and shimmery. 'Such a journey I've had! Those trains … so comfy and warm. And I was quite spoiled with the first-class ticket you sent me, *dear* Captain Jones.'

Captain Jones frowned. He looked a little confused. 'I sent you? I'm sorry, I don't…'

'I'm Mrs Honeybourne.' She smiled and took his hand with her gloved fingers. 'Oh, but you remember me now, don't you?'

For a moment Captain Jones was blank. Then a sort of flicker went over his face and right through his eyes, and he bowed hurriedly. 'Ah,

yes! I remember clearly now. We met last week, in … er?'

'London.'

'Yes, of course! I engaged you to be…?'

'Tomos's governess.'

Seren blinked. *A governess*! She hadn't been expecting that! But, after all, Tomos would have to go to school soon and he needed to be made ready. Would she go to school, too? A small shiver of excitement tingled through her.

Tomos was always exceedingly polite. He must have been startled, but he didn't show it. He put out his hand. 'Hello. I'm Tomos Jones. Welcome to Plas-y-Fran.'

Mrs Honeybourne shook his fingers with great ceremony. 'What a sweet boy,' she murmured.

'Well, yes…' Captain Jones turned. 'And this is my ward and dear god-daughter, Seren.'

Seren bobbed a quick curtsey. 'Hello.'

'Hello, my dear.' Mrs Honeybourne's quick eyes took in every detail of her face and dress. 'So you're a ward! Goodness me, I had thought you were the gardener's daughter, the way you were piling up those leaves. How very foolish of me!'

Everyone laughed, though Seren felt a tiny bit

annoyed. But now Mrs Villiers had come out of the house with Tomos's mother, Lady Mair, hurrying behind her, and there was a lot of surprised welcoming and shaking of hands and asking about the journey, and Lady Mair said she had had no idea a governess was coming, and Captain Jones was very apologetic, and said how could he have forgotten, and Mrs Honeybourne's trunk had to be got down and all her bags carried in.

Seren said quietly to Tomos. 'This'll mean lessons. No more conkers.'

He shrugged. 'It could have been a lot worse. She looks jolly, actually.'

Seren nodded. She had read enough stories about children being beaten and scolded by vinegary governesses to agree. Mrs Honeybourne would be nice, she decided. They would have fun reading in the schoolroom upstairs, about history and kings and far-off countries and wild animals, and maybe they'd do music and drawing. Tomos was very good at drawing. Much better than she was. And she'd always wanted to learn Latin and Greek and French and all sorts of things…

A large soft bag was suddenly dumped in her arms. 'That's my knitting, dear,' Mrs Honeybourne

whispered. 'Take care of it. I never travel anywhere without it.'

'Have we everything now?' Lady Mair said. 'Then please come inside, Mrs Honeybourne. You must be absolutely desperate for some tea.'

They all trooped in. The table was laid in the drawing room, and a small fire already crackled in the hearth. The room looked splendid, with bright china and glass in all the cabinets, much better than when Seren had first seen it, all dark and cold and the furniture under dust sheets. The whole house was alive now, and she felt proud of it.

Mrs Honeybourne sank thankfully on to the sofa. She took off her hat, and her hair frizzed out, but she kept her red gloves on. She stared round. 'Oh my lady, what a beautiful room. Such elegance. Such lovely china!'

'It was my mother's wedding set.' Lady Mair poured out tea and handed it round; Seren liked the way she never expected the servants to do that. 'We are so glad you've come, Mrs Honeybourne. My husband tells me you are quite the right person for our children.'

Seren's eyes lit up. Our *children*! Just hearing that made her happy.

'Yes, my lady, and I know this is the right place for me.' Mrs Honeybourne drank a scalding mouthful.

There was a slight, awkward pause. Then Captain Jones said brightly, 'Well, I'll just leave you all to chat,' and escaped through the door. Mrs Villiers said, 'I'll prepare a room, my lady.'

'Yes, of course.'

When they were gone, Lady Mair put her arms round Tomos. 'We are so proud of our children, Mrs Honeybourne. Tomos is a great artist and Seren … well, Seren is such a reader! I think she's gone through half the library already.'

'Already?' Mrs Honeybourne's bright eyes fixed on Seren.

'I've only been here since Christmas,' Seren said, reluctantly.

'Really! And before that?'

'The orphanage.'

'Oh, you poor dear,' Mrs Honeybourne said softly. 'How terrible for you.'

Seren shrugged. 'It was all right.'

'So brave!' Mrs Honeybourne finished her tea and rattled the cup into the saucer. 'I will be teaching both the children then, Lady Mair?'

'Oh, yes.' Lady Mair nodded her dark hair firmly. 'We want Seren to benefit. We believe that girls should have as good an education as possible.'

The governess smiled cosily at Seren. 'Dear Tomos will need his Latin and Greek.'

'I can do that too,' Seren said quickly.

Mrs Honeybourne didn't answer. Instead she squirmed round and began rummaging in the bags, wisps of hair coming undone from her bun. 'I have something special for Tomos. Now where did I put it… I'm such a scatterbrain… Ah, yes!'

From the largest bag she carefully lifted out a gold-coloured box. 'I know it's not until tomorrow…' She turned to Tomos. 'But as soon as I saw this in the shop window in London I simply couldn't resist it! Happy birthday, dear Tomos!'

She put the box in his hands.

Startled, he looked down at it.

'What do you say?' Lady Mair whispered.

'Thank you! I mean, thank you very much, Mrs Honeybourne.'

The box shimmered in the sunlight, an enticing golden cube. 'Can I open it?'

'You shouldn't till tomorrow,' Seren said.

'Oh, do let him.' Mrs Honeybourne clasped her red-gloved fingers tight. 'Just this once. I so want to see his happy little face!'

Lady Mair smiled. 'Mrs Honeybourne, you really shouldn't have bought anything. Tomos is quite spoiled enough as it is. But I suppose, just this once…'

Instantly Tomos tugged the lid off the box. Seren stepped closer, craning her neck to see. Even Lily the housemaid, clearing the cups, glanced over curiously.

Tomos stared inside. For a moment his eyes were wide with surprise. Then he almost whistled with delight. 'That's amazing,' he breathed.

Reaching into the box he carefully pulled out a large drum-shaped object and put it on the tea table.

'Oh,' Lady Mair said, clasping her hands.

'I knew you'd love it,' Mrs Honeybourne murmured.

'That's lovely, that is,' Lily said.

Seren stared at it, astonished.

She had seen pictures of them in books, though she had never been to a fairground. She knew what they were called.

A carousel.

Its base was red and gold, and in its centre was a striped pole topped by a golden ball. The ones she had seen in pictures had all had wooden horses that rose and fell, for children to ride on. This one was far too small to ride on, of course. It had just three galloping horses and each horse had a rider.

Tomos reached out and turned the small handle on the side, and with a faint, magical tinkling music the carousel began to spin round. And the figures moved. There was a Soldier in a red tunic who pattered on his drum as he rode. A Dancer in a white dress swirled her perfectly pointed feet. A Juggler threw glinting balls into the air and deftly caught them again. And, in the centre, not riding at all but curled up watching them all with its sharp eyes, sat a small red Fox.

'It's fantastic!' Tomos was beside himself with excitement. 'It must have cost so much!'

Mrs Honeybourne smiled comfortably. She reached out and patted his hair with her gloved hand. 'Worth every penny, dearie,' she said.

Then she levered herself out of the chair and gathered her cloak and hat. 'Well, I must go and find my room, my dears. Come along.'

Piling themselves with her belongings, Lady Mair and Seren stood up, but Tomos stayed with the carousel as if he couldn't bear to leave it, winding it up again as soon as it tinkled to a halt. The governess smiled, and swept out into the hall till she came to the stairs. Seren, hurrying close behind with the bag of knitting, looked up and saw Sam.

The white cat was sitting on the landing, as if he'd come to inspect the new arrival.

Mrs Honeybourne paused. It was only the tiniest fraction of a pause, but at the same moment the cat opened his eyes wide, fluffed his fur out like a puffball, flattened his ears and spat.

Then he fled in panic up the stairs.

'Why did he do that?' Seren wondered out loud.

Mrs Honeybourne gave Seren a swift, sidelong look with her sharp eyes, and, just for a moment, the governess looked like quite a different person, angled and slanting in the mirror on the wall.

'Cats are such silly animals,' she said.

Then she gave the jolliest of laughs, so that Lady Mair laughed too, and they walked up the stairs together.

But Seren stayed on the bottom step, her arms full of knitting and a sewing box. *No, they're not,* she thought, staring after Sam. *Cats are clever.*

Then they called her and she had to run after them, scattering wool and needles.

