

Never Seen  
by *Cassie Thomson*

Darkness fell across a wild land. Brambles reared; tree limbs reached, gnarled, for the indigo sky. In only a few places, green sprouted, though seldom did it share its emerald wealth with the other twisted, blackened weeds surrounding it.

Ruins of old stone buildings and houses protruded from the ground, grey mists lingering around their broken walls, shrouding the ghosts of a once cheery little village. White pillars rose northeast of this small skeleton of a town, rising from the wreckage that circled them. The crawling, withered plants and briars hadn't flourished near those four marble columns.

A desolate manor house, covered with peeling, white paint, sprawled within the boundaries of the colorless pillars, its windows thrown open. Fog rolled in and out of the windows on the lower floors of the house, where nothing but mold and mildew from the Great Flood lived. Ghostly white curtains hung out of every window on the upper floors of the building, fluttering in a non-existent breeze.

Inside, a young woman sat in a window seat, alone in the house; a miniature harp in her hands. Bright cushions and blankets covered every surface, but the atmosphere was far gloomier than the warm furnishings.

For all the oranges, reds and golds of the fall colors, the woman wore a deep, dull blue; a blue of sadness and pain. Her dress was long and full; folds of it draped themselves over the edge of her seat. For a while, she stared out the window. Losing everything had left no desire to play her harp, even after years of waiting. Her brothers and sisters had been washed out of the house

with everything on the bottom floors when the Flood had hit. Her parents had gone missing as well. She was numb.

Years passed, and nothing remarkable happened. She watched as ivy crept up the marble pillars, and then up the walls of her house. She never slept; never ate. How could she, when they might all appear when she was asleep? Hope kept her hanging on; grief fed her hunger, quenched her thirst, and kept her eyes open.

She felt every day like a stab of a knife cutting at her threads of hope. Every day, another string was hacked in half. She wouldn't give up though. Never would she lose faith in her family.

Her fingers became weak after half a decade of holding the harp in the same place. It dropped to the tiled floor, falling as if in slow motion. When it hit, the sound of the mixed up chords broke the spell of silence. Carefully picking up her harp, she put it back on the window seat, and avoided looking at it for as long as she could stand.

She went about her business: eating and sleeping again, dusting her room and cleaning it. She wondered where her family was, but never longed for them. Her six brothers and sisters; her mother and father were distant memories. She never stepped outside her room, though, for fear she should be reminded that they had walked down those hallways in the morning to wake her up with their music.

She plucked at the harp strings for the first time in ages; the first music in the house was the haunting melodies of her harp, expertly played. As she played the last song she could think of, a loud *boom!* was heard from below.

The noise had come from the first story, where she never went.

She knew she had to find out what was going on. The thought of the hallway terrified her, but what would the ground floor bring?

Slowly, she tiptoed across the cold floor tile, aware of every shadow and flaw as her feet stepped on them. Her harp was clutched in one hand. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, placed her hand on the iron door handle, and pulled it open.

Ten seconds later, she opened her eyes. Looking up and down the corridor, she reassured herself that nothing was lying in wait for her, and let out her breath. Focusing on placing one foot in front of the other, her shoes sinking into the rich, red plush carpet, she made it to the stairs in minutes.

The stairs seemed to have been shorter since the last time she'd seen them; she'd grown. She hugged the harp against her chest, and closed her eyes. Remembering how many steps there were was easy; she'd counted them as she'd gone down them every day when she was small. Closing her eyes, hand on the rail, she counted down the number of steps until she reached the bottom floor. Her heartbeat sped up every time she took a step, making her breathing uneven. Even so, she pressed on.

At forty-eight steps, she heard her shoes click on the tile, and opened her eyes. A surprisingly bright beam of sunlight shone in her eyes.

The mold and mildew she'd thought would be there was utterly gone. The doors had been opened to the sunlight; fresh air milled about inside the great hall. The land beyond the open doors was fertile and lush, no longer flooded by salt water. Children and adults alike screamed and laughed with joy, their home brought back and houses rebuilt.

To the young woman though, the greatest miracle of all was the eight silhouettes in the doorway, each holding a string instrument. The smallest figure, the one holding a violin, said, "We came back, Adele. We're all home now."

And finally, for the first time in six years, Adele allowed herself to cry. Her family crowded around her, and every sorrow she felt was gone, except for one. It was a short-lived grievance, though, because when she looked up, her auburn hair sticking to the tears on her cheeks, the shape of another person appeared in the entry. The sun lit his hair like a halo from behind, a golden ring glimmering on his left ring finger.

Adele just stared at him; there was no way he could possibly be alive. Here he stood though, in the flesh, looking at her like she was the only light left in the world.

Her husband had returned to her, there to stay at last.