

THE GOBLIN QUEEN

By C.E. Giugno

When the director first met Dora Willis, he thought she was a fool.

Bright and exuberant. Doe-eyed. Fresh out of the suburban wilds with the delusion (practically an epidemic these days) that she was somehow going to be Hollywood's next Jennifer Lawrence.

The young woman shook his hand warmly, thanked him for the opportunity to audition for "such an exciting new show", and read her lines with an appropriate amount of feeling. She was then dismissed in the next five minutes.

Dora Willis wasn't *bad*, of course, but then again, none of them were. The director muttered this to himself, massaging his temples. He had a theory that to make it to Los Angeles, you *did* have to be a halfway decent actor. His colleagues would laugh about it, saying he was too nice to the hordes of hopefuls-- but he could never quite bring himself to believe that. Surely a city in which your talent made you no one special was worse than a city where you didn't have to work hard for your mediocrity.

Dora managed to surprise the director though, by making the first cut by a hair. Quite literally. "We need a real ginger" the marketing manager had explained, "nothing out of a bottle this time." The director thought this was being rather excessive-- use a little CGI and no one could tell the difference-- All the same, he wasn't really interested in getting into a long argument over whether some redhead from Hicktown, Wherever would audition a second time.

So the next day he, yet again, sat through her innocent gratitude, endlessly bouncing curls and utterly passable performance. This time though, the actress got ten minutes until she was finally dismissed.

The director sighed and checked his watch. Outside the door, he was aware a parade of nearly identical gingers waited-- like lambs for the slaughterhouse. Suddenly, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Ms. Willis," he called out to the young woman before she managed to shut the door. Dora peeked her head back in, lips pursed in a bemused pout. "Yes sir?" she asked.

"You're hired. Tell the other women out there that auditions are over."

For a moment there was silent, then a faint stammer. "...me?"

The actress's tone was near disbelief almost as though she knew the element of sheer luck that had gone into the choice.

"Yes, you." The director gave a monotone reply through cracked lips. He was thirsty. Perhaps when the all the would-bes left, he could go out for a Starbucks run. As these two thoughts meandered about in his brain, he was distinctly aware that Dora was still standing before him, rambling on and on about her *feelings* of being chosen.

"You may go now." he interrupted though he knew it was a rude thing to do.

And indeed, the young woman's face fell-- but only for a moment. Then it was back to elation-- almost as though her optimism was an unstoppable force of nature. "I'll make you proud," Dora said, and the director agreed. "I suppose you will."

He was polite this time and left out the fact that anyone from the faceless red-haired mass could have done the same.

Dora knew she was a fool. Discovered it at birth and was keenly aware of it the rest of her life.

Her mother had put it rather cleanly the day that her daughter had finally left Berdsville, Kentucky to strike out for Los Angeles. “The thing about you Theodora is that you know you’re smart. We both do.”

Dora had concluded long ago that her cleverness--which did indeed exist-- was completely unrelated to her foolishness. *Sophomore*. The traits were an oxymoron, two sides of the same coin, and together they made Dora whole. So she nodded. “I suppose you could say so.”

Then the other shoe dropped. The mother put her hands on her hips and grabbed the handle of her daughter’s suitcase before she could shift it out the door. “But then why LA? Why *choose* this wild goose chase? You got into UVA, honey-- biomedical track.” The older woman’s tone became pleading. “I thought you said you wanted to become a doctor.”

And so Dora had. In her junior year of high school, after a length of painstaking research, the young woman had decided that the job she would be best suited for was most likely some sort of hospital specialist. Anesthesiologist perhaps. But then again she had said a lot of things during high school.

“I know what I told you, Mother,” Dora clasped her mother’s hands gently, “But it was just words I think. Not heart or soul or anything like that.”

“It was a *future*.” Mrs. Willis bit her trembling lip.

“This is a future too,” her daughter promised but the elder woman only turned her gaze to the floor. The air lapsed into silence as the two women, family yet utter strangers still, embraced in a minutes long hug.

“Be careful,” her mother whispered, “my dear heart.”

“I will,” Dora promised.

Four months later, the aspiring actress was living from gig to gig, holed up in 20 by 20 foot studio apartment, eating instant ramen almost exclusively. She supposed--not that she'd ever tell her mom-- that might qualify as breaking her word.

All the same, this wasn't the worst part. Dora could trick herself into liking stiff pasty noodles and cramped living conditions. Yet she could not hide from herself the truth now coming to light-- that this future she'd chosen, and indeed perhaps her own being, were nothing special.

Take for example, that director she had met today-- a man of forgettable tendencies and an even more forgettable name. Dora was certain that though she had won the part, she had not distinguished herself in the slightest from the other candidates. In fact, as she left the audition room, the young woman had experienced a moment of disorientation. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror-- all around her eager gingers repeating and repeating the same lines that she had just uttered moments ago.

She passed on the director's message that auditions were over but felt like a faker all the while.

For by then, Dora already had made her first epiphany-- that she was only a printer copy, a slight variant on the time-honored tradition of puckish redheads. As for the second realization, the actress had begun to get a sinking feeling about a week ago that, up until now, everyone besides herself must have been conscious of this unoriginality.

Why else would her mother tell her to take the easy path, stay safe at home?

Why else would the director look at her with such barely disguised pity?

Know yourself, her high school theater teacher said, then the truth will set you free. But that adage was somewhere far away, in the comforting realm of Berdsville, Kentucky. Here the truth simply maddened Dora, ate away at her core like battery acid.

So she wasn't even remotely surprised when she began seeing things.

In season one, the hallucinations were small. Mere blurs in the background, whispers in the evening light. Dora could deal with them just as easily as she deflected her parents' prying phone calls. But unlike those uncomfortable conversations, the visions grew and grew until they were impossible to ignore.

Out of the corner of her eye, Dora might notice something strange-- say a stumped figure crouching in the corner or a crow that was a touch more scales than feathers. She would dismiss it at first-- Theodora Jane Willis was a fool, but not foolish enough to trust her own senses. Not now. And especially not in this city of sparkle and illusion. But the figures were persistent-- trailing her not quite out of sight, not quite silent. They watched her performances, even seeming to enjoy them, with always a round of applause or a ghoulish smile at the end.

Their audience was unsettling to say the least... but it would be a lie for Dora to deny her pleasure in entertaining the little demons. Grotesque as they may be, their interest

seemed to be in Dora alone. And in a business where your very self was the commodity that was bought or sold or trashed, that was a rare, rare thing.

So she indulged them-- little gifts here and there, balm for crackly goblin skin, coffee (which they seemed to enjoy)-- and refused to consider these odd little creatures a sign of creeping madness. Theodora Willis, after all, was their queen. She was the one in control, not the other way around.

In fact, sometimes they seemed the only thing she *could* control...

It took five seasons for the director to tire of Dora Willis and her persistent energy. To be honest, he was surprised it didn't come sooner-- despite her friendly words and easygoing smile, there was something almost haunted about the girl. There were times, she would stare into space for minutes on end, intently focused on absolutely nothing. Occasionally she would buy coffee just to leave it on the lid of a garbage can, utterly untouched. And once-- when he had thought he heard her laughing in the breakroom with one of her costars-- he turned the corner and found the young woman to be entirely alone, face reddened and crinkled with an unearthly joy.

Yes, Dora Willis had to go. For the good of the show and most likely her own mental health. Certainly the director's anyhow. Besides it wasn't as though it would be a big deal to replace her. There were plenty of other halfway decent ginger actresses in LA, none of whom who would be quite as...unique.

Now the only thing left to do was deliver the bad news. The director would have *preferred* to leave the matter to one of his many underlings-- there were few things as volatile as

a jilted actress-- but that was terrible etiquette. Especially to one of the costars. Dora had done her job reasonably well, enough so that she deserved to be fired face-to-face. Besides, the director considered himself one of the few remaining men of principle in the Hollywood business. Men of principle did not just let a lady go without a single word even if the lady in question was rather...strange.

So as the final episode of season four drew to a close, the director pulled Dora Willis off to the side in Production Studio number four and prepared to deliver the bad news.

“Yes? What may I do for you?” the actress’s eyes darted to the side as though she had seen... not quite a ghost. More like an old friend. The director followed her eyes but could find nothing.

“Listen,” he murmured, trying to fight the goosebumps rising on his forearms, “Dora. It’s been a pleasure working with you-- really-- but I’m afraid--”

“You’re firing me, aren’t you?” She didn’t sound surprised, more relieved that the death knell had finally rung. “Please don’t do it. I need this job.”

The girl’s eyes became dewy and the director tried to look away. This was the worst part. “I know, I know. But a lot of actresses in LA need jobs and...well, wouldn’t it be a pity not to give them a chance?” He waved his hands like a magician, trying to conjure a distraction for her tears. He was a terrible illusionist though, and Dora Willis continued to cry.

“I’ve got to make it,” The actress’s voice filled his ears with a panicked whisper that he got the feeling was not meant for him. She leaned in closer. “Please. I *can’t* go home. My family is waiting and I’ve got a whole future ahead of me. I’ve got to make it.”

The director took a step back, confused. Dora's words were like a labyrinth-- no truth, no meaning, and no way out. The only way to win was to stay out of the maze. Quite frankly though, the director was fine with that.

So he spoke firmly: "I believe you, honey. But I still can't keep you on." then turned to go. All the while, thoughts passed through his mind in a disjointed tempest. He shouldn't be here. This woman scared him. There was something lurking in the shadows, something dark that he couldn't see and--

Dora Willis grabbed his wrist, vulnerability devouring her features. "Please." she whispered to him and to the gloom. "I'll do anything."

The director hesitated. Despite the woman's haunted eyes and strange mannerisms...well he couldn't help but admit she was rather pretty. Full lips. Full breasts. Nothing he hadn't seen before but all the same.

"Anything?" The director licked his lips, suddenly thirsty as the second time they had met.

Dora looked him in the eye. "*Anything.*"

For a moment, as their gazes met, the director thought he could see a vision of himself reflected in her pupils. And it wasn't flattering. In this young woman's eyes, he was a walking stereotype. The carbon copy of the horror stories the would-bes would tell between gigs-- all casting couches and predatory bosses. The man with a forgettable name and even more forgettable mannerisms.

The director closed his eyes to the sight and kissed Dora. Hard. Maybe the reflections were true but he wouldn't-- no, he *didn't*--care. After all, who gave a whit whether he was special or not? Especially in the eyes of Dora Willis.

Especially when this evening she would make him a king.

No, the director thought-- he didn't particularly care either way.

The room was cold as the pits of hell yet the sheets were made of silk.

There in the sight of the shadows, they made each other into nothing.

As the chaotic hours of night faded into dawn, Theodora Jane Willis walked briskly to the bus station, hands crammed into her pockets. No one but she could tell what they had done. Well--no one but she and her goblins. They were multitudes now-- huddled around her like a coat of fur, feathers and scales, perched on her shoulder like silvertone parrots. Within them, she could not feel the string of the brisk LA wind or hear the city's dull roar. And no one else could hear the pounding of her heart.

"Did I do the right thing?" she pondered at a fish-lipped grotesque roped around her neck.

"Am I...?" She whispered to the bat-eared freak. Dora never said the final word but she doubted she needed to. The demons always understood.

Am I a monster?

Despite everything she told herself-- how that it was necessary, self-defense perhaps-- Theodora Willis knew that she had lost something that last night. A kind of innocence that couldn't be recovered no matter how many times she scrubbed her fingers raw.

"Ticket for one," she told the lady behind the counter, another ginger who looked like Dora might if she spent another twenty years in LA.

"Where to?"

Dora almost told her *anywhere* but then paused to consider. "San Francisco" she decided. San Francisco had a good movie scene. As far as she could tell anyway. More importantly, it was almost 400 miles from her sins.

"One way or round trip?"

"One way."

The lady looked at Dora expectantly and she suddenly realized that she would need to pay for her ticket. Gingerly she lifted her hands from her pockets to lay a few crumpled twenties on the counter. "Is this good enough?" she asked.

The woman carefully explained that while her offering wasn't *good*, it would be enough.

Dora gritted her teeth, as that familiar frustration gored her chest. Her world had changed last night; *she* had changed... and yet their perceptions hadn't. Most likely they never would. Still, the actress forced herself to keep some distortion of a smile on her face, a magnificent performance appreciated only by the goblins. The little creatures swarmed Dora like moths to the sun, covering every inch of her skin with a scaley, feathered overcoat. And all the

while, they applauded her with almost enough ardor to block the tinny voice of the woman at the counter: “Are you alright?”

Dora nodded, almost shaking loose a small winged creature from her head. “I’m fine.” She said shortly. Then, with an otherworldly grace, the actress took her ticket, handed it to a tangle of fur on her right shoulder, and left the station.

“I’m fine.” she repeated, more to herself now. And she wasn’t lying. In the place of any remorse or fear she knew she ought to suffer, Theodora Willis only felt a curious nothing. The same nothing that had taken over her body late last night and refused to relinquish command. Perhaps in whatever hell she had sent him to, the director could feel it as well-- but Dora doubted it. He had never cared-- not just about her but about anything. And she...well, she had cared too much.

They were an oxymoron--

two sides of the same (all too human) coin.

So Dora couldn’t help but wonder-- which was clever and which was the fool.