

THE VIRUS OF BEAUTY by C.B. Lyall

EXCERPT

A woman stomped down the central aisle towards him. He observed the purple silk slippers she wore. Shoes that delicate shouldn't sound like soccer cleats marching across a metal basement hatch. She stopped at the counter.

His gaze lifted from the woman's feet to her face. Her leaden complexion and doughy face were enough to make him recoil. But the enormous wart at the end of her long, beaked nose was his undoing. He gasped.

She pursed her lips and her eyes flared. Wilf took in the rest of her appearance, from the severity of her hair bun to the red carpetbag, the size of a professional tennis player's racket bag, slung over her shoulder. He furrowed his brow. She reminded him of someone, but he couldn't quite remember who.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Not many are blessed with a wart of such magnitude," she said.

The hairs on his arms all stood up at the sound of her scratchy voice. Blackened nails poked out of the ends of her fingerless gloves, but thankfully, she wasn't offering to shake hands.

"Have we met?"

"Not that I recall," she said.

"You're probably right. I think I would remember seeing you before." He tried to avoid meeting her hypnotic, brown eyes. They seemed like mud pools wanting to suck him into their fathomless depths.

"Is that so?"

His stool rocked of its own volition and forced him to stand.

"Ermentrude Wakefield is the name." She glanced around the small store. "You may call me Witch Wakefield."

Wilf stepped back, braced against the wall, and shoved his ringed hand into his pocket. His heart raced. The Wizard Council had dispatched this witch to collect him. Well, it didn't make any difference who they sent. He wasn't leaving Hong Kong.

"Now, I don't usually deal with wizards" — her face wrinkled the way Myra's did when she took his soccer kit out of its bag for washing — "but this time I have to."