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A TALE OF THE TERMINALLY FEY
A MODERN TAKE ON COLLABORATIVE FOLKLORE

by

OLLIE DAMM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Creative Writing
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and in the Burnett Honors College
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Abstract

Writing has long been seen as a solitary affair, but this was not always the case. Before widespread literacy, stories were told and retold through the power of speech. Whole communities came together to weave tales and myths. Recently that tradition has been making a return to mainstream media with the renaissance of tabletop role-playing games, which serve as a standard vehicle for group collaboration. *A Tale of the Terminally Fey* is an attempt to reconcile the collaborative, off-the-cuff nature of oral storytelling with traditional narratives. The author has adapted the transcripts of live sessions into the first chapter of a novel that would follow the characters through one of these storytelling campaigns.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to Micah Hicks, for taking a chance on this work, and being there to guide me through it. Secondly, thank you to my players. Jason, Ellie, Jimmy. Your trio of misfits gave this story life I didn't even know it had. And lastly, but in no way leastly, Thank you a thousand times over to Humberto and Ashley for keeping the cameras rolling and the music playing. We'd be lost without you.

Introduction

A year ago, I set out to make storytelling a collaborative art form again. I teamed up with a group of other storytellers from different walks of life, and asked them to make characters in a world I was building. They brought the people, I brought the plot, we all brought our own dice, and together we told a story like I had never told one before.

Writing has long been a typically solitary act. Writers are seen as reclusive eccentrics penning works of genius on dark and stormy nights. But stories used to be community affairs, and it really did take a village to participate in the telling. The Scottish Hebrides all told tales collaboratively, and even Homer, as author Adam Nicholson points out, was probably not a single storyteller, but several, perhaps even a whole community coming together to make legends. That is why I chose to base so much of the story-world in fairy lore. Despite the influence of fairy tales on written literature being “considerable, if not decisive,” as Wayland D. Hand puts it in his article, “Irish fairy traditions appear to be closer to the folk and less dependent on literary traditions.” (Hand, pg 142) I wanted to bring that sense of community back to stories, and the best lens I saw through which to do that was one that many other communities are already utilizing: tabletop roleplaying games.

TTRPGs, as they are called, are a brilliant mechanic for group storytelling. They allow people to create characters based around a common core of abilities, so no one person is too competent compared to anyone else. They have *rules*. And, as Orson Scott Card puts it, “Before you can tell a meaningful story, you have to hone and sharpen your understanding of the world, and that begins with the fundamental rules, the natural laws.” (Card, pg 36) TTRPGs take some of the onus off of the storytellers to create rules from scratch. By existing in the background as an accepted mechanical certainty, they allow players to focus more on the telling of the tale. They provide a narrative framework to follow, and

unite participants in a solid idea of the world and story in which they are participating. For my work, I thought it best to use the most prolific of these systems, *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Many communities have used *D&D* to tell beautiful stories, such as *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone*, and *Dimension 20*, among many others. However, the one major pitfall for the observation of a *D&D* campaign is that the storytelling is often interrupted by talk of dice, rules, and out-of-character asides. For many people who have never experienced actually playing the game, this can turn them away. I wanted to make a more consumable *D&D* story that lost none of the collaboration and the uncertainty that I so loved about the format.

I handpicked five people whose capacities for carrying an improvised story I trusted, and over a period of three months set about building a world and characters with them. The intent was to transcribe what we played in our sessions and turn it into a more traditionally written narrative, though I hoped to retain some of the rawness and unpredictability of our game.

I served in the role of Game Master for this project, meaning that I was in charge of the world, the overarching story, and every character not controlled by a player over the course of the game. It was a weighty responsibility, but though I carried the brunt of the plot, my players brought much of the pathos to the tale, and their bonds with each other are what really moved the story forward.

One of the drawbacks of working with other people is that not all of the creative load rests on your shoulders. Two weeks into the recorded sessions, after three months of planning, I had two players remove themselves from the project suddenly. This was very unexpected, and I feared for a time that it would do irreparable damage to the narrative as a whole. Thankfully, due to the quick thinking and support of the rest of the cast, I was able to reel things back in. Since then, the most unexpected things that have happened have been in the course of the story, and have all been because multiple people

collaborated to make some surprising choices and turn the narrative in a way I was not expecting. My remaining players have been professional and profound, and I am honored to have made this work with them.

To begin building my world, I looked at, first and foremost, other campaigns. *Dungeons & Dragons* allows for expansive stories, and as such, no two campaigns will be the same. However, there are underlying qualities that make some campaigns successful while others fail, and almost all of them have to do with successful collaboration. More important than the dice rolls or the on-paper statistics, I found, was the rule of “Yes And.” Most commonly used in improv theater, “Yes And” is a simple principle to make everyone’s contributions to a scene count. When a character puts a scenario into play, you build off it and make it into something more by accepting the idea and adding onto it, not ignoring it or twisting it around. When a party of players and their Game Master work based on this principle, it keeps cooperation smooth and storytelling natural.

We have filmed for sixteen sessions, as of writing this, and I intend to go forward and complete the campaign after this semester is complete. My goal for this thesis was to take the first session of the campaign and synthesize it into a traditional narrative while still remaining as absolutely true to player choices and dialogue as possible. Some edits were made for time constraints and errors of continuity, but overall I have endeavored to create as direct a translation as I was able.

Admittedly, there are easier ways to collaborate on a story, but there is a rawness and an appeal in a medium where everything you say is permanent, and no choice you make can be taken back. There is no undo button for the spoken word, and the true off-the-cuff nature of spoken stories bring out areas of spontaneity not often found in other forms of storytelling. It is this spontaneity that drew me to

Dungeons & Dragons, and this spontaneity that I have polished in the following piece. Polished, but hoped to preserve.

This piece is the first chapter of a novelization of the *Tale of the Terminally Fey* campaign. The three main characters are preparing to embark upon something that none of them truly understand, to do things none of them thought possible. The path they have taken is winding, and full of unexpected turns, but it all begins here.

Chapter One

The door swung on its hinges, moved slightly by the morning breeze. It hung askew, the cheap wood around the lock and latch battered and broken from where Ronin Pierce had smashed it in the night before.

He hadn't slept. Partly because his bed was already occupied, and partly because of the adrenaline still singing through him. He could still feel power, thrumming in his fingertips. Mingled with exhaustion, it made his hands shake.

But the sun was rising. A new day meant new injuries, new patients to treat.

An automobile rumbled by in the back street behind Ronin's shop, exponentially louder than usual. The draft in its wake made the door flap uselessly.

A new day would also have to mean a new door.

Ronin sighed. He opened the door to his modest bedroom. His ex-wife was sprawled across the mattress, sleeping the dead sleep of true fatigue. They had both been involved in a street assault last night that had gone horribly, strangely awry, and bandaged and bruised, Journey looked as tired as Ronin felt.

What was *happening* in his city?

The Wall was coming down, according to Ronin's strange street minstrel, Jacks. Ronin only wished he knew what that meant.

He gathered his bag with his standard deliveries and stepped out the front of his shop. The morning Sun painted the cobbled streets and ancient park outside in warm gold, and Ronin took a deep breath.

A new day.

Gallowdan, Innisfree. The capital of the Grey Isles. A modern city at the peak of human innovation. Pierce nodded to the lamplighter, who went around putting out the flames in the street lamps each morning. Only they and the baker were usually up early enough to cross paths. He breathed in the smell of petrol, mingling with the ephemeral perfume of morning mist. He hadn't been sure how he could go back to living in the city, once he left the military behind. But as his boots went from stone to the soft pine straw-littered earth of Green Lady park, Ronin realized he couldn't fathom living anywhere else. Light filtered through the ancient canopy, splashing the path in gold and cool, calm grey. The tableau flickered as a breeze rustled the gentle branches. The old trees whispered to each other as Ronin passed beneath them, and a spring-fed pond framed by more twisted trunks gurgled softly in the quiet air.

One of the oldest parts of Gallowdan, Green Lady Park had been founded over five hundred years ago, when the city was barely more than a university and a loose cluster of houses. No one knew who had created it, though some whispered it had been one of the great Druids, who had vanished with the creation of the Wall Between Worlds. Whoever it was had bequeathed the park to the growing Gallowdan, with scathingly precise instruction that the park be left untouched, allowed to grow as it wished. Thus, as Ronin wandered its winding paths and the sound of the city faded behind him, the air grew dense with age and with wildness. The only sounds were his footfalls, and the clinking of the bottles in his medicine bag as it beat gently against his hip.

The blacksmith worked on the other side of the park. The squat building already belched smoke, and as Ronin approached, he heard the clanging of a hammer on metal.

“Morning!” he called. “Devlin, isn't this a bit early?”

Devlin, a man in his early fifties, leaned out of the shadows cast by the roof of the forge. He rested his elbows on the fence, clasping a bandaged hand with his good one. “For most sane people, sure,” he agreed cheerfully. He had a thick beard that would have been white if it weren’t so singed and sootstained, and his voice had a gravel to it that could only come from breathing a lifetime of smoke. “Tristan, however, is not sane. He’s been waking up this early all week, to try and cover any lag we might have because of my little accident.” He wagged his bandaged fingers.

Ronin rolled his eyes. “If only we could all have the bounceback of young boys,” he said. He rooted in his bag until he found the proper bottle. “Hopefully this will get you back to regular business hours sooner rather than later. For the neighbors’ sakes. Spread this on the burn when you first change the bandages in the morning, and again just before bed.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Captain Pierce,” Devlin said. “Where would anyone in the Green be without your poultices and tinctures?”

“Oh, someone would step in to fill the gap,” Ronin said.

“Bah, not as well. What do I owe you?” Devlin asked.

“Tristan patched my kettle a couple of days ago; that’s more than enough,” Ronin said, holding up a pre-emptive hand.

Devlin shrugged. “Have it your way. Hey, did you see the lightning last night?”

Ronin’s mind went to Journey Sunflow, ne Pierce, and where he had left her asleep. And where she had frightened away the man who mugged her behind his shop with a power no one had seen in centuries. “No,” he lied. “Must have missed it.” He cleared his throat.

“That’s too bad. Came rocketing out of the sky from nowhere! Like magic or something.”

“Magic’s gone,” Ronin said automatically. “Been gone for a long time.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, as though they might betray him.

Devlin shrugged. “Yeah, I know. Still weird, though.” There was a moment of silence. Devlin seemed to be waiting for some sort of a reply, but Ronin was preoccupied with trying to escape the conversation without fleeing.

“Well,” the Blacksmith eventually said. “S’pose I’ll let you get back to your route, huh?”

“Sure thing. See you around, Devlin.”

“And you, Captain. Thanks again!”

Ronin nodded and turned away.

#

Hathor Balwraek could not remember the last time he had seen the sun. The sinkhole he had lived in for over four centuries had slowly begun to close. Each day without a dawn, he felt his wooden limbs grow numb, his many vines stiffen and wither.

Hathor was a mandrake, a guardian tree spirit of the Fey world of Tir nAill. Though he usually walked on all fours, his long and sinewy arms granting him speed and grace, when he stood to his full height he was an imposing eight feet tall, making him and others like him ideal choices for guards and enforcers among the nobles of the Fey Courts.

The noble Hathor had served was gone, vanishing into a broken Gate five hundred years ago when the portals between his realm and the realm of mankind had closed for good.

But with Black Jakodak missing, and likely dead, Hathor had no one to relieve him of duty. So he stayed, guarding the archway of stone that had once been a door to another world. And when a chasm had opened up perhaps fifty years after that final battle, swallowing the arch and Hathor with it, still he

had remained. Duty kept him in the growing dark, fighting off thieves and wayfaring beasts that would endanger his charge. So in the crystal cave he stayed, surrounded by ghostly plants and creeping mushrooms and clusters of crystals that spread over the floor, eventually encroaching onto the arch itself. He mapped routes in the tunnels surrounding the caverns and patrolled, just as he always had before.

He had long ago resigned himself to never seeing the familiar light of his portal again.

So when light far brighter than sunlight shook him from his few hours of rest, he could not believe what he was seeing. Shifting, swirling color filled his arch, pulsing and turning like something alive. Slowly, Hathor approached and placed a hand on the stone. It thrummed with a familiar power.

For the first time in recent memory, he felt himself smile.

He wasn't sure what this meant, precisely, or even if anyone else knew he was still down here. There was anyone he could tell. But he once again had more to protect than an empty archway of stone, forgotten under Tir nAill's shifting landscape. His work once again had purpose. He hefted his quarterstaff in his grip. "Business as usual," he said aloud, unable to fully banish the smile from his face.

#

Ronin's bag was much lighter, the sun a few hours higher in the sky, as he waited on the carpenter. The 'ring for service' bell echoed a little in the empty shop. What he had said to Devlin was another lie.

Magic may have been gone once, but it was back. He had seen it. For Fates' sakes, he had *done* it! Five hundred years without a spell in sight, and last night Pierce had *done magic*.

He didn't know *what* he had done, exactly, but that hardly changed the facts.

He was shaken from his thoughts as the carpenter ducked through the beaded curtain. “Hey, Cap,” he said. “How can I do you for?”

Ronin scrubbed the back of his neck with one hand. “I... need a new back door,” he said.

The carpenter frowned. “What happened to your old one?”

“Uh,” Ronin said. “It, uh, broke.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Well,” he said, “How can I help you?”

Ronin shrugged. “The same one is fine.”

The carpenter frowned. Again. “Wait, I’m sorry. Your door broke on you, and you, uh... want the same one? As the one that broke?”

“It didn’t break on its own,” Ronin admitted. “I locked myself out.” He didn’t mention that he had locked himself out by teleporting through the solid wood, though the memory made him flush and go clammy all at once.

“Why not just call a locksmith, man?”

“Can I just have the door?” he asked.

The carpenter held up his hands. “Suit yourself, suit yourself! Two silver bits.”

Ronin nodded and paid up. Door slung across his back, he headed out of the shop. It was several blocks back to his own place, but he could split the trip almost in half by cutting through Green Lady Park. It was a nicer walk, anyhow.

Once again, cobblestone gave way to soft soil, and once again, the sounds of the city faded.

But this time Ronin was not left with silence.

Splashes echoed from around a bend ahead, a loud, shuddering gasp.

Ronin dropped the door and broke into a sprint.

The pond's crystal surface had been shattered. Someone thrashed in the water. Not even stopping to remove his shoes, Ronin waded in. He reached out and gripped the first thing he could take hold of.

He barely had time to register the cold scales beneath his hand before his arm was scored by what felt like claws. The cuts seared, and he let go, backing up and fumbling for his knife.

By the time he drew it and looked up again, the other occupant of the little pond had stopped their thrashing and found their footing in shallower waters.

And what Ronin saw stopped his breath.

A girl, no older than twenty, glared at him with baleful eyes. Her clothes, simple canvas garments, dripped with pond water. She was breathing hard, up to her calves in the weedy shoals.

Blue, scaled skin, its smooth sheen broken by a myriad of silvery scars, glistened under the dappled canopy light. Pondweeds tangled in green hair, and her hands, tense at her sides, were tipped in sharp, wicked claws.

She looked at Ronin, and at his blade, with mistrust.

It was a moment before he could manage any words. "What... what are you?" he asked, voice rasping.

Less than impressed, the girl... fish... thing wrinkled her nose. "I mean, I'd ask you the same." Her accent was strong and unfamiliar.

Ronin frowned. "I'm. A human being."

She blinked. "Well, yes. No, I see that. Duh. I *mean*, what are you doing in my pond?"

It was Ronin's turn to blink. "I—you're in a public park, lady. I think I have more grounds here! Why were you thrashing around like that?"

She flinched back. “I was waking up. It was very sudden. Listen, can you get—this is my space, okay? You’re in my bubble,” the young woman said slowly, still looking at Ronin like *he* was somehow the strange one in all this.

Raising the hand not occupied with his knife, he took a couple of steps back, out of the water and back up onto the path.

The girl brushed some of the water off her arms, not that it seemed to do much good. “Thank you, I appreciate that,” she huffed. “So... are you here to kill me or what?”

Ronin blinked. “What? No!”

The girl raised one scaled brow. “Oh. Then why didn’t you just start with that? Damn. Okay.” She shot him one more look before turning away. As Ronin watched, her claws melted back into much more normal-looking fingers. She waded to one of the old trees beside the pond and pried away a knot in the trunk. Reaching inside, she seemed to be rooting around for something.

Ronin was left dumbfounded. He felt like he should have been panicking. Blue people didn’t happen! They just didn’t! What was she doing thrashing around like that if she wasn’t drowning? Ronin swallowed. He was tickled by a faint inkling that he was losing his mind. But the last twenty-four hours had been so bizarre, with his teleportation and Journey’s storm of magically charged lightning, that all he could muster was a numb resolve to take it in stride. Things were changing, that was certain. Ronin just wished he knew *how*.

The girl withdrew her arm from a tree, unwrapping a parcel of fine, deep green cloth. She unwrapped it carefully, and Ronin caught a glimpse of a book.

“You, uh. You still haven’t answered my question,” he called, breaking the silence. “What are you?”

She paused and looked over her shoulder. “I am a . . . Thea. Nice to meet you. What’s your name?” She waded back over to him, bundle under one arm.

“Pierce.” He held his hand out, and the girl shook it. Mm. He didn’t know what he was expecting, but it was certainly . . . damp. Her nails were round and silvered like the rest of her scales, he noticed, and her fingers were connected by translucent webbing.

Pierce discreetly wiped his hand on his pants as she stepped out of the pond. Unfolding the green cloth revealed it to be a cloak, edged in soft pink embroidery in a language that Pierce did not recognize. She slung it around her shoulders and straightened her mantle before turning to him again. “Do you know what time it is?”

Pierce pulled out his fob watch. Old and plain, the iron sat heavy in his hand. “It’s eight forty-five.” The shop opened in fifteen minutes. Usually, that would be plenty of time to prepare for the day, but with the door, and now this . . . Thea, Ronin suspected things were only going to get stranger.

“Good to know.” She looked up at the canopy, and down at the path. “Um.”

“Do you know where you are?” Ronin asked, a little more gently than he had before.

She nodded. “I’m at my pond!”

“Outside of that. Do you know where this pond is?”

“In Aprua . . .” she frowned at him.

“The whole world might be too general,” Ronin said. “Think smaller.”

“The Grey Isles?”

“I mean, yes, technically, but—”

“Listen, okay? I’m not normally the one that goes out and puts names on things.” She shrugged. “That’s usually Penelope’s thing. So listen, if you just tell me where I can book passage on a ship near here, I can go and cut off the other ear of that *bitch* Captain Sett and get right out of your hair.”

“Now.” Ronin paused. “We don’t have time to unpack all of that. Um.”

Before he could tell her that they were *in* a port city, her eyes slid past him and settled on a bench along the trail. “What is that?”

“It’s... it’s a bench?” Ronin said carefully.

“I know what a bench is. I’m not an idiot. Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot,” she said. She glared at it. “What is it doing here?” she asked, striding over to it.

Ronin paused. Admittedly, he didn’t really have an answer.

“Listen, if I have to be stuck to a pond, I want people to treat it like it’s my pond! I don’t want anyone sitting, watching my pond. This is my pond!” she turned to him, folding her arms mistrustfully. “Of course, it won’t be my pond for long. Hopefully. I don’t know. I gotta find that out.”

“I don’t know what you’re *talking* about,” Ronin said pleadingly.

“By the way, where is the nearest shop? I need to restock, and things look... different than I remember.”

Ronin blinked. “Just... follow the path out that way. He pointed back towards the side of the Green where his own storefront was located. “There’s about three blocks of shops.”

The girl frowned. “Oh. That’s different. Why are they there?”

Ronin pressed his lips together as exasperation started to boil in him. “Because the city said they should be, I don’t know—”

“City?” the girl said. She laughed. “We’re not in a city.”

“Yes... we are,” Pierce replied. “We’re in Gallowdan.”

“Don’t be silly, that’s not a city.”

Pierce frowned. “Yes... yes it is. It’s—it’s the biggest international port in the Grey Isles. It’s the Capital!”

“You’re funny, human. No it’s not.”

Pierce threw his hands up. “I don’t know what to tell you! You wanted a port city, you’re in a port city. You don’t know what a bench is—”

“I know what a bench is!” she said. “I told you I do! Why are you insisting that I’m stupid?”

Pierce sighed. “I didn’t say you were stupid.”

“You implied it,” she muttered.

“I—you—okay, so. You said you are ‘a Thea.’ What does that mean?”

She shot him a withering look. “I’m not *a* Thea. I *am* Thea.”

“But you said—fine. Okay, Thea. What are you? What’s with the fins, the blue, the...” He motioned at her general vicinity. “All of it?”

She looked down and picked at the webbing between two of her fingers. “Oh, that! Well, that is because I am a...” she glanced back at her pond. “Triton. I am a triton.”

“Great,” Pierce said. He spread his hands imploringly. “What does that *mean*?”

“It means, that’s what I am! Fins, gills, swimming. I can breathe underwater. The whole nine yards. I’m... a triton.”

“I’m... I don’t...”

Thea cocked her head at him.

“Okay, how about this,” Ronin said. “How... long have you been in this pond? Because I’ve lived in and out of Gallowdan my whole life and I certainly never noticed—and I don’t think anyone else did either, or else there would have been a commotion—”

“How old are you?” Thea asked.

“Uh. Forty-seven,” Pierce replied.

“Then at least—wait, wow, yeah. At least forty seven years,” Thea said. “Probably longer.”

Pierce frowned.

“Okay, uh. Okay.” Thea looked up at him, her voice growing small. “What... year is it?”

“By the calendar of the Fates?” Pierce said. “Uh, two-thousand and nineteen.”

Her orange eyes got very wide. “Oh... oh. Is Penelope even alive?” she whispered, more to herself than him.

“Are you all right?” Pierce asked.

“You said two thousand and nineteen?”

He nodded.

“Okay. Okay. Uh. Let’s just say that I went to sleep, like... fifteen oh-four?”

Pierce blinked. “Is that, like, military time?”

Thea looked at him flatly. “No, that’s like year time.”

“So you... are saying that you’ve been asleep for over five hundred years.”

“Give or take.”

“Okay. okay. So that means you’re from before the Wall even—”

“Oh!” Thea cried.

Pierce flinched. “What?”

“That means Captain Sett is dead.”

Pierce blinked.

“Well, I don’t need the port city part anymore.”

“Um…” Ronin sighed. “How about this. Can you do magic?”

She held her hands up. “What do you think that whole claw thing when I thought you were trying to kill me was?”

“I don’t know! I thought you could just… do that!”

“Well I can’t! It’s not like a special triton power or anything. That was all magic.”

“Well, good. Neat. Okay. Well.” Peirce sighed. “Look. Not to be insensitive, but you do know that you don’t exactly… look like the average folk around here, right?” At Thea’s blank look, Pierce paused. “Five hundred years, no, you don’t know, do you? You have no idea.”

“No idea about what?”

He sighed. “Okay, look. I’m going to try to explain this the best I can. Way, way back—”

“Can we sit on the bench?” Thea asked.

“Sure we can sit on the bench,” Ronin said. “Yeah, let’s sit on the bench. You want to sit on the bench, let’s sit on the bench.” He scratched at his neat gray beard. This was going to be an exhausting day.

“I mean, it’s basically my bench. It’s in my woods, looking at my pond. I might as well sit on it.”

Thea skipped over to the bench and draped herself across it. Ronin followed, settling down more

hesitantly on the old studded wood boards. He gathered himself to speak again when Thea frowned.

With a small noise of discomfort, she stood, swiping at her arms. “I changed my mind. This is *not* my

bench,” she muttered sourly. “I don’t like it. It’s itchy. Your city should replace it. With... what stuff do you use, other than this?”

“Uh. For... benches?” Pierce asked. He frowned at her, trying to puzzle out what was wrong.

“We... don’t really use anything else. Wood and iron... that’s what makes a bench.”

“Wait.” Thea glared at him. She glared a lot, Pierce was gathering. “You put *poison* on your benches to *sit on*? Why? Are humans stupid?”

“I—there’s no poison,” Pierce said. “Just... good clean pine and cast-iron.”

“Iron is poison!” Thea said, stamping her foot. “Look at my arms.” She held them out, and her forearms did indeed seem to be slightly burned.

Pierce frowned, looking them over. “Weird...”

“*You’re* weird,” Thea said. She paused. “Not that you’re weird. I just meant like... Humans in general are weird. You don’t react to poison normally, and that’s weird. Not that you’re weird,” she added.

Ronin blinked, something from an elementary history course thirty years ago finally clicking in his head. “Fey are repelled by iron. You’re fey!” He pointed at her. “Oh, holy shit. You’re feyish.”

“Duh.” Thea stuck her tongue out at him. “What’s wrong with you, have you never seen a faerie before?”

“No, no! That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Ronin said. “Okay, listen. Five hundred years ago, just over five hundred years ago, maybe, your people came here from the Feywild, and picked fights, and started wars. So we... put up a wall. And all of the magic, and the people that came with it... they just sort of left. Essentially, we were married for a while, but then we got a divorce. And now, we’re signing a prenup and trying it again, I suppose? Is there a prenup? Three Fates, I hope there’s a

prenup...” He paused, feeling his metaphor floundering slightly, to find Thea looking at him in puzzlement.

“The magic left for five hundred years, and took you all with it, but now for some reason the Wall is down and magic is back,” Ronin sighed. “And I don’t know how it happened, or why or where or when, or even what that really means. All I know is that things have gotten *weird*.”

“And now blue people are popping out of ponds?” Thea asked.

“Blue person, so far,” Ronin sighed. He put his face in his hands. “But one person is enough. Look,” he added, looking back up at her. “I don’t know if your kind was around five hundred years ago—I mean, I certainly wasn’t alive—”

“Well, I was around,” Thea said. “I’m my kind. Even though people did still look at me a little weird...”

“Well, I can guarantee it is going to be worse now,” Pierce said.

“Well... how about this?” Thea flipped the hood of the cloak up and spread her hands. “Ta-da.”

“Your arms are still blue.”

She pulled them back inside the cloak. “Ta-da.”

“Your face is still blue.” Ronin sighed, running a hand down his face. He could feel new white hairs growing.

“Well, what do you want me to *do*?” Thea asked.

“I... don’t know,” Ronin admitted.

Thea looked down. “Where am I supposed to go?” she asked, voice shrinking again. “I can’t exactly go into a shop like this.”

“I don’t know,” Ronin said again.

“Are people going to try and kill me because I’m blue?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s try it!” she chirped.

“That’s—what? No! That’s a *bad* idea,” Ronin said, sitting up straight.

She shrugged. “Well, if you guys don’t have magic, and I do have magic, I think I’ll have a little bit more of a, um. Edge than, you know. The average human.”

“I—we—you don’t even have any idea of the technological advances we’ve made in the last—”

“Plus I mean I’m really not worried about *dying*,” she said, with a shrug that made Ronin frown.

“I mean, I don’t like *pain*. I don’t know if you do. Maybe you do. Humans are weird.”

“I don’t,” Ronin said.

“Well. Good. I don’t either. But I’m not worried about dying.”

If baffling statements were luggage, the path would be littered with bewildering trunks. And at present he could take the time to unpack exactly none of them. Every second they loitered here was another second a stranger might cross their path. “Why don’t—listen, why don’t you come back with me to my shop,” he pleaded gently. “And we’ll try to figure something out. We can even put some salve on your arms.” Not that he knew if his medicines would even work on fey, he realized.

Thea took a step back. “Are you going to try and kill me? Or take me? Not that you *have* tried really... or that you’d tell me if you were,” she added under her breath.

Pierce laughed a little in spite of himself. “No. Trust me, if I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead already.”

Thea shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Pierce scoffed. “You’re barely five feet tall. Maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. I *think* I could take you. If I were so inclined.”

“I’ve been tortured for a long time, and trust me, he was a big guy like you and he said the same thing, and I laughed at his face.” She paused. “He didn’t like that; he threw daggers at me, but he just took them back out anyway, so.”

Pierce pressed his thumb into his eye and stood. “Well if I wanted to try to kill you I would have tried already, okay? Okay. Let’s go.”

“Oh! Sure! Okay! Do you still want me to pull up my hood, or...”

“Yes. Yes, actually, in fact...” Ronin looked over his shoulder at where he had dropped the door. “I have something that might be able to help us. Wait there.” He trotted back to where he had left it. A crow pecked at the hole for the doorknob, and he shooed it away. Slinging it onto his back, he carried it back to the waiting fey. “Hold the back half of this in front of you. I can guide you from the front, and it should help hide your face, and...” He paused as she took a hold of it, and his eyes fell on her fingers. “Oh, no, those hands. I... do not have gloves.”

“Excuse me,” Thea said. “These are beautiful hands, thank you very much. They make beautiful drawings. Bitch,” she added.

Ronin choked. “I’m happy for you,” he managed. “Hang on.” He rooted through his medicine bag until he found a roll of bandages. Taking the door from Thea and setting it aside, he wrapped up her blue digits. “The higher the chance of anyone mistaking you for a human or like... a half-elf, the better,” he muttered.

“Oh, so you don’t have tritons, but you have half-elves?” Thea asked.

“I mean... the fraction is much smaller than that at this point,” Pierce sighed. “But the name stuck. We have remnants of your world. Halfbreeds, diseases. Vampirism... lycanthropy.” Even saying the word aloud made him shudder, bad memories surging just below the surface of his thoughts, and he turned away from her. “Let’s head out.”

“Oh. Okay... Why aren’t there half tritons?”

“Who’s to say? I don’t know. I failed history the first time I took it. We need to go.” Ronin thrust the back half of the door into her hands and picked up the front half. Looking around to make sure the way was clear of any observers, he hefted the door in his hands and set off for Ronin’s Remedies.

#

Hathor retrieved his arrows from the elf’s corpse, the heads leaving her chest with a nasty sound. A bandit from a clan that made camp in a tunnel about two miles from his cave, Hathor had discovered her attempting to sneak through the portal upon return from his rounds. The fight had been swift...

But not as swift as it should have been, and her companion, an elven man, escaped. Hathor felt slow, tired. After the skirmish, he needed to pause to rest. Rest! After a brawl with a single elf! The permafrost that coated his limbs and much of his back, the pride of any winter mandrake such as him, had begun to melt from the strain.

Hathor stood close to his portal, trying to position himself under the sole pinprick of light still streaming in from the closing hole in the cavern above.

It wasn’t enough. It hadn’t been enough for a while now. He was starving.

He leaned on the warm stone of his portal and sighed.

#

Hathor had allowed his mind to drift. He wasn't sure how long he had been standing there in the quiet, the only sound of the dripping water and the low, spectral hum of his portal beside him.

That quiet was fractured by the sound of footsteps on stone. Whoever it was clearly wanted to make their presence known. Hathor readied his staff, focusing an act of will upon it. It became coated in crystalline frost, steaming gently in the air.

An old elven woman emerged from the darkness of the tunnels into the relative light of the crystal cave. Her silvery hair was braided down to her waist, and she was dressed practically in protective leathers and flexible clothes. Hathor had never met her before, but he knew her by reputation. She ruled the bandit sect that infested these tunnels.

She looked up at Hathor, keeping well out of range, and smiled. "So you've been causing a bit of a stir recently."

Hathor was silent for a long moment. "Me?" he finally said. "Cause a stir?"

"Well, in the past six hours, we've had one of our best scouts go missing. The other returned in an utter shambles, the poor thing. He was beaten nearly half to death. He was babbling about some sort of Portal and about how you had... attacked him? And I find myself disinclined to disbelieve him, especially considering that marvellous arch behind you."

Hathor narrowed his eyes. "What's your business here?" he asked.

The Bandit Queen inspected her fingernails. "I'm just here to be sure that things don't... change. Just because you have this fancy new door, we don't want anything to do with Aprua. We don't want anything to do with the rest of Tir nAill. Don't think that because your little Gate has opened back up again, you can start hosting some sort of Ferry service across the planes like you used to do. That just won't stand." When Hathor didn't immediately reply, she continued. "If you keep anything from coming

through, in either direction, I think it's safe to say that we won't have any issue. Is that amenable to you?"

"You should know my position with the portal by now," Hathor said, voice even. "I'm just here to protect it. No more, no less."

"Protect it from whom, is the question."

"Anything that means to harm it." He shrugged, wooden shoulders creaking.

"Well, then—"

"On either side." He looked at her hard.

"Then... I see no reason why we should continue to quarrel," the Bandit Queen said slowly.

"Please, don't kill any more of my people. They do good work for me, and I would hate to lose them because an old tree gets a stick up his own ass about his position." She smiled.

Hathor was unamused. "Keep them away from my cavern, and perhaps I won't have to."

The smile turned brittle, like winter frost. "Consider it done." She inclined her head to Hathor, and walked back into the dark.

"I'm a tree," Hathor muttered to himself. "There are *only* sticks up my ass."

#

In the shop, Ronin took the door and set it in the storeroom, beside its damaged predecessor. He closed the blinds in the window, and pulled a screen down over the door. It looked like he wouldn't be opening today after all. He eased open the bedroom door and leaned inside. "Journey?" he whispered. "Journey?"

Journey Sunflow mumbled in her sleep and tucked a lock of golden hair behind one delicately pointed ear. With her cascading tresses and sunkissed, terra-cotta skin, she was the most fetching woman

Ronin had ever seen. He found himself just as in awe of her every time he saw her as he had been the first time they met, when she came to visit her brother at the barracks all those years ago.

Reaching over, he shook her gently. “Journey?”

“Mm?” Muzzily, she opened her eyes.

“We have a situation,” Ronin said, still whispering. “And I think I have to run out for a little bit. Could you do me a favor?”

“Watch the shop?” Journey asked sleepily.

“No... watch the girl in the shop.”

Journey sat up, all traces of her sleep gone. “The what in the *what?*” she asked.

“Can you just come out?” Ronin pleaded. “It might be easier to show than tell.”

Journey clambered out of the bed, smoothing the old, patched gardener’s overalls that she had fallen asleep in. She followed him out warily, and when they entered the front room of the shop, her hand flew to her mouth in shock.

Thea had taken a pot of joint cream off of the shelves, and was holding it up to her nose. “This goop smells nasty,” she said, holding it out to Pierce.

“Well, it’s medicine. Good medicine rarely smells nice,” Pierce said.

“She’s a fish,” Journey said.

“Triton,” Thea corrected her. She walked up to Journey and stuck out her hand. “I’m Thea.”

“I’m Journey,” Journey said, a little numbly. “What is a triton, precisely?”

“One-of-a-kind, *apparently*,” Thea said.

“Oh,” Journey said.

“So, like... do all humans like to be covered in bandages, or what?” Thea asked.

Journey blinked. “What?”

“Well, you’re all beat up, Pierce is all beat up. Is that just like a thing? Or is it for looks, or what?”

“Rough night, is all,” Ronin said. “Look. I have to go find Jacks. He knew what was going on with magic before it happened, maybe he can help us with this. Journey, can you please stay here?”

Journey shrugged and nodded. “Uh. Sure. Yes. Yes, okay.”

“Great.” Pierce started backing towards the door. “Thea, you can trust her. I will be back soon with... someone who hopefully knows what’s going on.” He turned and left, breaking into a sprint as soon as his feet hit pavement.

First he stopped and asked Rhona, an old homeless woman with whom Jacks could frequently be seen. The old mute shook her head, and Ronin moved on. Not as in shape as he once was, his run soon slowed to a trot as he checked all of Jacks’s favorite haunts in the whole district of the Green.

It was only when he paused for breath, hands on his knees, outside the Green Lady, that he heard it: the lilting trill of a tin whistle, echoing between the trees. Ronin looked up sharply and hopped the low wall into the park, following the sound.

Part of him was unsurprised to find the man standing in Thea’s little pond. His old, tattered pants had been rolled up to his knees, and his shoes had been set carefully ashore. The tinwhistle’s melody was aching and sweet, lingering between fond nostalgia and mourning.

Jacks was... an odd duck. Ronin had known him ever since he had... just sort of appeared in Gallowdan, several years ago. Long, wild black hair shot through with gray tangled and curled as it fell down his back, kept tame only by a bandanna over his head. His face and hands were tattooed in some tongue Pierce didn’t recognize.

He used to think the minstrel was addled, forgetting his name or saying things that made no sense. But after the events of the last twenty-four hours, Pierce had begun to suspect that Jacks knew something more.

Ronin skidded to a halt in front of him and doubled over again, gasping.

Jacks put the tin whistle away, but didn't open his eyes. "Hullo, Pierce," he called, in his odd, musical voice. "Fuck's wrong with you?"

"I've been looking for you," Pierce gasped.

"Oh. Well, congratulations," Jacks said. "I remembered my name this morning."

"That's good," Pierce said. "I didn't know you had forgotten it."

"Well, that's rather the point of forgetting, isn't it?" Jacks said. "It's Abrajax."

Ronin blinked. "It's *what?*"

"Abrajax. Or maybe it's not a name. It's what I'm called, anyhow."

"And you just remembered that now?"

Jacks—Abrajax nodded. "The Curtain is tearing," He said, tapping his temple. "More's coming back." He opened his eyes and cocked his head. His ears were longer than any half-elf Pierce had ever seen, and had one point been liberally pierced, though now many of the holes hung empty. The remaining jewelry clinked and jingled as he swept over Ronin with a pale grey gaze that he had always found unnerving.

"That's good..." Pierce looked him up and down. "Look, Jacks—Abrajax. I need your help."

"What with?"

"There's a fish person in my shop. You know it's kind of funny, she actually came out of that pond you're in now." Ronin laughed a little.

Abrajax looked down at the water. “I thought there was a nymph in here,” he said. “She never came out to play, so I let her rest.”

“Oh, uh. Actually, she said that she’s something called a triton—”

“She lied.” Abrajax’s eyes snapped back to Ronin. “Take me to her.”

#

“I don’t think I like this,” Thea said, looking at Ronin worriedly. Abrajax was prowling around her in slow circles, picking at her cloak, at her hair, at her sleeve. Journey held her hand.

Abrajax backed up, eyeing her up and down. He twisted a lock of his hair between two spindly, tattooed fingers. “It’s just as I thought,” he said, somberly.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong?” Thea demanded.

“You’re real fucked up, kiddo.”

Thea frowned.

“Someone screwed up your life proper well.” Abrajax turned and picked a pot of salve up off the shelf. He opened it and swiped his finger through it. Raising it to his nose, he sniffed. “This smells like shite, Ronin. You prescribe this to people?”

“That’s what I said!” Thea cried.

Ronin rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t have to smell nice to do its job.”

“You’re a beast, Ronin Pierce,” Jax said.

“Who screwed up my life?” Thea asked.

Abrajax shrugged. “Who’s to say? I couldn’t tell you. Whoever it was, they probably don’t even remember doing it.”

“What are you talking about?” Journey asked.

“The wee lass there is a nymph,” Abrajax said, swiping more wares aside to hop up onto a counter. “Nymphs aren’t born, they’re made. Cursed, specifically. Soul bound to the land, never free from their guardian duties.” He shrugged. “Not a bad gig, when it’s voluntary.”

Thea scowled and looked down, digging her toe into the floor.

“You know... I reckon it’s you two,” Abrajax murmured.

Ronin frowned. “What’s us?”

“How should I know?” Abrajax asked sourly. “I’ve been having bad dreams, Ronin. For days. A cousin of mine that I might have had once, or I might have one day, she used to get dreams like this I think. But there have been people in my dream, whose faces I couldn’t see. Two of ‘em made me feel the same way to look at as I do looking at you.”

“Bad dreams like...?” Thea asked.

Abrajax rolled his eyes and hopped off the counter. “Like this,” he said, poking the first two fingers of each hand into their foreheads.

Ronin and Thea doubled over in pain.

The images were short and choppy, ragged, like they had come a long way.

Four figures stand silhouetted on a hill. Backlit by the flaming ruins of a city, they look out at the abyss.

One holds the mantle, his blade shining sings.

One holds the waters.

One a wild thing.

The last holds the duty.

When all’s said and done,

Four a—

A searing bolt of interference arced through Ronin's mind, scrambling the last phrase. He shouted in pain, almost collapsing to the floor.

"And you," he heard Jax say dimly to journey, as he put his mind back together. "You're there too. But not yet."

"What do you mean, not yet?" Journey demanded, holding a hand to her own head, just as Ronin cried, "What in the name of the Fates was that, Jacks?"

Abrajax shrugged. "It's just a dream," he said. "You can't do that?"

"No!" Ronin cried. He put a hand on Thea's back, who wasn't faring much better than him.

"You said 'not yet,'" Journey said softly.

Abrajax shrugged. "I know what I know, no more no less. All I can say is that if you go with him, We'll mourn two worlds. If you stay, we might not have to mourn any."

"I'm sorry, go where?" Ronin asked, straightening up.

"You..." Abrajax breathed deeply, looking Ronin over with hooded eyes. "You must... leave this world, Ronin Igneous Peirce."

"Leave this world?" Thea demanded. "Are you going to kill him?"

"What?" Abrajax asked. "No, of course not! Don't be silly."

"Two worlds..." Ronin looked up at Abrajax. "No."

"No?" Abrajax frowned.

"Don't make me do this. I'm retired. I have been for years. Since that werew—since Rordan."

Journey flinched at the mention of her late brother's name.

"I'm in no state to be fighting monsters."

Abrajax's hand flashed out. He grabbed Ronin by the jaw and looked hard into his eyes. "That's quitter's talk, you fucking coward," he snapped.

Ronin blinked, not quite a flinch.

"The walls are down, Ronin. The walls are down and shit's going to come through the holes, with the moon strong in their blood. There'll be a lot more Rordans, if you don't do what needs doing."

Ronin set his jaw.

"Don't you dare," Journey said quietly, her eyes on him.

"The ways are open," Abrajax said. He released Ronin and looked over at Thea. "You know where to go. Cross over. Seek out Vox Andalaia. They can confirm what I've told you, and send you in the right direction."

"Who is that?" Ronin asked, voice a little desperate.

"I don't know," Jacks said softly. He shrugged. "All I know is that she can help you."

Ronin looked at Journey.

He saw her heart drop as she read his expression. "Don't you *dare*."

"I have to."

She shook her head. "No you don't."

"What happened to you, what's been happening to me... and now Thea," Ronin added. "The world is changing. If I have a chance of heading catastrophe off at the pass, shouldn't I try?"

Journey wrapped her arms around herself.

"I... I'm going to," Thea said. "At least to talk to this Vox person. I've been to Andalaia, she's *really* nice. So if this Vox person works for her I don't see why they would, like, lie."

Ronin pointed to her. “What she said.” He ducked in back, moving his bed aside to get to the trunk that held his old armor and service weapon.

“If it’s all bullshit, though, you’ll come back. Right, Ronin?” Journey asked. “Right, Ronin?” she asked again when he didn’t respond.

“Yes, yes. Sure. Probably.” Ronin didn’t mention how his head had started to throb the moment Jax had mentioned Rordan. At first a bunkmate, and then a fellow officer in the army, Pierce and Rordan had been like brothers. Closer than brothers. And he would never admit it to Journey, but he had long since lost count of the nights he had dreamed of pumping the thing that killed him full of more silver than the damn mint. He dragged the six-foot-long trunk onto the bed, opening it with a screech of disused hinges.

He heard footsteps behind him before Journey grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. “Tell me this isn’t some sort of vengeance quest that’s been... brewing in you.”

“It’s not,” Ronin said. “Though I won’t say it’s not a bonus.”

Journey took a step back.

“Don’t try to stop me,” he said. “Please.”

“I don’t know that I could,” Journey said flatly. “I don’t know that I could. Just promise me you won’t... die. Or that you won’t get so caught up in this... this revenge that you have in your heart that you lose what little of the man I married there is left.”

“I swear to you, that won’t happen,” Ronin said.

“Good.” She looked over her shoulder at where Thea was listening intently to Abrajax talking about his tattoos. “And don’t let her die either.”

“I won’t.”

“I’ll stay here, keep the lights on at the shop, help people. Like we used to.” she smiled a little.

“So you can take it over again when you come back.”

“Right.”

“Because you’re coming back,” she said.

“Right.”

“Right.”

Ronin sighed. “We should... find some gloves and a scarf for Thea.”

Journey nodded. “I have some gloves that might fit in my bag.” She ducked out, and Ronin followed her.

“Hey, You’re supposed to know where we’re going, right?”

Thea looked up from Abrajax’s forearm and nodded brightly. “Black Jakodak’s Gate! It’s an island way far up north of here.”

Ronin scratched at his beard. “You mean Black Jakodak’s Tomb.”

“It wasn’t called that when I was there,” Thea said.

“Well, it is now,” Ronin said grimly. Black Jakodak’s Tomb. Of course the first place on their itinerary would be a place so full of disappearances and deaths people thought it to be cursed. “We’ll have to get a train up north. We can catch a ferry from there.”

Oh, yes.

This was going to go well.

#

Hathor picked himself up from where he had collapsed, shaking the images from his mind. Mantle, waters, wildness, duty? Those weren’t his thoughts.

He looked around at the still silence of his cave, a familiarity he had come to appreciate in recent centuries. He stepped back, facing his portal, and readied his quarterstaff. The length of wood became coated in Frost.

Something was coming. Hathor could feel it like he felt the seasons change.

The Wall was down. Magic was flowing out of Tir nAill and into Aprua once more.

But if things could leave Tir nAill... they could also enter it.

And Hathor would meet them when they did.

###

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