

The Never

A Tale of Peter and the Fae

Don Jones

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Foreword

I obviously owe a debt to J. M. Barrie and his original “Peter Pan” story, from which “The Never” obviously draws inspiration. “Peter and Wendy” has been a longtime favorite of mine, and “The Never” is a story I’ve struggled to write for well over 20 years.

I want to recommend Gordon Wine Bar and Theodore Frog, both top-notch establishments near the Thames in London. Much of the book’s outline for Parts 2 and 3, along with a handful of chapters, were written in these excellent establishments. Chapter 10, and a bunch of consistency touch-ups, were completed at Tamesis Dock on the South Bank of the River Thames in London, which is a very cool place to sit and write. And I’m especially fond of Chapter 9, which was written at a small bistro at the Serpentine, just a stone’s throw from where the tinker-fairies opened their first portal into the Never.

I should mention that, while the geographic details in this novel are correct in very broad strokes, I’ve taken ample liberties where needed to further the story or my own aesthetics, or to better blend the narrative with Barrie’s original world. Consider my London one that very much could have been, even if it’s not the one that led to our present-day metropolis.

I also want to thank everyone who’s supported me in my fiction-writing efforts. You know who you are. It takes

a tremendous effort to “put yourself out there,” and even if you’re just doing it for your own selfish reasons, you should do it. The world never suffered from a little extra storytelling. If nothing else I’ve very much enjoyed the effort.

Prologue

The exhausted fairy flittered back to the encampment. As she approached, she saw that her people had been busy: a pavilion had already been erected for the queen, several small campfires were burning, and the lights flickering in the nearby trees and bushes suggested they were starting to find niches in which to settle down for the night.

With her delicate wings aching, She landed heavily in front of the pavilion. Taking a deep breath and absentmindedly rubbing her tired eyes, she walked in through the open flap. There were no lights inside, and the moonlight formed only a small pool of pale illumination at the pavilion's entrance.

"Ah," said a quiet voice in the darkness. "My little tinker returns." The voice was like rough silk: smooth and supple, but with tiny sharp catches that suggested a rip might be imminent. "And what news?"

"It is holding, my queen," the fairy said softly. "He's imagined more land, forests, lakes, and more. The other tinkers pinned them all as soon as they sprang into existence, and the Never is held back. Within a few more days, everything new should be firm."

"You smell of him," the queen's said, her voice full of disdain. Her sense of smell was exquisitely sensitive, and she had always disliked Humans' odors.

"At your orders, my queen," the fairy responded, keep-

ing her voice as low and emotionless as possible.

“And so shall it ever be,” the queen said lightly. As she did, she stepped into the moonlight. The fairy marveled, as she had done thousands of times, at Queen Mab’s simple, effortless beauty. Raven-black hair spilled down over shoulders that were as white as the moonlight now caressing them. Her eyes were a piercing green. Like most of the Fae, she had no wings, but her gently pointed ears poked out slightly from her silken mane. She wore a simple white shift that flowed from her shoulders to the grassy ground. “And are we now bound to his whims? Will it all fail again when he grows bored?”

“No, my queen,” the fairy said, shaking her head firmly. “He is young enough. His imagination is capricious, not firm, and his memory is short. Once the tinkers finish pinning his latest work, he won’t remember that he imagined it. He will know it for the world it is.”

“And when he grows older?” the queen asked.

“It will take centuries,” the fairy replied. “Time is still a vague concept for him. The sun moves the sky only because he is used to it doing so, not because it is chained to time.”

“And he remains ignorant of us?”

The fairy nodded. “He thinks I’m the only Fae here.”

The queen laughed softly. “And so you shall keep him company through the centuries, as his companion.”

The tinker-fairy paused. This would be a touchy subject. “Myself, and his Lost Boys. But he will need other companions,” she said quietly.

“Others?” the queen snapped. “Which of your immortal

brothers and sisters would you condemn to that particular eternity?”

“None, my queen. I shall remain the only Fae the boy ever sees if we choose to remain hidden.”

“Who, then?”

Now for the touchy part. “Others of his age,” the fairy said firmly. “Other Humans. More Lost children.”

“*More* of the filthy beasts? Do you wish to recreate their world here, in the Never? Let them bring their Cold Iron, their wars, their greed, their—”

The fairy held up on delicate hand, interrupting the queen. A brave act, or a foolish one, she knew, and she would find out now which it was. “No, my queen,” she said, “of course not. Just one every so often. A young one. A... a fresh face for him.”

The queen considered her, arching one long, perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “Why?” she asked.

“Two reasons,” the fairy said, lowing her hand. “He *will* need more companions, and others his age will be perfect. But more importantly, *they* will further cement this world. It will be all they ever know. And when this first child eventually does grow too old, we can send him back to the world of man, knowing that a band remains behind to anchor this world as it is.”

The queen pondered for a moment. “Interesting. So you propose we merely steal children? Do you forget the changelings?”

The fairy had not. The Fae’s fascination with human children had, at one time, led them to steal children from

their very cradles, substituting them with Fae changelings who took on their appearance. The humans soon began to suspect and eventually realized that the Fae were behind it. New protections were added, and it began a new age of unease between the humans and the Fae. An age which rapidly led to the Fae's banishment to Under Hill.

"I do not, my queen," she said. "After all, we did not *steal* this boy from his cradle, nor did we steal the other few who first came with him. When the time comes to bring him playmates, we will bring another just like him. Someone who comes to *us*. Someone who is Lost."

The queen nodded and smiled softly. Her hundred years of exile might finally be over.

PART ONE: BEFORE

The Last Battle

“My queen.”

The Elven knight knelt on the cool, white marble floor, keeping his gaze down. His iridium armor was dented, the shimmering surface pitted and tarnished. *He’s been touched by the Rot*, the queen thought, her nostrils flaring at the lingering odor of burned metal. She noticed that his sword was missing and mourned the loss of magic. The knights’ swords were ancient, and the secrets of their making had been lost since the last Druids passed hundreds of years earlier. *So much loss*, she mused. “What news?” she said aloud.

“Ill, my queen,” the knight said. He paused.

“Out with it,” she ordered in a flat voice. There’d been no good news in years, so why should today be any different?

“King Oberon, my queen. He—” the knight paused again, and Queen Mab could hear the choke in his voice.

“Gone?” she asked softly. The knight nodded, never looking up. “And his company?” she asked even more quietly. The knight shook his head. *All lost, then*, she thought. She rose from her throne and stepped off of the low dais it sat upon. She walked to the knight and placed a hand on his helmet, saying nothing. After a moment, she turned and walked to one of the tall, graceful windows set into the walls of her throne hall. Her castle, a delicate

confection of tall towers, thin causeways, ornate turrets, and grand windows, sat atop a low hill and overlooked a vast meadow. Beyond stood an ancient forest, cut by a river of the purest, deep blue water. And soon, she knew, all too soon, it would be gone. “Is there anything else?” she asked without turning from the window. Hearing nothing, she said, “you may go. All of you,” she added, turning back to the room, “may go. Kex, you stay.” Her loyal seneschal, an Elf so old he was beginning to look like a shrunken Human, nodded deeply.

“What, then?” Mab asked after the room had cleared. “Oberon had all of our forces save the Home Guard. We’re left with a scant handful of warrior-fairies, a company of brownies, and a foul-tempered banshee or two.”

“And the leprechauns, my lady,” Kex added.

She snorted. “I was counting useful creatures,” she muttered. “I’d no more count the river-sprites or garden-fairies.”

Kex shrugged. “It wouldn’t matter,” he said dourly. “The Rot has proven impervious to force. It is not a *thing* we fight. It is merely an event that has happened to us. Even as Humans cut us off from their world, they poison ours.”

Mab frowned. It was true enough, but a delicate reminder that the Fae had likely brought this on themselves, were truth to be told. Over the Human centuries, more than a few of the Fair Folk had helped the Humans in their pointless battles, healed them with fairy magic, and blessed their homes and fields. But just as many had played trickster games with the Humans, making them angry and

fearful. And if there was one thing Queen Mab had learned, it was that a fearful Human was a very dangerous animal indeed.

Once the Humans had discovered how to dig Cold Iron out of the Earth's body, how to heat it to molten slag, and how to cast that slag into sharp weapons, the Fae's time amongst Humans had dwindled. Just the proximity of Cold Iron would diminish the magic of any Fae creature; the actual touch of the stuff would poison their blood and slowly kill them. Humans began using Cold Iron as a defense against the more wicked Fae, heedless of the fact that they were also driving off the more companionable creatures. Wooden doors gained iron nails, hinges, and locks. Iron bars blocked windows. And iron swords and spear-heads cut and killed.

It was the spears in particular that started it all, she remembered. Humans had long recognized the fairy rings that acted as portals between their world and the Fae home of Under Hill, but that recognition had only encouraged them to avoid such rings. The few Humans who'd ventured to Under Hill uninvited were allowed to live mainly so that they could return a proper message to their people: Keep Out. Few were invited to the domain of Oberon and Mab, and those were always escorted and cautioned to remain on their best behavior. Even though the last such honoree had been admitted over a century ago, Mab's nose wrinkled involuntarily at the memory of its stench. She had never been able to abide the smell of Humans.

But with the advent of iron-tipped spears, the Humans

had become bold. With their homes protected by iron, they ventured out to secure their fields, their woods, and their lands. One brave soul had thought to stab a spear of Cold Iron into the middle of a fairy ring and had been astonished to see its border mushrooms immediately wither and crumble to dust. Excitedly, the queen imagined, he had spread the word, and that's when it had truly begun. Parties of Humans, armed with iron, started actively hunting for fairy rings, stabbing them with spears and closing the portals to Under Hill.

Humans probably would have been satisfied with confining the Fae to their own world, and Mab would have been happy to let them believe it. Her tinker-fairies could, with little work, open a new fairy ring anytime she wished it. But what the Humans never realized is that each destroyed portal manifested in Under Hill as a pool of thick, black, foul-smelling slime. A slime that did not remain in place, but instead slowly oozed outward, enrobing everything it touched. It dissolved grass and flowers. It toppled trees. It consumed entire buildings. And it never, ever quit spreading. The Fae called it the Rot.

Born of Cold Iron, the Rot carried the poison of Cold Iron with it. Nearby magic flickered and failed, and Fae, who stayed too long in its presence, became weak and sick. It was as if the iron spear tips had punctured the fabric of Under Hill itself, dissolving the deep, ancient magic that formed the place, consigning it to a grim, tarry death.

Oberon had first set forth with a significant company of magic-weavers and warriors, hoping to either beat back the

Rot, or confine it. They erected pillars of pure Elvensteel, which slowed the Rot only slightly as it ate its way, hissing and spitting, through the strongest material the Fae knew. They cast wards capable of holding back Balor himself, and the Rot merely oozed onward, as if nothing had happened. Oberon himself had invoked Arawn, the god of the underworld, who had sent a company of Sluagh flying in from the west. They had flung themselves into the Rot, hoping to steal whatever power it contained, and had vanished instantly. Oberon and a few others had barely survived, retreating to the castle to regroup and plan anew.

Efforts to raise the other Tuatha De Danaan, the gods of the Fae, had been fruitless. It was as if the Rot had cut them off, or the gods had abandoned them. *Or, Mab thought wryly, the gods bet against us and stayed on Earth.* The Human Celts, she knew, had always been mighty worshippers of the Tuatha De Danaan. Now, even the other powerful Fae had proven powerless against the Rot. The Carman, the most powerful and evil enemy of the Tuatha De Danaan, and a recognized goddess of black magic, was missing. Her cave home had been discovered flooded with the Rot, and her three sons were nowhere to be found.

Oberon's last, fatal attempt had been to call down the Bright Light, a task requiring no less than twenty of the realm's thirty Elven knights, a full complement of warrior-fairies, and nearly every magic-weaver in the land. All but one, apparently, were now dead.

"And so we die," she said flatly.

"Not necessarily," Kex said carefully. "We are many," he

reminded her, “and we are not without escape. The tinker-fairies are holding one last portal open, here on the castle grounds.” As the Rot had spread, fairy rings had started to die spontaneously. The tinkers must be using all their might to keep one open, even with the castle’s considerable magic to reinforce them.

“To Earth,” Mab said, disgust in her voice. “We retreat to our enemy’s stronghold.”

“Humans are not the enemy,” Kex said sternly. “They are an animal provoked. If you kick a bane-wolf, do you not expect him to bite? Yet he is not your enemy.”

“Exile, then,” Mab said.

Kex shrugged. “If you like. *Life*, regardless. Survival.”

“They’ll destroy us,” she said.

“We will hide,” he countered. “The portal will diminish us, make us smaller. It will make us harder to see, if we abide.”

“We cower in the dark, then, and you call that survival?” Mab’s pride flared inside her.

“We *live*, my queen. We gain time to find another answer. Perhaps we can make a home on Earth, away from the Humans. Perhaps we find a door to another world. But we do not merely give up and let the Rot consume us.”

She mumbled something under her breath and fell silent. She turned to look back out the window. Green grass, ancient trees—all of which would be gone soon enough. “How long?” she asked.

He paused a moment. “Oberon led his company to Evendom Rise, scarcely a day’s ride from here. We will

likely see the edge of the Rot tomorrow or the next day at the latest. It will be upon us a day after that, at most.”

“Two days,” she said.

“Give or take,” he said.

She fell silent again, thinking. It was within her power to hide any of the Fae within her range of influence, a power uniquely given to her by the great goddess Danu in the First Days. Her other skills aside, she was first and foremost the protector of her people, the trickster who could spirit them away when no different path was available. This, then, would be the ultimate expression of her power and Danu’s purpose for her. Not her Greater Magics. Not her ability to enter men’s dreams and influence their thoughts. Not her unsurpassed beauty. Her purpose would be to hide her people, to lurk amongst the filthy Humans. To diminish herself to the size of a sprite, to lead them to a world where magic had all but died, and to bury them there. They would be paupers, living in fear and blight, she knew.

But Kex was right. They would be alive.

She sighed and lowered her head. “Send word,” she said quietly, defeat creeping into her sonorous voice. “Summon the Host. We leave at the next daybreak. The great wolf of the Fae shall be as a winter-mouse in his hole.”

Kex was not jesting, Mab thought, looking at the dozen tinker-fairies struggling to keep the last small portal open. She smelled the sharp tang of ozone as the fairies used

raw magic to hold the portal open by force. *They're losing this battle.* The Rot had been spotted moving through the wood beyond the meadow, and would indeed be upon the castle before the next sunrise. The Host of the Fae, the last survivors of her kingdom, had gathered on the meadow behind her. They carried only the barest essentials, slung in packs over their backs. Even the fearsome bane-sidhe, floating wispily in the unaccustomed sunlight, seemed subdued.

Mab opened her mouth to say something stirring, to rally her people. But then she closed it. Everyone knew what was happening here today. There was no lovely glamour to cast upon it. Passing one last glance across the assembled, pitifully small crowd, she turned her back on them and walked sedately to the last portal. It's blue light twisted and bucked before her, trying to close itself despite the tinkers' magical anchors. The tinker-fairies looked at her, and she saw the exhaustion in their eyes. Another dozen of their number had already gone ahead to prepare the way. She nodded at them and stepped through.

Time ran differently on Earth than Under Hill. On Earth, she remembered, Time was shackled to a strict schedule, always proceeding apace, and ever forward. Humans placed great stock in Time, ordering their lives completely against its measure. The folk of Under Hill, on the other hand, had a more casual relationship with Time. He was undoubtedly welcome Under Hill and was often present. But he was not forced to march always forward, and at one exact speed. He could linger on a pleasant

moment, or revisit a particularly memorable month. He could speed through a series of dull days, or skip some small intervals entirely. A year Under Hill could pass while no time passed at all on Earth, while sometimes a single day Under Hill could represent a century of Human time.

It had been daybreak Under Hill when Mab stepped through the fairy ring, and it was nigh sunset on Earth. *Easier for hiding*, she admitted, casting her senses wide to find the tinker-fairies that had preceded her. They knew what they were about, and knew how to not be seen, but she still needed to prepare herself for what was to come. And they came almost immediately, almost bowling her over in their eagerness to escape the Rot. She stepped to one side as gracefully as possible, watching her people spill before her. The sight was almost ridiculous, as the portal had shrunk each of them down to no more than a human's hand-span in height. She herself was standing in grass that came up to her knees. *Thus our fate*, she said, realizing that this was her new reality, and feeling her dislike of Humanity deepen instantly into hatred.

She watched her people spill out before her. She could smell cut grass, tame flowers, and fresh water, all nearby. She could also smell the fear of her people, their nerves wound to a breaking point. The tinker-fairies flitted to and fro, directing the arriving Fae to the shelters already prepared. A river ran nearby, perfect for the water-nymphs and other wet folk. A stand of tall, stately trees would provide an evening of protection for the fairies and their kin. The ground-folk, including the few remaining brown-

ies, burrowed into soft, loamy patches that Mab realized were Human flower beds. She frowned because those beds meant that they'd not been able to arrive in an isolated area as she'd hoped. The darker Fae melted gratefully into the long shadows cast by the setting sun. Within minutes—*too few minutes*, she thought, *for there are too few of us*—the exodus had completed, and the remaining tinker-fairies jetted through. The last had barely cleared when the mushrooms marking the edge of the fairy ring blackened and withered to dust.

She slowly looked around her, casting her most subtle magics of concealment and invisibility across them all. Time enough tomorrow to learn what Humans called this place, and how safe the Fae would be. Time enough ahead to plot their path, and try to shape their future. *Time enough*, she thought grimly, and with no little relish, *to decide how these Humans will be repaid.*

Exile

Ten miserable Human years, Mab thought to herself. Ten years in this hideous preserve.

The Fae had emerged from Under Hill into a manicured parkland in the middle of London, one of the Humans' capital cities. It was a city populated, at least, by the Humans the Fae were most familiar with, but these descendants of the Celts had built a monstrous city of quarried stone and Cold Iron. This parkland—the humans named the two halves “Kensington” and “Hyde,” differentiating them only by a winding artificial lake they'd built between them—was one of the few refuges where the Fae could survive.

Her people had scattered throughout their new reservation, striving to steer clear of the many Humans who came here for a daily stroll, to watch their children at play, or to carry out their odd courtship rituals. The Fae were all greatly diminished, not just in size, but in power. While the parks contained little Cold Iron—mainly small fences, benches, and statues—the surrounding city reeked of it, drawing their magic from them and channeling it, neutralized, into the earth. Those Fae less able to conceal themselves had to remain closer to Mab, for her own power of concealment could no longer stretch to cover the entire parkland.

The fairies were well-off enough for an exiled people. They'd always been adept at concealing themselves, and at

their current diminutive size, they could flit almost freely throughout the parks. The garden-fairies, Mab suspected, positively delighted in their new home, which was strewn with formal flower beds and green gardens. The tinker-fairies were bored, and most likely to seek out trouble by pestering young Humans. The Human world was fully grounded, invariable, and naturally at-rest; the poor tinkers had nothing to do with their reality-shaping powers. A small group of them had managed to give a bird the power of speech before Mab discovered their antics and called a stop to it. Her last few warrior-fairies tended to sulk in the crevices between tree branches, nursing their wounds and dreaming of old glories.

The sprites fit in perfectly with this mostly natural environment, taking up residence in the small river, the various water fountains, the trees, and the bushes. They even drifted through the breezes that graced the wide-open spaces. She knew that they teased the odd Human who happened to look too closely at that flash of sunlight on the water, or that off-key rustle in the leaves, but sprites had always done so. The brownies, to her great surprise, had proven more resistant to Cold Iron than the rest of the Fae. Many had ventured out to Human homes as they had in the ancient times, cleaning up small messes and performing small chores. More than a few remained in the parks to take care of their kin, cooking meals of tree-nuts and pollen, a diet Mab was becoming increasingly weary of. She sniffed, smelling the ripe pollen on her own breath, and shuddered.

Of the lighter Fae, the elves probably had the worst

of it. Proud beings to begin with, warriors and workers of magic, they found themselves with too much idle time and too little power. A few of them continued to amuse themselves by holding court, throwing small balls in the shadow of night, and even attempting to teach magic to other Fae, but most merely lay about, wasting away. She shook her head as she remembered her last Elven Knight, begging leave to wage war on a pair of older Humans who regularly cleaned the manicured walkways of the parks. She'd had to cast sleep on him and have his fellows hide him a stand of rushes alongside the river. He slept still, and would remain unaware until Mab woke him.

A few elves from her old Court continued to tend her: solid, reliable Vulwin; young, naive Fistra; and old, conniving Nymphidia. Kex, her trusted advisor, buried himself in research, poring through the many volumes of history and magic he'd managed to rescue from Under Hill.

The darker Fae were a mixed lot. The bane-sidhe mainly sulked in the shadows, as they'd done in Under Hill until attracted by Lady Death as she went about her rounds. Then they'd flit and float before her, moaning wailfully until some Human's life ended. The few remaining dark elves skulked on the edges of the parklands, beyond Mab's concealing glamour, preying on small animals. She'd forbidden them Human prey of any kind, for fear of the hubbub and risk of discovery, and they'd resented her order ever since. Gantor, their chief, visited her regularly to chide her for cowardice, but no Fae could disobey their queen.

The queen sighed. *Ten years*, she thought again, *and no closer to salvation*. Kex continued his research, assisted by a handful of the more obedient and less rambunctious tinker-fairies, into the possibility of other worlds to which they could escape. Her loyal charioteer, Cranion, had set off in her magical carriage with a small band of hardier Fae in search of abandoned land that they might occupy. Six years gone, and she'd started to give up any hope of seeing them again. It took so little to kill an entire company of Fae when you had Cold Iron to back you up.

Mab had wandered, moving gracefully through flower beds without being seen, to the western side of the parks, the side the Humans called Kensington. The Humans had erected a palace of sorts on the edge of the park, and Mab took great pleasure in criticizing it. Fae palaces were delicate and graceful, replete with twirling stairways, proud turrets, and grand, arching windows. At night they twinkled with fairy-lights, the very walls glowing with a soft, magical light. This Human palace was a series of connected rectangular boxes, made of dull red brick. At night, its square, flat windows glowed with a warm yellow light that was somehow made less charming by being flat and unwavering. She found the entire thing an unimaginative sprawl and derided it whenever she spoke to her courtiers. It smelled of stone and mortar, and of the rank perfumes the Humans used—liberally—to conceal their own odors.

This day, some pageant or other was underway, with overdressed Humans parading in and out of the building, and wandering to and fro from there and the collection

of ramshackle—to Mab’s eye—cottages to the side of the main structure. Mab snorted. Human frippery paled in comparison to the luminescent gowns and precious jewels the Fae had left behind in Under Hill, and these Human processions were but a pale echo of the glorious revels the Fae had indulged in under Mab’s rule.

She turned back toward the park’s interior, making her way to the man-made river that separated the west and east sides. A road cut through the park here, and Humans clattered back and forth on it in their horse-drawn carriages. Mab longed to whisper into a horse’s ear and send it galloping away, hauling its load of surprised and scared Humans away behind it. She resisted the urge.

“My most glorious queen,” came a silky voice behind her. One of her courtiers, likely pestering her to attend their latest fete. *Glorious indeed*, she thought sarcastically.

“What?” she asked without turning.

“My One Lady,” the voice oozed, “you had sworn us a boon and agreed to attend tonight’s Great Ball, commemorating our escape from certain death and lionizing your role as our savior.”

Lurilan, she thought. You could almost hear algae in his voice. He was one of a small pack of elves who preferred to spend their days lounging in the tiny, hidden coves along the head of the river. Even back Under Hill, he and his band had done little but sleep off one revelry in preparation for the next. She sighed.

“A Great Ball, you say?” she asked, allowing a small note of interest to creep into her voice.

“Indeed, oh Gracious One!” he said, seizing the bait. “A revel to—”

“To celebrate our exile into this dreary expanse of grass?” Mab asked, her voice hardening. “To rejoice at our diminished powers? To toast our decline into little more than rabbits and jaybirds? Is this the theme of your latest distraction?”

The elf stammered. “But, my queen, we—”

“Enough, Lurilan,” Mab said, sighing again. “Perhaps I have accepted that distraction is the most we can hope for, unless Kex can find us a new home or Cranion makes a miraculous return.”

He was uncharacteristically quiet for a moment before venturing, “so then, you will...”

“I will attend,” Mab said firmly. “But I will do so on one condition: that you and your ilk deliver a gala like those of old. That every Fae attends in whatever finest they can manage. That for just this one night, we recall the grandeur of Under Hill, before the sun rises and reveals us to be fools and shadows.”

“I... I agree, my queen,” he said softly. She heard repressed delight in his voice, and then the rustling of grass as he sped off to deliver the news to his kin. The courtiers would be delighted, as Mab had forbidden them any grand revels for fear of discovery. She wondered why she’d changed her mind.

“Gantar,” she said, still never moving her gaze. She knew the dark elf would hear her.

“Queen Mab,” a voice answered from a nearby shadow.

It was gravelly and hard, but at least he got to the point without all the bowing and scraping that had begun to annoy her so. “A Grand Ball?”

“You’re not invited,” she said flatly.

“We wouldn’t have participated,” he answered mockingly.

“Oh, you shall participate,” she said. “You and your kin. For this night only, I give you leave to steal the Humans’ senses. Not their bodies, Gantar, for we cannot have even more Humans investigating a death or disappearance. But you may charm their vision, and glamour their ears. You will whisper secrets to them, and lead them away from the Host. Lie to their noses with promises of rich food, and steal their minds to sup upon. Lead them out of our refuge and into the streets, and then let them go.”

He was quiet for a long while, and Mab could sense him looking for a loophole. “This night only?” he finally asked.

“This and any other night where the Host gathers to revel,” she amended. “Just as you shun us, so shall you protect us.” She knew this would irk the dark elves, but their ire would be overcome by their taste for Human thoughts and feelings. They would dine richly tonight, she knew, and likely sleep it off for a week or more.

“Agreed, my queen,” Gantar said graciously. “And thank you.”

Mab smiled softly.

The Great Ball was in full swing, under a dark moon. The garden-fairies zipped through the trees and shrubs, leaving brilliant green motes in their wake. The tinker-fairies danced—carefully since Mab had forbidden them the *rince mor*, the dance they used to open new fairy rings—and tended sparkling fires made of abandoned sunlight. The sprites and brownies danced in small packs, while the still-graceful courtier elves engaged in intricate ballroom exchanges. Even a few bane-sidhe twisted in the shadows overhead, keening tunefully.

Mab sat upon a throne of twigs and dandelion stems, smiling graciously at her people. A courtier elf supplied her with spiced dandelion wine, something she had no idea they'd been concocting. She'd have to speak to the tinkers about that because there was no possible way that the elves had come up with it on their own. In the distance, she could sense the dark elves skulking happily through the shadows, leading wandering Humans out of the park with their senses dazed and their minds confused.

Mab smiled as she noticed the few remaining warrior-fairies engaging in one of the ancient, regal dances their kind performed to honor their dead.

A scream in the distance interrupted her appreciation, and her head snapped toward the sound. She held up a hand, and the Great Ball instantly paused. The water-sprites' music stopped, and everything became still. Even the fairy-motes floating in the air immediately faded into darkness.

Another scream. It came from the north-eastern corner

of the park, the place where, on a daily basis, Humans would stand on small wooden boxes and espouse their beliefs to anyone who would listen.

A *Human* scream.

Mab could not fly, exactly; that privilege was reserved for the fairies, the bane-sidhe, and the now-extinct wisps. But she could *flit*, very quickly and very quietly, stepping through space without the companionship of Time. It was harder to do in the Human world, but at great need, she could cover the entire span of the park in the time it takes a sparrow to take a single breath. She did so now, peripherally noting that the Host was already scattering to their hidey-holes and refuges.

She arrived to see a Human woman, young but past the age of childhood, curled up on the ground, sobbing quietly. The stink of fear and duress poured from her, and Mab felt a bane-sidhe arrive overhead, keening softly. “Shut up,” the queen ordered.

Surrounding the girl was a brace of dark elves. “Cease this,” Mab ordered, her voice ringing with her authority. The queen of the Fae had been made so by the mother-goddess Danu herself, and every Fae ever created was enjoined to obedience, however reluctant, when Mab exerted her true authority. The dark elves each took an involuntary step back. “What goes here?” the queen hissed.

“You gave us leave,” Gantar growled back.

“To confound and mislead,” Mab said angrily, “not to harm. To lead out of the park, not to visit with nightmares. To misdirect, *not to touch*,” she finished with heat in her

voice.

“She tripped,” one of the other dark elves said sullenly.

“She tasted so *good*,” another added.

Gantar waved a hand to stop them. “You never said we couldn’t taste their fear,” he said quietly, “and we’ve not touched her.”

Mab seethed. Goddess-given authority was one thing, but when it came to dark elves, loopholes were another. “I sought to prevent discovery, not to bring a company of Humans upon us, looking for the source of a scream at night.” She stared at Gantar for several moments. He met her gaze with stony determination. “My children,” she said, slumping her shoulders and letting the anger drain from her voice. “I know. I know you long to taste them, to spirit them away, to darken them. I know you ache for their fear, and I know you burn to use them as fertilizer for the *blath oiche*, that you may bring new kin into the night.” Gantar’s face had softened. “But this, we cannot do.

“I hate these Humans, my children,” she said quietly, but with stone in her voice. “I hate what they did to our beautiful Under Hill. I hate the death they have wrought upon our kind. I *hate* that my husband, your King, perished in their hideous Rot. I want nothing more than to make them pay. It weighs on my mind every day and has for these ten years.

“But they outnumber us thousands to one. We are corralled into this park, held back by the Cold Iron around us. If the Humans remembered who we are, what we *were*, they would surround us with yet more Cold Iron. They

would box us in, and then they would hunt us.

“And we would lose.”

The dark elves had all hung their heads, except Gantar, who now met her gaze mournfully.

“Our time will come, my children,” she promised gently. “It will come. We are the Fae. We are forever, blessed of the Tuatha De Danaan, the Children of Danu. We will outlive these Humans, and the ones after them, and the ones after that. And one day, we will have our revenge.

“But until then, we must *live*.”

They looked up at her and nodded softly before dissolving into shadow. She envied the dark Fae that ability, sometimes.

Mab walked up to the girl, who was still shuddering on the ground, weeping. *My child*, she said, speaking into the girl’s mind. The girl turned her head toward Mab and opened her bloodshot, water-soaked eyes. Mab focused on a powerful glamour, making herself appear somewhat larger and more ethereal. *My child*, she said, *you have come far this night, and into a place where darkness holds sway at night. I have saved you, but now you must hurry home. Do not return here when the sun does not protect you. Do you understand?* The girl nodded, sniffing. *Good*, Mab said, smiling. *Now raise yourself*, she said, gesturing upwards with her arms as the girl stood. *And go in peace*. The girl nodded, and stumbled down the path, out of the park, and into the street.

Mab let the glamour drift away and began walking tiredly back to her people.

The Coronation

“Danu’s tits,” Mab sword under her breath. “What is this?”

She’d emerged from the tree-nook that had been her home for the past twenty years. She’d recently had the idea to get the gnomes to build an underground palace of sorts, but they were only a year or so into the effort. They did enjoy it, at least, and it kept them busy. Today, she wished she’d thought of the idea years ago because the parklands were swarming with Humans. Their stench all but drowned out the soft smell of grass that she’d become so accustomed to.

“The Humans are coronating their new king today, my lady,” Vulwin said. One of Mab’s favorite courtier-elves—and it wasn’t much of an achievement to be favored from *that* group, she thought—had accompanied her. The two of them were crouched beneath a dense shrub. Mab re-exerted the concealment charm she’d maintained almost continuously these past two decades, and marveled at how the magic had become nearly as natural and automatic as breathing.

“Everyone is in hiding?” Mab asked.

“Yes, my lady,” Vulwin answered. “Even the water-sprites are clear that they’re to stay hidden in the deeps or amongst the rushes.”

“Good,” Mab said distractedly. “A Human king. How good for them. How long did the previous one last?”

Vulwin's only vice was a fascination with the Human court, although Mab hadn't the slightest idea where the elf managed to dig up her facts and gossip. She probably didn't want to know.

"Sixty years, my lady," Vulwin replied breathlessly. "He ruled them for longer than any of his predecessors."

"A blink of an eye to our kind," Mab said with a sneer in her voice. "They think you can simply take any of them, plop them on a throne, rest a fancy crown on their head, and automatically make them a ruler. Danu *made* Oberon and I to rule. She made the Fae to be our people."

"The English say that the monarch is selected by the hand of their God," Vulwin offered.

Mab snorted indelicately. "Their *God*," she said. "Who apparently has to pop in every few decades and pick someone new? Pfft. Why not just *make* a monarch, and make them eternal, as Danu did with me? What is this new king's name, Vulwin?"

"George, my lady," the elf replied.

"George? I thought they'd already had a George," Mab said.

"George the third, my lady," Vulwin clarified. "He died. This is his son, who will be styled George the fourth."

"Ridiculous," Mab spat. "You see how they seek to emulate us? The son takes the name of the father so that they can pretend to an uninterrupted, eternal reign. Only the Fae could ever have it so."

"Yes, my lady," Vulwin said quietly, wisely recognizing that this was not a time for further clarification. One reason

Mab liked her so much.

The two stood under the shrub for a moment. “I suppose this will go on all day?” Mab asked.

“Likely, my queen,” Vulwin answered. “Today is Thursday, and they will likely celebrate until Monday.”

“Which is?” Mab had never cared to learn the Human calendar.

“The fourth day hence, my lady.”

“Four days,” Mab said flatly. Vulwin nodded. “I believe I shall nap, then,” Mab replied, and flitted back to her tree.

The new king weighed on Mab’s mind in the weeks following, even as the last celebrants packed up and headed home, and the city workers cleaned up their trash and replanted the trampled grass and flowerbeds.

Twenty years in the Human world. Twenty years of cowering in the bushes and shadows. Mab decided to make the Great Ball an annual reminder of what they’d lost, and a yearly opportunity for the dark elves to enjoy themselves for an evening. Ten Balls later and the sheer monotonous *routine* of it all weighed on her just as heavily as the idea of this new Human monarch.

Cranion had never returned, and all now presumed she and her party were lost forever. Excursions into the city by the more iron-tolerant brownies had revealed only a few additional places for the Fae to live, and those were all parks similar one they currently occupied. Mab had decided to keep them together rather than spreading them

out, but she kept the other parks' existence in her mind. Should the dark elves ever get too pushy again, she could always send them elsewhere to hunt.

King continued to float through her mind as she sat idly in her tree-nook and sipped dandelion wine. The wine, at least, had significantly improved in the past years.

"Bring Kex to me," she snapped, and one of her attendant-sprites scurried to obey.

"My queen," Kex said when he arrived, bowing low. "How may I serve you?"

"You might," Mab said archly, "find us a new world to live in." This had been a sticking point between them for some time, so much so that they now saw one another almost exclusively on the evening of the Great Ball.

"My queen, I—" he started.

"Nevermind, Kex. That's not why I asked you here," she said tiredly. "I wish to hear your thoughts on the topic of an alliance."

"All— I'm sorry, my queen, I believe I misheard you."

"Alliance," she said distinctly.

"With... but with whom, my queen?" he stammered.

"The new Human king," she said directly. "This George the fifth or fourth or whatever he is. Why should we not strike an alliance with this new king? I'm told he maintains a lavish court. Perhaps he is a Human who can appreciate the grandeur of the Fae."

"But, but," Kex stuttered, "to what *end*, my queen?"

"Because I am tired of this damn tree!" Mab shouted, slamming her fist on the bark. "Because this animal, this

Human enjoys the society, the food, the furnishings that are *my* birthright as Queen of the Fae! Because I am an eternal creature, and he is *nothing*, yet still has all I do not!" She sat heavily, her heart pounding in her chest.

"I see, my queen," Kex said evenly. "I am unsure how to advise you."

"How should we approach this Human king?" she demanded.

"Well, ah... I suppose ordinarily, we would send a procession. You would be drawn in your magical carriage, surrounded by a flock of warrior-fairies. A selection of your courtiers would follow on... ah," he said weakly, realizing that almost none of those things were possible. Cranion had taken the magical carriage, never to be seen again, and it was a well-known fact that the queen was continually vexed by her lack of a proper company of warrior-fairies.

"My queen, if I may," came a quiet voice from the shadows of the tree-nook.

"Nymphidia," she said flatly, recognizing the voice of her eldest courtier.

"Only that I have a suggestion," she said, emerging from the shadows.

"Do you?" she asked. "About the Human king?"

"Exactly, my lady. I understand your desire to approach this Human king as if... well, obviously not as an equal, but as a fellow monarch."

"Yes," she said. "And?"

"And given our current diminutive state, and our lack of light Fae warriors to protect you, it seems... hmm,

logistically challenging.”

“I can still cast a glamour,” she reminded him. “I can appear in any size I wish.”

“Around as much Cold Iron as the Human king’s palace is likely to contain, my queen?”

She *harrumphed*. “What is your idea, elf?”

“Only that there would be no reason to parlay with this king. No reason to meet him. No reason to present him a spectacle, no reason to remind him who the Fae are and have been to his people.”

“If?” Mab prompted.

“If we merely replace him,” Nymphidia said.

Mab blinked. “Replace?”

“I know all the Fae are your children, my queen, and we are all your subjects. But it is possible that some lesser of us, especially the lesser of the dark Fae, may sometimes fall beneath your notice,” the elf said.

“Stop groveling, elf,” she said. “Out with it.”

“We send a changeling, my queen – a changeling and enough Fae to kill this Human king. We put one of our own on his throne. Someone who will be loyal to *you*. Who will welcome you, and us. Who can *protect* us.”

“Ridiculous,” Kex sputtered. “First of all—”

“Stop,” Mab ordered. She considered Nymphidia’s suggestion. “Kex,” she said, “you would remind me that the changelings are not True Fae, yes? That they were not made by Danu to be loyal to their queen?” Kex nodded. “Still,” she said. “Still.”

“This is a poor idea, my queen,” Kex said for the dozenth time. “Changelings have ever been the castoffs of the Fae. They’re what we’ve left behind when we steal a Human child from its cradle. We *make* changelings. They—”

“Made, Kex. We make them no longer,” Mab reminded him.

“Ah... of course, my queen, not until it is safe to do so again. But changelings are not eternal. They are *mortal*. They—”

“Enough, Kex,” she said, making a slicing motion with her hand. “You have spoken with this changeling, this Oriel, have you not?” Kex nodded quietly. “As have I. Does he not strike you as loyal? He escaped from Under Hill with us. And he *is* eternal, as eternal as any Fae, until he takes Human form. He volunteers much.”

“He has much to gain, as a Human king,” Kex muttered. “And no changeling has replaced a Human adult, before. Only babes.”

“Oriel feels confident,” she said, “as do I. This new king, if rumors are to be believed, leads a lavish lifestyle. He parades with a painted face and wears heavy clothing. Oriel needs only to observe his manner of speech for some hours.”

“But you want a changeling to *rule*?” Kex said, aghast.

Mab shrugged. “Rule the Humans. Vulwin tells me that their king is often a figurehead, and that rule comes from their councils and parliaments. Oriel should have no problem with that, and he could find us a new home. Something grander. Something more... *appropriate*,” she

finished wistfully. “And perhaps,” she added slyly, “he can even earn us some of the retribution we’re owed.”

Kex realized he’d lost the argument. “I return to my studies, my queen,” he said quietly. “There has been promising progress toward touching worlds other than this one or Under Hill, and I will continue the pursuit of that goal, by your leave.” Mab waved distractedly at him, and he limped away.

“Shall I summon Oriel, my queen?” Vulwin asked from the far side of the tree-nook. She’d remained respectfully quiet while Kex was here, but she agreed with the elder Fae’s concerns.

“Yes,” Mab said, turning to her with a smile. “Do that.”

A changeling’s act of substitution is remarkably simple: the changeling in question simply stares at the target baby for a few moments and then assumes its shape. Because a baby Human has no voice, no way of speaking, and no particularly distinctive characteristics (in most cases, the Fae believed), the changeling’s job wasn’t that hard.

Oriel had a more difficult task. He was spirited into the castle by a small team of tinker-fairies, who did their best amidst all the Cold Iron to bend and shape light away from their party. Oriel then observed King George for some days, learning to mimic not only his appearance, but also his voice, his manner of speaking, his walk, his way of standing, and so on. When he was ready, Gantar’s dark elves stole the king’s spirit, while a team of gnomes bore

the body deep underground. Oriel began his craft and took the king's place. It was no easy feat, for the king was an obese, drug-addled man. Oriel had to learn to mimic his eccentricities and girth, something the changeling had not been originally designed to do.

The Fae who helped with the deception were weeks in healing, having been so close to so much Cold Iron for so long. They rested near the park's lake during the evening, tended by Mab and her courtiers. Once the last of them was back on his or her feet or wings, Mab decided to pay a visit to Oriel.

“My queen,” Oriel—George, Mab reminded herself—said. “It is blessed to see you. I hope our kin are healed and well?”

“They are,” Mab said. She was perched on a table, still well below the eye level of the seated changeling. He was arrayed in splendid regalia, sumptuous even for the Fae. His private apartments, in which they now met, were luxuriously appointed. And they smelled *terrible*, she thought. Heavy perfumes covered the stink of sweat and waste. She didn't know how the changeling could stand it. Trying to inhale as little as possible, she said, “And now we can be to our work.”

“Our work?” he said, affecting confusion. Mab thought she smelled something foul and sharp on his breath. It smelled of rotted poppies.

“Our work, changeling,” she said. Attempting to assert her goddess-granted authority would have no effect, she

knew. Still, she could barely keep herself from doing so. “We are to find a place for our people to live. A place free of Cold Iron, free of Humans. I am told this empire has many remote places.”

“Mmmm,” George said silkily, causing Mab to flinch from his foul-smelling breath. She noticed that his eyes seemed glazed, the pupils overly large. “My empire certainly does. But I fail to understand how this could be *our* work, you see.” He smiled and giggled softly.

Drugged, Mab thought. Like the Human he replaced. “*Our* work,” she said coldly, “because *I* placed you here to do *my* bidding. Find a home for my Host, and you may enjoy the remainder of your days as this foppish king. Fail me, and—”

“And what, little queen?” George asked, bending over to leer at her. She took a step backward, held out a hand, and *struck* him with a lancet of magic to his oversized, reddened nose. “Ow!” he cried, sitting back and rubbing his nose. Then he giggled again. “I am the king of a human *empire*, little queen. And I owe no allegiance to you, as your advisor warned you.

“So let me tell *you* what ‘*our*’ work shall be.” He pointed a fat finger at her. “*You* will go back to your park, and you will stay there. You will never return here. You will never send any of the Fae here. If you do, I will command my army to *destroy* you. I will raze your refuge to the ground and build it anew.

“Do we have an understanding?” He smiled brazenly at her.

Mab fumed and clenched her jaw. Her pride had caused this, she knew. *I should have listened to Kex*, she thought, not for the first time since this masquerade had begun. She'd risked the lives of Fae to put this puppet on the Human throne, but the puppet had cut his strings. She summoned her magic to herself and *flitted* out the open window, saying nothing more, but her hatred of Humans managed to find new depths in which to roil.

“*Everyone*,” Mab spat at her courtiers. “*Everyone* is to move. Every encampment. The gnomes have been digging; move as many as possible into their warrens. Oriel knows where we are, and if he comes here with soldiers, he must find not a single one of the Fae.”

They scrambled to obey.