

The Hunters and the Hunted

By Patrick Christensen

I had already known that even in the best case scenario this weekend was going to suck, however fleeing for my life before the Wild Hunt took my expectations of disaster and laughed at them for not being hardcore enough all the while rolling them for their lunch money.

Normally you couldn't convince me to venture into a forest for love or money, except I'm here because my dad guilted me into it and bought me a sweet new desktop as the lure for his trap. Let me try again, you can get me to wander into a forest with love and money but you better have a goddamn lot of both.

My dad and I get along great I swear, it's just, I'm a geek and my dad... isn't. In fact my dad is an avid outdoorsman, which makes us something akin to oil and water. Mostly we accept each other as the flawed individuals we are, but occasionally we try to get one another to appreciate our hobbies which is why my dad has seen all of Firefly and I can light a campfire using steel and flint. Don't judge me, I resisted as best I could, but some knowledge just seeps in.

Anyway, when I moved to California for college I swore that I was done with nature. Trees? Who needs 'em. Fresh air? Overrated. Sunlight? Bah, at least indoors I'm at less risk of skin cancer. My dad on the other hand gave me several recommendations for good hikes in the local area. I ignored him, but over the years his hints became more insistent until last week he finally took action.

I'd just graduated this year with a comp-sci major and managed to get a job in an electronics repair shop. Yeah, not the most glamorous use of a degree, but it was a job and I'm kinda desperate moneywise. Fucking student loans.

So by chance my birthday was last week, only a couple weeks after entering the workforce and my dad decided to buy me something nice as a combo birthday/graduation thing. That something nice was a new high end desktop. Okay my dad didn't actually buy the computer, he told me to pick what I wanted and he paid for it. Neither of us are idiots. Anyway, along with my nice new toy he bought me top end camping gear, I mean tent, backpack, portable stove, the works. Now just when I was about to smile and politely put the gear in a closet until I could throw it out my dad looked at me and said, "Son I'm proud of you, you've started out on your own and as much as it pains me to say you don't need to rely on me anymore. This is a moment every parent knows is coming, but when it arrives we aren't ready for it."

Crap, I was tearing up a little. I mean sure I'm not really an emotional guy and all, but he was looking so lost as he was saying this I couldn't just look away. Embarrassedly I shuffled my feet a little and started to mumble something about how

he'd always be part of my life, even if we didn't see each other quite as much when he looked at me and said.

"I hope the gifts I've given you remind you of me and you put them all to good use."

The slight emphasis on all gave away the game. He was guiltting me! On my birthday! I was preparing to angrily tell him off for pushing his expectations on me when I reconsidered. Damn it, this was my dad, the guy who went along with my hobbies just to find a way to connect with me. The guy who actually sat down with my D&D group and gamed with us for a session just to understand what I was doing with my time; which, while hugely embarrassing for me at the time, was actually pretty cool of him to have done.

I looked my dad in the eye and said, "You got it dad."

That was all it took, some things can be communicated with only a look and a tone of voice. My dad graciously acknowledged his victory by not mentioning it any further. The rest of the day passed and we made small talk until it was time for him to go.

A week later I'd looked through some possible hikes and selected a two day backpack through a trail not far from where the I-5 meets the 89 in Castle Crags State Park. So it was going to pretty much be: drive in, hike for half a day, set up camp, spend a night outdoors, hike out, go home and get blitzed. My dad had actually bought equipment for both me and my friends on the idea that misery loves company. I wouldn't actually mind company as a night alone in the woods wasn't all that appealing, but when I explained the situation to them they just laughed at me.

Assholes.

Okay fine, if our positions had been reversed I would've found the whole thing hilarious, but I wouldn't have laughed in their faces. Probably.

So maybe my friends and I aren't the outdoors type and expecting them to join me in my exile was a bit much. Still they're good people as evidenced when my buddy Mike expressed his concern for my safety.

"Hey, haven't a lot of people gone missing on hiking trails lately?" He asked, "maybe you shouldn't go out right now. I could see you being abducted on your own and butt-raped by hobos or something."

"Don't worry about it," I replied. Sure it was cool he was worried about me in his own way, but he was questioning my manhood and that couldn't be allowed to stand. "It's the beginning of hiking season, there's always some idiot who overestimates his orienteering prowess and gets his dumb ass lost."

"Alright," he sighed, "but you better not get bit by a werewolf."

I laughed. Yeah Mike may be a bit rough around the edges, but I know he'll look out for me. Not enough to, you know, actually go camping with me, but he'll be there in spirit.

"You're way too much of a wuss to be a werewolf. You wouldn't do anything cool if you were turned. If something that awesome happened it should happen to me."

Yeah, I don't know why I hang out with him either.

So Saturday found me dragging my skinny carcass up a trail carrying the weight of the world on my back. Alright so maybe it was more like 60 pounds, I'm not exactly a bodybuilder; anything over 20 pounds took effort.

The hike was like every other pointless expedition I've been on. Lots of exercise punctuated by repetitive scenery. Look a tree! Some sort of squirrel thing I'm pretty sure isn't actually a squirrel! Another tree! Excitement!

Fortunately I managed to straggle into a campsite before daylight was completely gone, nothing sucks more than trying to set up camp in the dark. I even managed to get my tent set up before nightfall. Hah! A triumph of man over his environment! My stomach grumbled to remind me that I'd been burning energy lugging Sisyphus' stone on my back all day so I started making an extra large pot of pre-made stew. Iron chef I am not.

She appeared just as the stew was ready to eat. From the moment I saw her I knew there was something about her that drew me to her. That would ensure I would follow her every whim, even if it had me braving the depths of hell, just that she might look at me with favor or perhaps turn her smile my way. Perhaps it was the way the firelight reflected in her warm brown eyes giving the impression of overflowing vitality. It could have been her shy smile that looked like it might either flee or embolden itself into a different aspect. Mayhap it was that her every movement flowed with an otherworldly grace. Or maybe it was because she was half naked.

I'm a guy, sue me.

For a second I thought I was hallucinating because there is no way any sane person would wear what she was wearing. Her outfit, and I shit you not, was a medium length skirt and a short top, what's the word for it? Oh yeah, a jerkin. Both of which were made entirely from animal skin. When I say that I don't mean she was wearing an ensemble of fur or leather. I mean someone, probably her, had hunted down small four legged critters, killed them, skinned the little bastards, and stitched their dead hides together into what I could only describe as an Animal Rights Activist's worst nightmare using what I strongly suspected was sinew. I also suspect she hand-sewed it together herself; the stitching was uneven causing the hides to push together and pull apart creating a tapestry of gaps that revealed tantalizing glimpses of her bare flesh.

She drifted slowly into the light of my fire and asked, "Would you mind if I shared your fire?"

Alright, was she suspicious? Possibly. Was she crazy? Probably. Was she hot? Definitely! Decision made I stood and welcomed her, "Fair lady be welcome at my camp, for it is truly fortunate I am to share such a wonderful evening with one so beautiful as you. Please find a... rock and be seated."

Gah, okay not the smoothest beginning. I'm a little out of my depth when it comes to the opposite sex. My strategy in these situations is to be as dorkishly amusing as possible in the hopes that chicks would find me charming enough to stay around and hopefully go from there. It wasn't exactly the best plan, but it was what I had and now it was making me sound like the lead of a bad romance novel.

"A gentleman!" She exclaimed, "I've been forestbound for some time now and most I approach aren't so kind as you, it was what made me so cautious in approaching your camp." She smiled as she dragged a rock to the fire. Whoa! She chose a large one for her seat, weak she was not.

So apparently when a crazy chick approaches you from nowhere at night, talking like you grew up in a Renfaire was the way to go. Learn something new every day I guess. I was about to reply in the same vein as I had started when the act of sitting teased open a slight gap in her skirt around her waist and I found my attention riveted by what was revealed. Or more accurately what wasn't revealed, for one second I got a flash of thigh and nothing else. I think she wasn't wearing underwear.

I tore my gaze up to her face, fortunately she was looking at the stew instead of at me. That was good because I'm pretty sure gazing at a woman's crotch like you have x-ray vision pretty much precludes any chance you have of dancing the horizontal tango. My thoughts raced, I hadn't seen any cloth through the gap in that one instant but maybe she was simply wearing a thong or something skimpy like that. On the other hand, what if she was starkers under there? Maybe if I played this right I would have the opportunity to find out for sure.

Quickly to make up for my slight preoccupation I offered, "Um, I'd offer the rest of the stew since you seem hungry, but I, uh, don't have any extra bowls or eating utensils."

"That's no problem!" She exclaimed happily and proceed to grab the pot and eat from it with her bare hands.

Okay that was unusual. The pot was off the fire, but it should still be hot enough to burn. I guess it wasn't as she wasn't screaming and flailing her hands about, instead she was sitting there devouring stew as if it was her last meal on Earth. Still it wasn't weird enough for me to ask her to leave. To be fair she could have walked in and announced she was the sovereign queen of the moon and then proceeded to attempt to find out what this thing humans call love is from me and it still wouldn't be weird enough

for me to ask her to leave. Actually if that was how things went tonight I'd be completely okay with it.

I was just finishing my portion, watching her eat may have been fascinating but it grew awkward after a bit, when she slurped the last from her cupped hands and looked up at me. Realizing I had seen her lapse of etiquette she immediately grew embarrassed. She coughed a bit looked, down at her hands, seemed to decide that since she'd already lost it she might as well continue on, and licked them clean.

"I'm really sorry about that." She apologized to me, "It's been so long since I last had cooked food I forgot myself. Most of my meals I take raw. Still it was an inexcusable lapse and as your guest I am ashamed."

Raw? I guess she was some sort of back-to-earth vegetarian or some other such nonsense. Wait, that couldn't be right. She'd eaten the beef along with the veggies so meat probably wasn't an issue. Maybe she lead some kind of hunter-gatherer lifestyle? Eating plants she harvested, hunting animals for food. No, she'd still need to cook the meat, unless... raw? No let's not think about that, back to the situation at hand and no time to spare for what only happened in my imagination. Probably.

"It's no problem, if you were willing to risk cooking your own hands along with the stew just for a meal I can't fault you for it," I allowed. I faltered for a second then recalled basic social graces and scooted forward a bit offering my hand, "My name's Robert by the way."

"Where have my manners gone?" She wondered aloud, "I'm Ruth and it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance." With that she took my proffered hand and shook it firmly.

"So you're a Bobby, huh?" Ruth continued, "So Bobby what brings you up this way?"

"I'm not a Bobby." I explained seriously. I knew it probably didn't seem that big a deal, but I was no Bobby. It's important to stick to your principles a after all. Otherwise you get stuck as Bobby for the rest of your life. "I am a Robert or if you must shorten it, a Rob."

Ruth pouted cutely, "But that makes you sound like such a fuddydud."

Fuddydud? Who used fuddydud anymore? "That's fine, so long as I'm a fuddydud named Robert," I countered. "Anyway I'm up here because-"

"That really doesn't matter," Ruth interrupted, looking sharply at the sky.

Wow, that was rude.

"I hadn't realized the time," she continued, "I was going to talk with you some more, but my friends are going to be waiting if I stay here much longer."

Oh. Yeah of course she had friends, this was starting to feel familiar; a hot girl had walked up to me out of nowhere, smiled a little, and then asked me to do her homework... I mean share my stew. Fuck, I was back in high school! Now would come the part where she was happy to get to know me, but she had things to do as far away

from me as possible and she would appreciate it if I didn't tell anyone she had ever talked to me.

"You see my friends and I are having a party out here," damn it here it came, "and I was wondering if you would perhaps like to accompany me?"

There it was- Wait, what? She was actually inviting me? Holy crap I'd never been invited to a party by a hot chick before! Oh man I could actually score tonight, I mean she must like me at least a little if she was inviting me to her party...

In the middle of the forest...

During the dead of night...

Alone...

Fuck me. I had almost fallen for it. I had almost been stupid enough to walk off into the woods with an obviously crazy woman wearing animal hides. I was an idiot. I looked that treacherous bitch right in the eye and stated as firmly as possible, "I would love to come."

What the hell? Maybe all that sparkled really was gold. Maybe to get what you want in this life you simply had to take what chances would come no matter how insane they seemed. Maybe as she was carving out my heart in sacrifice to her dark gods I'd get a chance to cop a feel.

I mean, you never know, right?

Ruth guided me confidently through the dark forest never hesitating for a second. It was actually a little eerie; she never missed a step or stumbled on any branches or forest growth. How long did you have to spend in a forest until you knew it well enough to navigate only by the light of the moon? That had to be what she was doing, the full moon was giving some light, but not enough to explain the sheer assurance she moved with. The only other explanation I could think of was that she could see in the dark and that was ridiculous. Right?

"We're approaching the Feast Hall of the Fae, carved from the Earth itself." My lovely guide announced. "I should warn you my friends are a little quick tempered; be as respectful with them as you have with me and you should be fine."

"Uh, I'm not gonna go home from this and find a century has passed while I was with you, right?"

Ruth stopped in her tracks as though some invisible wire had drawn taught within her. Slowly she turned in place and gave me a level stare. "Why would you ask something like that?" She probed.

"Um," I gulped, put on the spot, "Fae basically is short for faerie. A favorite prank of theirs was to invite a mortal to their domain where time would pass differently much

to the mortal's dismay when they left. Look forget about it, it was stupid of me to say. I'd love to go to your party, the cave just has an odd name."

Far from being offended this made Ruth laugh, a sort melodious sound that ran through me like electricity. "Never fear, poor mortal," she mocked, "no wicked faeries will remove you from your time. Besides we plan to enjoy tonight. It wouldn't do to make it pass faster. Still you did well with the name, perhaps you'll do better than I expected."

That actually comforted me quite a bit. If she was of the Fae she couldn't lie according to the stories and she had basically promised me safety. If she wasn't a Fae she was taking me to a party where people were dedicated enough to dress in animal skin and party in a cave. If that was the case I would fit in fine! With more confidence than I had ever imagined I could feel going to a social event I followed Ruth to the entrance of a cave.

Some guy dressed in much the same fashion as Ruth was hanging out by the entrance. He'd gone for more of a buckskin legging and moccasin sort of look, and his outfit was clearly store bought being much too well made for someone living in the woods.

"Arethusa," he drawled, "how nice of you to join us. I was wondering if you wimped out on bringing mortals to us. I was gonna suggest to the big guy he give me your ass to punish for failing your obligation to our court."

"Be silent newblood," Ruth snarled, "I have been here far longer than you have even walked this Earth. You have not the position to stand against me and if you remain insolent I will flay you alive for your transgression."

Whoa. Ruth was not someone to cross. It looked like the asshole at the door agreed as he muttered something that rhymed with itch and fled at full speed inside.

Boy could he move when someone motivated him.

Ruth turned to me. "About that name he called me. I probably should explain. You were astute when you spoke earlier, you are about to enter one of the realms of the Fae."

"And Arethusa is your name amongst them and you would prefer me to refer to you as such for tonight." I nodded, things finally making sense.

"You are unsurprised by this revelation?" Ruth, uh, Arethusa asked.

"Yeah. I didn't get it immediately, but all the little things just added up and now I know what's going on."

"Knowing your situation you do not choose to flee?" Arethusa asked clearly taken aback a little.

I lay my hand upon her shoulder and looked her straight in the eye trying with all my might to convey sincerity. "Look Ruth," I used her personal name to try to emphasize whatever bond might have developed between us in our short acquaintance, "I don't know if we meet because of sheer coincidence or if perhaps some higher fate brought us here (women loved anything about fate or destiny, just mention it and they'd

be eating out of your hand, at least according to the several romance novels I'd read, purely for research of course) but I live for this stuff. I had no idea that something like this was out here, but now that I know that it exists? No power in the world could stop me from going in there and I would honored," and with this I caught her hand and slowly kissed the back of it, yeah I had no idea where this was coming from but I was gonna roll with it. "Honored," I repeated, "if you were the one to escort me in there."

It was sad really. LARPing had such a social stigma attached to it. Ruth had been so brave to walk up to some stranger's camp dressed as she was, but obviously her group's need for extras to fill out their gathering had inspired her to go the extra mile. A good number of the group had probably gone out to beg and cajole clueless mortals to attend the feast. Sure she'd come on a little strong, but I thought it was cute how much of herself she'd put into her role. Yet even though she seemed so confident she was worried that I would reject her based on her hobby. It was a sad thing when a girl as hot as Ruth felt people would judge her poorly for something like this, it only went to show how stupid some people could be.

Ruth looked at me as if I had suddenly sprouted a second head, unsure what exactly to make of me. Finally she seemed to come to some conclusion and gave me a cool approving smile. Not flirtatious at all, but it was so genuine there could be no doubt of what she felt. That smile went through my heart like cupid's arrow, I think I may have floated off the floor a little, carried on that smile.

"Very well, mortal," said Arethusa donning her persona like a mask, "you have impressed me. You proved courteous where others proved crass. You are insightful where others are clouded. Finally you are brave where others much your superior quake with fear. I find myself hoping you survive the night." Now her smile turned opaque and I fancied a hungry darkness was concealed by it. "Though I doubt that shall be the case. Come mortal and know what is hidden from your eyes, though it shall prove your doom!"

With that she whisked me into the Feast Hall of the Fae. I have to give her credit she really knew how to set the stage. Ruth was cute, a good actress, smart, brave, and a whole list of other amazing qualities. I never knew a girl like this was out there, but I thanked God or whatever higher power existed for bringing us together. I was pretty sure she didn't have a boyfriend, there is no way someone dating her would be comfortable letting her walk around in that getup alone. My course of action was clear; before the night was over I was going to get firmly in her good graces or I would die trying!

The Feast Hall was an artificial cave. I could tell this because it lacked features I was pretty sure natural caves had and contained features I felt natural caves lacked.

For one thing the hall had no stalactites, no stalagmites, lacked any sign of flowing water or other sign that some erosive force had slowly formed it from the surrounding rock. For another it had what appeared to be claw marks all over the walls, ceiling, and floor. If I had to guess at its construction I would swear that it was created by some taloned beast that had torn it from the earth handful by handful. It was amazing, I couldn't believe any LARPing group had the resources to create something like this. I mean doing this in a state park must have like a million permits to file and then you have to deal with any naturalist groups... the mind boggled and let's leave it at that.

Light was provided from great big torches dipped in what looked like tar, casting a flickering light over the proceedings. The damn things were smoky too. The cave wasn't well ventilated causing a layer of smoke to coat everything. I coughed a bit; there was such a thing as being too realistic. Would it kill them to set up a generator and some electric lights and just pass it off as mystical elf lights? On the other hand everything about these people screamed that they were perfectionists dedicated to making every bit of the experience authentic. I was forced to admit it was very impressive, even if the smoke annoyed me.

Speaking of the people there was a pretty good sized crowd going when Arethusa entered with me on her arm. I know the girl is normally on the guys arm, but you have to understand the situation. Most of the Fae in this room were wearing obviously store bought leather goods. They might have seemed rustic and natural looking and would probably have created a convincingly wild atmosphere if it weren't for the few that simply blew them out of the water. Arethusa was one of these, she wore her animal skin skirt and jerkin naturally as if that was all she ever wore. Plus the genius of its fabrication became apparent in this situation. Her outfit just screamed that she was too busy living the life of some sort of woods nymph or elf to give a flying fuck about how she appeared. Next to her most everyone else looked like a poseur trying to pretend they lived the life she actually did.

Holy crap, she must be a queen among these people. With the level of attention to detail these people had, someone that went as far as her for her art must be high ranking amongst them. Yep, every head turned toward us as we entered and all eyes fixed on us. Then everyone gave her a short bow, those that neglected this were given an elbow until they remembered their propriety. Oh wow, this must be what it feels like to be a pretty princess on the arm of her charming prince.

Uh, did I just think that? No of course not, no lack of manliness here. I eat 5 pounds of steak a day and wrestle grizzly bears for fun. Grrrr.

All interesting personal revelations aside, the attention didn't last. Soon enough everyone turned back to their conversations and I could people watch unobserved.

Scattered through the crowd were people I assumed were like me. They seemed to have been invited to this at the last minute by one of the Fae in attendance. Their expressions ranged from amused at the situation they found themselves in to extremely

confused. For once I was much more confident and sure of what was going on than other people going into a party. What a rush!

Then there were a pair of men in suits. They were very easy to spot amidst this crowd, both by their attire and by the respect afforded them by the Fae participants. I guessed they would be representing an outside interest here to plot and scheme and make things more interesting in general.

Finally the most numerous group was obviously the Fae. Surprisingly enough I couldn't discern any major factions amongst them. They all seemed to wear much the same thing and they only were talking in small groups of at most four with no larger groups being formed. They did not glance around as if looking towards a leader that might summon or command them. Odd that, I would expect at least a few factions in a group that was supposed to represent the Fae, masters of treachery and subtlety. Huh, another strange thing was that they didn't fit the geek or nerd archetypes. Let's face it geeks and nerds have a reputation for being a little out of shape, a reputation that tends to be true. No one here was obviously overweight and a surprising number looked like they were at least passingly acquainted with a gym. Both men and women appeared at minimum moderately attractive with some care taken towards personal hygiene. An outdoors type LARP group, there are some truly strange things in this world.

From across the room a great horned man caught Arethusa's eye and gestured her over imperiously. From where I was standing it appeared that his horns were real, probably taken from a stag, and affixed to his head by leather straps mostly concealed by his long hair and great tangled beard. He was wearing what appeared to be, hmmm. Not a kilt, a little too short. I guess I'd call it a wrap made of deer hide and nothing else, his great chest bare. "Go and have some fun," Arethusa murmured to me, "I'm obliged to serve him."

"Okay, do what you gotta," I replied, trying desperately to hide how jealous the thought of her serving him was making me.

I was pretty sure those two weren't an item as he was obviously of some stature within the group. I think he was even the leader of this little gathering; rule of thumb the guy with the largest, most impressive hat is usually the leader, but I was still feeling a little overmatched. It was probably all in my head, but all the same I quickly turned and left Arethusa behind to show her I was totally fine on my own and didn't need her at all. Yeah, I'm an idiot, this is nothing new.

Anyway I was quickly in the middle of the gathering, surrounded by strangers. It was a little unnerving really, up close a lot of them looked like they could be typecast as stereotypical gang members in a bad daytime TV serial. I guess tattoos were more common among hiking enthusiasts/LARPer than I'd ever guessed. Also now that I was looking some had bits of bark where normally you'd see piercings. It looked like either they had decided to become way more intimate with nature than I was comfortable with or they were trying to prevent their piercings from healing over. Never mind, that last

one didn't make sense, It took way longer than any LARP session for a piercing to heal. Not my problem anyway.

Inspecting the crowd took my attention away from where I was walking and I accidentally stumbled into a group of three Fae. Immediately one shoved me away hard screaming at me, "Away mortal! Touch me again and I swear I'll *ahem* I mean, to touch me again shall bring forth torments unimaginable!"

"Man, you're trying too hard. You sound like some kinda queer," laughed the second.

"Dude, we gotta play along, can't fuck this up," whispered the first, looking around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "We screw up and that insane geezer will kill us."

"I don't care. I was living the life before this bullshit. Hot bitches, had my old crew too fuckin' scared to talk back to me, and the blood. Oh sweet Jesus, the blood was sweeter than any damn drink I ever had."

"Look don't you think I wish I was back home too? We was kings of the street as motherfuckin' dracs man. We gotta recognize that things've changed. It may suck balls, but back there we are overflow and it blows but they got serious ways of dealing with overflow. Here at least there's some prey to hunt. So think real hard homie, is you overflow or is you one of these fuckin' fairies?"

"Goddamn," swore the first, "I'm a fairy."

"You know I always suspected," quipped the third one.

With a snarl the first whirled around and punched the third straight in the face. In less than a second the two of them were at each other's throats, snarling hatred. Holy shit those two must be martial artists or something, they were swinging at each other so much faster than I've ever seen anyone move before.

"Ha!" Laughed the horned guy, suddenly appearing to watch. "Good! Only the wild Fae ride with the Hunt! Work up an appetite, for tonight we shall have sport!"

Wait, wearing horns and talking about a hunt, could it be? Oh I bet it was! This guy was probably supposed to be Herne of the Wild Hunt! In folklore he would ride through the wild untamed forest and hunt, well, anything. From hapless mortals to legendary beasts all would flee before the Hunt should they wish to live to see the dawn. I had to go say hi!

"Herne, might I have a word?" I quickly moved to catch his attention. He was definitely the lord of this hall, he probably had lots of demands for his attention, but maybe I could get a word in edgewise before he was called off elsewhere.

"Ah, Bobby!" Herne greeted me. "Arethusa made mention of you to me. The mortals change so quickly, did you know that once you would have been referred to as Hob? Hmmm, time is such a fickle thing is it not. Of more importance Arethusa reported to me your eyes pierced our glamour and you still ventured inside my realm, you have

named me correctly so my doubts have been vanquished. Tell me Bobby, why have you come?"

Bobby! That little... No, focus. Take the lesser of two evils and move forward.

"Actually mighty Herne I would prefer to be known as Hob," it was probably too late to be called Robert. Anyway Hob was actually pretty badass now I thought of it. "I'm sure Arethusa enjoyed her little joke. Tell me, lord of the wild, do you hunt tonight?"

"Ha! Ah ha ha ha ha! Merriment! We have one who seeks my boon! Ah Arethusa, always have you brought me such treasures. What a blessed daughter you be. Aye mortal, aye. Tonight the Hunt shall ride, and should you prove clever, brave, and resourceful perhaps you shall even manage to claim my boon. Prepare well mortal, I now have other matters to attend."

With that he wandered off back into the crowd. This was far more than I'd hoped! A Wild Hunt was taking place and I think I had a chance of joining it. It made sense, it seemed like there were a lot of newbies among the Fae group which would explain a lot. From the conversation I'd overheard it sounded like a lot of players had recently switched over from some sort of vampire roleplay so the balance of power was probably shifting and no true factions had been established. If I could mingle and either make some influential contacts or obtain valuable information to ingratiate myself with a powerful patron I could be allowed to ride with the Hunt. Like Herne said, I was going to have to be clever, brave, and resourceful.

With that in mind I tried to find the men dressed in suits. They were obviously an outside faction added to add intrigue to the event and thus were my best bet for whichever option I ended up going for. I passed through the Fae in my search and saw several other invitees throughout the throng. Most everyone now had little crude wooden cups full of what I assumed was alcohol and the invitees were relaxing and starting to enjoy themselves. I thought about going for a drink myself, but decided I needed my head clear for sleuthing. Those like me had been invited for atmosphere, they provided amusement for those who knew what was going on and I was determined not to be the same as them. By the end of this thing I was going to succeed beyond what anyone thought possible and impress the panties off Arethusa. If she was even wearing them.

Spotting the two suits I realized they were standing right next to what appeared to be the bar. Anyway there was a lot of liquor by them and one was partaking heavily. Perfect. I tried not to be too obvious as I sidled up, poured myself a drink, and pretended to nurse the beverage while hanging out by a wall in eavesdropping range of them.

I probably needn't have bothered, they seemed to ignore everyone there as if people would be too intimidated to do something as impertinent as eavesdrop on them. Oddly enough, they were right. In that crowded party there was a clear circle of space around them that no one seemed willing to violate. My position by the wall was right at

the edge of this zone and the relative lack of noise let me hear their conversation without too much difficulty.

"All I'm saying is that the cleanup is gonna be a bitch," spoke the one who seemed to be drinking quite a bit more than his buddy, "it would be different if it was happening somewhere else, but if a fairly large group of people disappear in an area where there aren't too many people to begin with, even the mortals could notice something's up."

"If the location is suspicious then simply move the location," the other guy was obviously annoyed; I got the sense he wasn't too fond of his friend Drinky. "At the same time you manufacture an explanation of what happened. I think the mortals simply met, found each other agreeable, then decided to travel together to a bar for a drink before they went back to their lives. Tragically there was an accident on the high road involving a gasoline tanker. And fire, so very much fire. In the end any irregularities with the bodies will be erased."

"I have trouble deciding which of these groups has less restraint, there may not be any bodies, Christopher."

Christopher smiled a horrible twisted grin. "There will be bodies, they'll even be the right age and sex. Any other ways they differ can be covered by the appropriate application of influence."

Alright! I had chosen well. These two were obviously discussing some conspiracy in their game and it was a doozy. Still I needed information that would interest people in this gathering not stuff related to an outside one. I decided to keep listening, if they didn't move on to something relevant I could try introducing myself later.

"This whole thing just seems unnecessary to me," complained Drinky.

Christopher sighed. "Very well I shall explain again what you should already know. Mighty Herne over there was an amusing irregularity, someone to be laughed at; who took in those that were excess or didn't fit in the cities. When the war broke out our enemy took exception to his presence in their territory. Instead of being driven off he successfully led a Hunt and destroyed them losing most of his... court in the process. Lady Yvonne was impressed by this and decided to make use of him. We gave him all of the *ahem* 'Fae' amongst us and told him if any turned out to be one of ours they had transgressed against our laws and could be dealt with as he saw fit. Now he will hunt our enemy in our place."

"I'm not witless, I was aware of this. What I mean is we aren't supposed to be fighting yet and no matter how many small tribes we eliminate here it is meaningless against the armies being arrayed on the main fronts of the war. Besides, have you not heard? The Freewill is among us and he shall lead us to great victories. We should be gathering strength to add to his."

"The Freewill is the problem, you sot. There may be many stories about him but all agree on one thing: he is tied to James. Lady Yvonne may not have had the power base for a serious play at the First Coven but do you think she is pleased her most bitter rival managed to attain the seat? If, when the council of war is finally called, our lady can truthfully report she has severely reduced or better yet eliminated the enemy in her

domain it will go a long way in overtaking the status James has gained in securing the Freewill."

"I've met James. It didn't seem like he bore Yvonne hostility. In fact I didn't think he considered her a rival at all."

Christopher looked at his companion the way one would look at a centipede. "I should kill you right here Martin," he spoke conversationally, "I have no idea how you have survived this long. Do you think our Lady is pleased by that? James could not have offered her greater insult had he tried. Know that James is our enemy even more than the forest dwellers. Do not say anything that implies otherwise in Lady Yvonne's presence, she might take out the remainder of her wrath on me after your slow torturous death."

I had just gotten some excellent information but I needed something more to get into the Hunt. I was amazingly lucky they had recapped anything at all and I didn't think I would luck out into them being so straightforward again. It was time to join the conversation. I could either try to blackmail them to get me into the Hunt or I could use what I'd overheard to try to get them to reveal more concrete information. Either way it was time to up the ante.

I sauntered up to them and had just started to introduce myself, "Excuse me, I'm-" when things went wrong. In less time than it took for me to breathe Christopher grabbed me by my shirt and slammed me against the cavern wall.

"I am not in the habit of allowing impertinence," he snarled at me. "You should consider yourself fortunate I have not slain you for this transgression."

"Yeah," chimed in Martin, "it escapes me why we're being merciful. Tear his arm off Christopher. I want to hear him scream."

"If your memory is so faulty allow me to refresh it," said Herne as he strode out from the crowd with Arethusa at his side. Damn it, I was trying to impress this girl and she had to come in now. "He is to remain unharmed since he is here under my hospitality. Now release him."

Unhappily Christopher allowed me to drop. Wow was he strong, his grip hadn't even wavered as he had pinned me up against the wall. Pretty grouchy too, I hadn't expected to be attacked just for trying to talk.

"Don't give in so easily Christopher!" Martin groused, obviously deep into his cups. "I'm fed up with this madman's mummer's farce. Teach this fool his place."

Herne took this about as well as could be expected, that was to say not at all. He bared his fangs in a furious snarl (wait how did I miss the fangs) and his eyes turned as dark as a clouded night. Martin took a step back but then his resolve steeled and he refused to back down any further. The tableau hovered on the edge of violence for several long seconds.

Then Christopher stepped in front of Martin and apologized, "Forgive us, I acted rashly and my companion is inebriated. No offense was meant."

"No harm done then!" Herne laughed and his eyes returned to normal. "A small amount of excitement is part of these occasions. Think nothing of it."

It should have ended there. The suits would have gone back to being mysterious and creepy, I would have left and avoided those two for the rest of the night, and Herne would keep on being loud and jovial. This resolution was shattered instead by the arrival

of a very drunk Fae. Coincidentally it was the same one I had heard complain about being a Fae earlier.

"Hey faggot," he slurred at Christopher, "I'm done. I fuckin' quit and screw you if you think you can make me stay in this shithole. I'm not a goddamn fairy, all man up here!"

Christopher rubbed the bridge of his nose as he muttered, "Why is it that I must always be surrounded by drunken idiots?" Oddly enough he was glaring at Martin as he said this rather than the newcomer.

Herne stepped forward, "So you admit to being an outsider using me as a shield to protect your miserable life?" He sounded oddly calm, as though the answer wasn't important to him. Even so he exuded an aura of barely restrained menace. I suddenly realized why Christopher hadn't taken offense at the moron; Herne had the primary claim on dealing with him and it didn't look like there would be anything left after he took his pound of flesh.

"Fuck off asshole," the drunk started "I-

It happened too fast to see. One second there was an idiot mouthing off to the lord of the hall and the next there was a flash of light and heat and Herne was posed a step forward with his arm thrust through where the idiot's heart would be if he was still there. Only he wasn't, a small pile of dust marked the floor where he had been standing.

Silence reigned for several long moments as the assembled Fae tried very hard to pretend they weren't perturbed by this. Herne let dust trickle through his fingers as he declared, "Let all witness the fate of those who violate the hospitality of Herne! Liars and spies are not welcome in my hall!"

Applause burst out. I spun around to see who was clapping and found that most of the outsiders were grinning and applauding the act. Act! Right it must have been an act! It couldn't possibly have been real, right? Just because I had no idea how they managed to pull something so complex right in front of me with no betraying telltales of a trick didn't mean there wasn't one. Nothing else made sense.

The applause drew to a close as I stood there mulling over impossibilities. Fortunately my demeanor of cautious thought matched that of the Fae making it seem more like I was one of them rather than one of the incredulous tourists. I hope Arethusa thought that anyway, wait where'd she go? Crap she'd almost managed to wander off before I had a chance to convince her that I had the whole thing under control and her help, while appreciated, was unnecessary.

Alas Herne was right next to her and after that last demonstration, real or not, I wasn't about to slight him in this hall. Thus my next words were to him though I was trying to convey my version of events to Arethusa. "Lord Herne," I called, "I thank you for interceding on my behalf. I had not thought to cause trouble in your domain."

"Think nothing of it, the unliving often overstep their bounds and need be reminded of their place." Herne responded offhandedly. "Still Hob, what brought you in contact with those foul creatures? I thought you a brighter lad than that."

Arethusa pouted a bit upon hearing me called Hob; I smirked a bit at her to convey that her ploy had failed. Yes, I know it was silly, but even small things can form bonds between people and I would hold on tightly to anything that connected me with her.

Still I had to answer the lord of the hall, allowing myself to ignore him would definitely be a mistake. "I was curious as to their nature. I studied them awhile to ascertain what they may be and upon hearing such interesting conversation I felt I must insert myself into it to see what I might learn. I knew there was a chance I would be unwelcome but I did not foresee such a violent response to merely introducing myself."

Arethusa shook her head looking at me with exasperated amusement. "I see you did not speak false when you professed your desire for knowledge of this world. Never the less, I advise you not to seek out situations that will endanger you further, there will be peril enough for you this night and you should prepare yourself to meet it."

"Lay off the lad Arethusa!" Cried Herne. "He is the hardiest mortal I have met in a century. Modern times have stripped all sense of adventure from the breed, now when they meet something outside their experience they cower instead of facing it head on. It is refreshing to see that boldness is not wholly gone in this day and age."

"So Herne," I interjected trying to get off the subject of my recent mishap, "may I ask about the fangs? None of the stories of you I have heard describe them."

"Ah yes, there is a reason for that." Herne frowned. "Not many who meet me survive the experience. Thus only fragments are relayed back to the other mortals. I am the embodiment of the Hunt. I may take whatever aspect I deem fitting. For some time now I have enjoyed wearing the aspect of the wolf. Thus the fangs."

Behind Herne Arethusa quickly shook her head. For whatever reason she was warning me about pursuing this subject. She was my guide here so I felt that taking her advice would probably be the smart thing. I was trying to come up with a new topic when I heard the growling.

In the stories of the Wild Hunt there is often mention of dogs. These hounds bore little resemblance to the dogs of this day and age. They were great beasts made mostly of shadow. Unholy fires lurked behind their eyes. Their claws and fangs were formidable weapons but their true calling was to seek out prey and call for their master's attention. Fearful of what monster these dedicated roleplayers might have chosen to represent them I spun around quickly to scan the gathering for its advance.

I couldn't see it, the crowd was too thick. Nervously I continued my vigilance; dogs make me nervous. Laugh if you like but there it was. The growling was getting to me; it was pervasive, as if the hound was right in front of me. I unconsciously took a step back and felt something brush against my shoe.

Slowly I looked down and then yelped. The beast was right behind me! It glared at me with hungry eyes, fangs were bared with hatred, and its growl warned me of my doom. Anyone could be excused for panicking in the face of such a monster. My quick scramble behind Arethusa was a well planned retreat for my very life. She was probably familiar with the beast and thus was more likely to calm its ire. Thus there was no shame in my actions, even if the thing was a little smaller than I'd originally thought.

Okay, it was a Chihuahua.

Let's not mention this again alright?

"**Heel,**" commanded Herne.

It was odd, that command had some strange power to it. I heard the words with my ears, but there was also a feeling of catching a whisper with some other sense. Like I was hearing an echo of a call in my mind. Eh, I'm too imaginative. Something like that was impossible.

Herne knelt down and petted the mongrel. "Hob meet my loyal hound." He beckoned me. "He shall lead this Hunt, sniffing out our prey. Is that not right, boy?" With that he picked up the beast and started playing with it. "Still it would not do to violate hospitality right this moment. Fear not! I will not allow him to slip his leash."

There is something about dog lovers that turns them into drooling morons when some mutt is around. Still I wasn't about to point out to the lord of the Hunt that his fearsome pooch was less than a foot tall. "Ah yes. Truly a frightening animal." I lamely supplied.

Arethusa grinned. "Aye, though it seems to be more so for some of us than others."

"Don't be hard on the lad." Herne admonished. "He sees past the surface of things. He can tell this is no ordinary dog, it is a hunter formed from shadows! It is fortunate that Arethusa is able to travel to the realm of shadows and procure such marvelous hounds."

"Yes, that is exactly what I do." Arethusa quickly interjected.

"For these mighty hunters are too free of heart to be kept here." Herne continued as if nothing had interrupted. "Eventually they all find their way into sunlight, which burns away their masks returning them to the shadows whence they came." Herne set the pooch back down with a hint of sadness.

Oh. This dog must be new. It sucked to have a pet die, but Herne was obviously soldiering on in spite of his loss. Dogs may not be my favorite thing in the world, but I'd cut this one some slack for Herne's sake.

That was when I felt something warm and wet hit my leg. Slowly I looked down at the Chihuahua. Yep, that horrid monster had just peed on me. Forget what I said earlier, when it came to this thing all bets were off. If I caught this terror away from its protectors I was going to strand it in a tree somewhere.

Herne and Arethusa had a good laugh at my discomfort and then wandered off once more. I mingled for a while longer, avoiding the two suits from earlier, and met and promptly forgot a couple of the invitees. The LARPer continued to be oddly dissonant from what I expected of them. I didn't catch Arethusa alone, though not for lack of trying.

Eventually Herne mounted a dais and declared that the feast was about to start. Everyone gathered around the giant stone tables at the end of the cave. The stone benches weren't very comfortable, but they were impressive so it evened out. There was no real seating order; we all just grabbed whatever seat was available, I managed to snag one by Arethusa just before someone else, to my satisfaction.

Herne stood by a throne made entirely from the bones of animals and produced a great goblet filled with a red liquid which he raised in toast. "I welcome all gathered to my hall. Make merry all and gather your strength! For you shall need it in what is to come!" With that he drained his goblet and sprawled on his throne. The assembled raised their drinks of choice and imitated him.

That was when I noticed something. Earlier I had come across the suspicion that Arethusa was not wearing underwear. Now I knew that Herne wasn't. He sat there with his legs spread revealing him in all his glory.

Ugh. I quickly looked at the gathered merrymakers to distract myself. I saw mirrored looks of revulsion on many of the male new Fae and outsiders. Oddly enough a number of the females looked speculative. It made an odd kind of sense. Just flashing your junk isn't going to get you laid, but that wasn't what Herne was doing. First he looked like some sort of wild king, not just handsome but regal in some way. Then he didn't just hike up his wrap and flash everyone but instead just made no move to cover himself. That bespoke a natural sort of confidence that appeared unconcerned with what others might think. It wasn't something you could fake, it took balls. Great big hairy ones from what I-
Nope. Not going there.

Anyway my line of thought was interrupted when they brought out the food. At least they were treating it like food. I was hoping it was just some bizarre set piece and not actually something I was expected to eat. Two of the what I had begun to think of as Elder Fae, the ones in handmade furs, manhandled the thing I was trying to distract myself from and starting carving slices off onto plates. Yeah, definitely dinner.

The object of my revulsion was a skinned buck. There was nothing appetizing about it; it was bloody, skinless, and uncooked. It looked like its throat had been torn out. It was official; there was such a thing as taking roleplay too far and I was looking at the result, desperately trying to figure out how I could decline to eat without looking like a wimp to the girl next to me.

When the crude wooden platters reached us Arethusa quickly ate a small piece, sucked the blood off her plate, and then left the rest alone. Ah! That's the reason for her freak out with the stew, she'd eaten a meal so she wouldn't be hungry now. I was going to ignore the blood thing for now. Judging people isn't cool. Alright, let's be honest, nothing she did would be enough to make me judge her. She was just too hot.

Sucking it up, I took a small piece from in front of me. Arethusa had managed it and no way was I wimping out in front of her. Reluctantly I closed my eyes and just swallowed the meat whole. Gah! That was disgusting! I would never do that again even if the alternative was a horrible death. Unless of course Arethusa took another bite. Then I was pretty much sunk.

The other invitees of course didn't take this so well. "What the fuck!" Exclaimed one woman. "This is disgusting! There is no way in hell I'm touching this!" Herne looked up from his goblet. "Are you refusing my hospitality?" He asked, dead calm.

"Yes! Did you really think anyone would eat this? I thought things were a little weird before, but this is way too much. Fuck this and fuck you, I'm leaving."

"Not only do you refuse my hospitality, you go so far as to deride it!" Herne proclaimed. "You have earned the enmity of this hall!" And with that he tore her throat out.

This was impressive as they were on opposite sides of the hall. Herne didn't seem to care about that as in the space of a heartbeat he disappeared from his seat and appeared in front of the complainer, who was now bleeding copiously.

Screams echoed off the cavern walls from the outsiders who now realized the danger they were in. The Fae just kept clear, a few running their fingers in the blood and licking it off.

Then it hit me; I'd been completely wrong all evening. This was no LARP group, everything here was absolutely real. Arethusa looked at me and murmured, "This is the price of knowledge, mortal. You have been fortunate thus far, but to walk among us is to witness bloodshed. Now perhaps you regret my bringing you here. Hate me if you will."

I wasn't listening. I wrapped my arms around her in the biggest hug I've ever given and just told her, "Thank you so much."

It was real. It was all real! Everyone insists that what we see is all there is to the world, but I'd always wanted there to be something more to things. In this world there existed such creatures as Faeries and that meant that other myths might be real too. There could be wondrous and terrible things in the world hidden from the sight of normals. Now at last I wasn't normal anymore! Well according to my friends I'd never been normal, but screw them! Now I was part of the supernatural! Ooh, maybe magic could be learned and I could become a wizard! The possibilities were endless. If the price of being allowed to enter into this secret world was to hunt down other humans then so be it. It's not like I knew them very well anyway. I'd worked all evening to separate myself from the other clueless mortals and-

"Tonight the Hunt shall ride, and should you prove clever, brave, and resourceful perhaps you shall even manage to claim my boon."

Wait couldn't that also mean...

"I advise you not to seek out situations that will endanger you further, there will be peril enough for you this night and you should prepare yourself to meet it."

Oh. Oh no.

"I find myself hoping you survive the night, though I doubt that shall be the case" Oh fuck me, I wasn't going to ride with the Hunt tonight, I would be hunted by it!

The rest of the feast continued under a noticeable pall. The mortals were terrified of the might Herne had shown and I was lost in the realization of how badly I'd misjudged the situation. None of the assembled Fae were too interested in the meat before them, though a good number drank down the blood.

Finally after a short while of subdued desultory eating Herne stood and announced, "it is time" and with that new life seemed to come into the gathered Fae, a predatory presence that filled the hall. "For those mortals that have not yet realized where they have found themselves," and with that Herne winked at me, "I shall give an explanation. Tonight you have partaken of the hospitality of the Wild Hunt. Now in exchange for our hospitality you shall be hunted by it." With this a low moan came from the doomed mortals. "Any who should survive until the dawn shall receive any boon within my power to grant. Now flee! We shall allow one hour to pass before giving chase."

With this around half the mortals ran screaming and the other half tried to argue with Herne. I paid little attention to either group as no one among the mortals had impressed me. I would have to depend on myself to survive the night. Suddenly I realized I had a problem. Other than a mob of crazed Fae lusting for my blood, which I was still having a little trouble wrapping my mind around to tell the truth.

"Arethusa," I leaned over to whisper, "you've indicated that I carry some favor with you. Should this be true I need a favor."

"I'm sorry Robert." She whispered back to me. "I can't save you. You were kind while I knew you and I'm sorry now that my approaching you has gotten you killed but I won't defy Herne for your sake."

"What?" Oh yeah, she must have been out looking for prey when she came to my camp. Damn it, she'd only been looking at me as prey all night. I probably would never get to sleep with her now. No wait, no time for that. "It's not that. You were the one who guided me here, any chance of my survival rests on me getting back to camp to scavenge what I can to defend myself. Can you lead me back?"

"Oh." She seemed surprised. "Yes. I can help you that much at least."

Arethusa took me to my campsite and left me there reminding me I had less than an hour before the Hunt began. Alright, what out of the assorted odds and ends in my campsite would balk the Fae?

Iron would be good. I'd start with that. That should be pretty easy after all, humans had been using iron for centuries. My camp should be full of the most commonly known weakness of the Fae. Once I stripped all the iron from the area I was going to be fucking unstoppable.

I looked around my camp for a good weapon. Uh oh, where were the heaps of iron I'd been imagining? The stew pot! It might be awkward as a weapon, but it was undoubtedly metal. I picked it up and then stopped. Arethusa had grabbed it earlier. That threw everything I thought I knew about the Fae into question. What chance did I have if the most basic piece of knowledge I had about my foe was false? In a fit of pique I lifted the damnably light thing and made to throw it against a tree.

Wait, light? That's it! Iron is heavy so backpackers carry lighter materials to save weight! I wasn't mistaken about Fae weaknesses, I still had a chance! Now all I had to do was to get the iron from my camp.

Which I suddenly realized I might not have. When you're carrying everything you need for a camping expedition on your back saving weight becomes of utmost importance. Backpackers, and their camping suppliers, were fanatical about reducing the weight of the items they had to carry. I scrambled to examine every piece of metal I could find. The following was what I had to work with:

- 1 Pot (aluminum)
- 1 Bowl (aluminum)
- 1 Fork (aluminum)
- 1 Knife (aluminum)
- 1 Empty Can (aluminum)
- 3 Cans of Food (aluminum and various organic matter)
- 1 Portable Stove (partly aluminum and pretty damn heavy despite this)
- 4 Tent Pegs (aluminum)
- 2 Hiking Poles (titanium, as I said my dad had been generous)
- 1 Multi-Tool Pocket Knife (steel)

And that was it. The only thing that might even be marginally helpful among the collection was the pocket knife and I wasn't even sure if steel counted as iron or if the process of turning it into steel mucked with the mojo. Even if steel worked as well as iron the largest blade on the little pigsticker was about the length of my little finger. Not exactly the arsenal I had been imagining when I'd started my little scavenger hunt.

I needed more as my plan to arm myself to the teeth with iron had just fallen through. Think, I had to think. What could I do? I'd gone into this with no preparation. In D&D games getting caught as flatfooted as I had been normally meant a total party wipe and a need to reroll some characters. No, I couldn't afford to think like that, I only had one life and no continues. I would have to do everything perfect on the first try; there would be no saves, checkpoints, or restarts. I would be reliant upon what I could scrounge from my camp and randomly generated items found in the woods. Damn it, I hated rougelikes!

I absentmindedly kicked some small plant with orangish red berries in frustration. I was dead! There was no way one puny knife was getting me through this and without any other protection I was going to die. Then several of my thoughts began to gel. I'd focused too much on iron, there were other defenses and if I wanted to survive I would have to search my entire campsite for anything that might keep me alive.

With that I returned to the plant I'd kicked, I had no idea what Rowan looked like but I knew it wasn't very tall as trees go and has red berries. The plant I was looking at was more of a bush and its berries were orangey and I wasn't even sure if Rowan grew in California but that didn't matter. There was a plethora of useful items all around me. If I couldn't target a specific weakness like iron, I'd go for a shotgun approach and hope something among what I threw at them worked. With that in mind I tore a branch off, stuffed it in my pocket, and returned to ransack my camp.

Alright time to think. In my foggy memories of Faerie stories, what were they weak against? Rowan was a good start, but wait, I think in some stories it was used by the Fae, oh well shotgun approach. Let's see, I remember a story that connected Fae with technology. No, that was about Fae moving into cities and forming a Neon Court, not helpful. Hey, my smartphone had signal! I could call for help and tell the police that I was being hunted by Faeries. No that would get me committed not helped. Besides remembering how fast Herne had moved didn't fill me with confidence that the police could even help. Maybe if they knew what they were getting into, but going in blind would just cause their death and somehow I doubted they'd believe me if I told them the truth of what was happening. That was out, back to looking for countermeasures.

Searching through my pack I found a packet of trail mix. Good, I vaguely remembered something about scattering seeds on a doorstep to protect a house from intrusion, hopefully mixed nuts and dried fruit could serve the same purpose. A compass, the needle was a magnet which was also known in the olden days as lodestone. Lodestone was believed to have lots of sorcerous properties. I guess I'd be finding out if any of them were real. A can of Bear Spray, well what the hell, why not. If it was powerful enough to work on a large apex predator maybe it would work on Faeries too.

Unfortunately, I'd lost track of time somewhere between my panic attack and my sudden epiphany. The baying of the hounds brought me back to my senses. Well alright

there was only one hound and it was more of a yapping than baying, but boy was that dog getting into it. The Chihuahua was facing me from the edge of my camp and doing his damndest to let everyone know he had found me. How had he found me so fast? There were lots of other targets that hadn't had the benefit of a Fae guide to help them get so far out, it wasn't fair! Then I realized, he had marked me earlier tonight. All the beast had needed to do was to find my trail and follow it.

Well, this moment would have come sooner or later and I had known it. I might have preferred that it had happened a little later but it didn't matter. It was now time to pit my wits against the might of the Wild Hunt, to prove my intelligence and daring, and to accomplish a feat that few others had managed. Now, how to shut this thing up. My eyes roamed my surroundings for a hint of an answer.

Aha! I slowly reached down to the underbrush and picked up a stick. "Do you want the stick?" I demanded of the vicious beast waving the branch insouciantly. "Do you want the stick?" I challenged again. The fiend stopped its call, its gaze riveted on what had suddenly become the most important object in its world. "DO YOU WANT THE STICK!" I bellowed, the beast was frantic, waving back and forth in front of me. "THEN GO GET THE STICK!" I commanded and made a mighty throwing motion with my arm. The dog took off like a shot, bounding away at a speed no mortal animal could match. I waited for a minute and then discarded the stick from behind my back where I had hidden it. That dumb mutt looked like it would be miles away before it stopped chasing its imaginary stick. In my first encounter with the Hunt I had proven triumphant, now I could venture forth and hopefully continue the night undetected by the Fae.

"I told you following the dog was a good idea," said one of the Fae to his buddy as they walked out of the trees.

Ah hell, looks like I hadn't won yet. Too much to hope for I guess.

"Heh, who would've thought the little mutt actually had a purpose." Laughed his friend.

Alright, I'd prepared for this moment. I had my defenses and now was the time to use them. I would start with iron as that still seemed the best way to go. Flicking open the blade of my pocketknife I challenge them. "Stay back! Be afraid for I wield a blade made from the bane of your existence; cold iron."

The second guy broke into laughter. Uh oh, that didn't bode well. Scant minutes into the hunt and what I'd assumed to be my greatest defense was already looking weak. What else among the meager line of defenses I'd assembled would prove to be worthless. My confidence, so recently boosted from besting that hellhound, started to waver. Fortunately it looked like the first one was wary, maybe this would work out after all.

"Ah ha ha, ha. Oh man I haven't laughed that hard in forever. Look at this guy he's all like 'look at me I'm such a badass' and he's waving that little knife around. Come on man crack a smile, this shit's hilarious."

"No it ain't." Refuted the first one. "That knife is made of iron, one of the Faeries' greatest weaknesses."

"Oh, not this bullshit again."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Touching that blade would kill a Faerie and dying pitifully in front of Herne would be a disgrace."

"Wait, Herne's here?"

"He told us he wasn't going to participate in the Hunt until the end because he wanted to watch our performance. He took interest in this asshole during the feast. You work it out for yourself."

"But I don't see him anywhere."

"Does that really make you feel better?"

"Aw damn it, not really. Yeah I guess there's easier prey to be found. Let's just get this over with."

The first nodded and then glared at me. "You got lucky. If things were just a little different I'd be gutting you right now. Understand?"

Well that was pretty clear. Still I was going to have to be tough and lucky to survive. I needed to create an impression that I was difficult game and these two were the perfect messengers for me.

"Whatever Faerie boys," I taunted, "things aren't different so you might as well just go ahead and get lost."

The second guy growled deep in his throat and started to lunge for me but the first caught his arm. There was a brief struggle for control before the second guy realized that he couldn't hurt me and stopped. As they left the clearing the second guy stopped and spat at me. It happened too fast for me to try to dodge and I was left wiping spittle off my shirt. Still, they had left and I would count that as a win. Now I could finally try to find somewhere safer to hide out than a campsite in the middle of a hiking trail everyone knew I'd originally come from.

"You handled those two quite well." A third Fae congratulated me walking up from a different direction than the others had left. He was one of the Fae that was wearing the DIY clothing rather than store bought. Hmm, there must be something to that but I didn't have time to think about it. "It's a pity you'll be dying so quickly after such an impressive showing but I suppose that's just luck of the draw."

My magnificent blade had worked the first time and I saw no reason to mess with a good thing. Brandishing the pocketknife valiantly at the Fae I once again prepared to wager my life. "If you were watching the previous confrontation then you are aware I hold a blade forged to defeat you." I intoned. "Retreat now while you still have your life."

"Yes very good." Complimented the Fae, fangs elongating from his mouth while his eyes turned black. "You have enough attitude to make up for the size of your blade, I can see why the newbies decided to leave." He bent down and picked up a stone from the ground. "Still, I'm not a newbie." And with that he threw the stone in one explosive motion.

The stone hit the pocketknife's blade with the force of a rifle bullet and the knife was knocked out of my hand, the blade snapped clean off. Oh shit, that was bad. I'd seen these guys move and I didn't have a lot of time to bring up another defense. I think he was playing with me a little, wanting to see my reaction to losing what he assumed was my only line of defense, because I managed to pull my sprig of what-I-hoped-was-Rowan out of my pocket.

A look of bemused confusion crossed his face and I inwardly panicked. Fuck me, I'd known that Rowan grew in Europe and was native to that continent but I'd hoped so strongly that I'd found another weakness of the Fae to exploit. With this out of the running I was down to much shakier methods of survival. Still as long as the Faerie was giving me time it was worth a shot to try to see if it was completely useless or not.

"A branch of Rowan wood to protect against the depredations of the Fair Folk!" I declaimed. Suddenly I was a lot less sure of this, he could get bored and just end me before I could even try any of my other defenses.

"Huh." The wild Faerie murmured. "That's actually a defense. Impressive I didn't know that- I mean I had no idea Rowan grew in these parts." At the last part of the sentence his voice swelled dramatically as if he were an actor in some sort of play. He bent down and picked another stone nonchalantly.

"Thus I am protected from any harm you might do me." I quickly continued to forestall him stoning me to death. "Be it magical or physical in nature." Yeah I was making this up on the fly but maybe some god, fate, or a humongous amount of luck would be on my side and a barrage of rocks wasn't in my future.

"Well that does complicate things." The Faerie agreed. "And the others were right, Herne could very well be watching this." He seemed to come to some sort of decision. "I'm a survivor." He confided to me. "I prioritize myself over everything else, it's how I wound up here. I'm not going to risk fucking that up over you. Besides the newbies were right, there are plenty of other mortals running around the forest tonight." And with that he took off into the woods leaving me alone.

I'd learnt my lesson. Every time I thought I was home free I found myself right back in danger. This time I wouldn't fall for it, this time I'd be prepared for whatever came next. I quickly retrieved my pocketknife, the big blade might be broken but it had lots of other tools all made from iron.

Time passed.

More time passed.

Fuck it no one else was coming. Feeling a little foolish I kept my pocketknife in one hand and Rowan branch in another and took off into the woods. My campsite might be clear for now, but it was still the obvious place to look and I would fare better somewhere away from obvious signs of human presence. So I ran into the dark woods trying to ignore the screams I hoped were only in my imagination.

Running through the midnight forest was a novel and terrifying sensation. Underbrush chose the damndest places to hide and trip me while low branches were an ever-present danger. Still I felt powerful, a primal energy suffusing me. I was swift! I was sure! I was untouchable!

I was sliding! In the dark I had missed the small gully and its sudden appearance caused me to miss my footing. I slid down the slope stopping only when a tree interrupted my slide. Ouch.

In no shape to continue running I sat down with my back to the tree to catch my breath. I'd put distance between me and my camp so I should be okay and if another Faerie came along. I had my defenses to-

My defenses!

I'd been holding them in my hands when I'd taken my tumble and somewhere along the way I'd obviously dropped them. Suddenly getting a second wind I frantically raced about to try to find them. Ultimately it was futile, of course. It was far too dark to

have any hope of reliably finding them even if I had a general idea of where they were. My two proven tools were now out of the picture.

I was starting to panic again. All I had left was an extra large pack of trail mix and a compass with which to protect my life. Neither of which I really wanted to trust my life to. It was hopeless, I'd done well to come this far but this was it. This was as far as I was going. I was as good as dead.

No. Panicking wasn't going to help. Only clear thinking would help me out of the hole I'd found myself in. Looking back on the night it was when I hadn't stopped to think that had gotten me in trouble. From following Arethusa blindly into danger to unwittingly insulting the two suits, the actions I hadn't thought through had endangered my life.

Conversely when I had bothered to stop and think it had saved my life, the Rowan being a good example of that. So now it was time for me to get it in gear and find my way out.

Let's see, was there anything I could salvage or scrounge to either remake or replace my lost protections? I was out in the middle of the woods with fuck all around me. It didn't seem like following up that line of thought would be helpful or a good use of whatever time I had before I was discovered.

Alright, was there some aspect of the Fae themselves I could find that I hadn't thought of, that I could use against them? No, all I could think of was that in folklore they seemed to love bargains and right now I had nothing that they would want. There was nothing-

Wait, yes there was. There was a mystery that had been subtly nagging me all night and I'd never actually bothered to figure out. There seemed to be two sorts of Fae here tonight. One group, the newbies, was dressed in obviously manufactured dress and looked more like gang members than Fae. The other, the Elder Fae, dressed in handmade clothes and seemed more like what I'd thought Fae should be. There had been mention of spies and traitors.

Hmmm. Alright I'd treat this as a RPG I was playing. Earlier I had gone around collecting clues. It was now time to put them together to figure out the plot. From there I could best decide how to act.

Something about thinking of it as a game sparked a memory. Right! Earlier in the evening when I'd assumed everyone was a roleplayer I'd had the impression that the noobs had come from some vampire LARP due to the conversations I had overheard. Now, knowing all this was real combined with the reference to infiltrators meant that the noob Fae-

No that couldn't be. In fact the best candidates to be vampires would actually be the Elder Fae. Actually the only fangs I had seen tonight had been on the Elder Fae from earlier and on Herne himself.

Who others had accused of being insane. Who wore antlers strapped to his head instead of growing them himself. Who drank from goblet of blood.

It was ridiculous of course, but following the logic events began to make a certain kind of sense. Odd statements, actions that didn't fit, and other random occurrences started to come together to form one logical conclusion:

There were no actual Faeries here. Every so called Faerie was actually a vampire playing a convoluted part.

WHAT THE FUCK WAS WRONG WITH THE WORLD TO MAKE THAT THE LOGICAL CONCLUSION?

Still it made sense. I could see it played out in my mind. At some point in the distant past some unfortunate man had been turned into a vampire. I don't know whether he was mad to begin with or if the shock of being turned broke him, but for whatever reason that man had refused to believe he was a vampire. Instead he had latched onto the fantasy that he was a Faerie of the Wild Hunt. More specifically he had believed he was the Hunt's leader, Herne.

He probably hadn't been taken seriously at first. In fact I doubt any vampire had wanted anything to do with him. Still, status seemed to be a big thing in their world and I doubted anyone would have gained anything from killing him. So he was allowed to survive until the unthinkable had happened. He'd grown old and with that, as in so many works about vampires, had come power. Suddenly he was a madman everyone was forced to take seriously due to his strength. I had no doubt he was older than America itself, so he had probably been forced here either because he'd trespassed against someone more powerful than him or because other vampires hadn't wanted him around to fuck things up for them.

Once he was here he'd stuck to the forests so he hadn't caused too much trouble, subsisting mostly off animal blood and the occasional hapless hiker. Somehow he'd attracted other outcasts from vampire society and they'd formed their own... pack? Society? Coven? I liked coven, let's stick with that. And they'd survived out here alone, welcoming in those that no one else would take.

Until the war that Martin and Christopher had mentioned had taken place. Then he'd led a Hunt against the vampire's foe, whether intentionally or not, and had emerged victorious, though at a cost. Seeing opportunity Yvonne, the local vampire leader, had hatched a plan to use the mad Herne for her own benefit. She'd gathered the riffraff from her streets, hit them with some law she hadn't bothered to enforce until she needed it, and told them they had a choice; join Herne and play a Faerie or die.

It explained so much! The split between the two groups of Fae, the reason so many of them seemed unsure if something was actually a weakness or not, why Arethusa had stopped me from discussing Herne's fangs. With this I knew what was going on and I was now at an advantage.

No wait, I wasn't at an advantage at all! I'd just eliminated every potential defense I had! The only vampiric weakness I could think of was staking one through the heart and I highly doubted any of them would stand still to let me try it! Furthermore, iron didn't affect them, even if I found more I-can't-believe-it's-not-Rowan it wouldn't-

But it had. Back when I'd thought I was dealing with Faeries I'd used classic Fae weaknesses to keep my ass alive. If they were vampires that shouldn't have worked so why would they...

Of course! They still had to pretend to be Faeries or Herne would off them! If any of them proved they were a vampire in front of Herne he would kill them. Thus they had to pretend to be affected by Faerie weaknesses even if they weren't. And that meant I had a plan. I got up, it was time to start moving.

I managed to avoid the Fae for at least an hour, probably more, before my spate of luck ended. A tiny brown blur streaked in and fastened itself to my ankle. Fortunately the teeth were small enough not to get through my hiking boots but the menacing growl from the diminutive form gave me ample cause for concern. Being the cool collected customer that I am I remained in total control despite this surprise. Yelling a battle cry that was completely unlike the shriek of a frightened school girl I took to hopping on one foot while shaking my captured appendage and chanting, in the manner of warriors everywhere, "Get it off! Get it off!"

After a few short minutes proved the inefficacy of that strategy I realized that I would have to face my adversary more directly. There was darkness in this world and the time had come for me to take a stand against it. It was time to strike a blow in the name of humanity and prove once and for all that mankind was not afraid of the beasts that lurk in the dark. And so I bravely reached down and tore the horrid thing from my ankle, its fangs taking some of my boot with it, lifted the squirming thing to the level of my chest, and then, before it could get its bearings and sink its fangs into my flesh, dropkicked the demonic anklebiter into the nearest tree.

It was, and shall forever be, one of the proudest moments of my life.

The little runt got stuck on a branch a fair bit up, its own light weight and the power of my desperation, er ahem, the might of my blow combining to send it flying quite a ways. It started to scramble to come after me but soon realized it was much higher than any dog was supposed to ever go. Not realizing that thanks to its own vampiric strength (yes of course it was a vampire too nothing else made sense, damn it) it could easily leap the distance its little doggy brain told it that it was trapped, despite possessing the means to free itself. The beast raised a howl of despair once it realized I had vanquished it, but was powerless to stop me as I left the site of my most recent victory against the forces of evil.

Naturally I didn't get very far before more trouble arrived. As I kept moving through the forest I could hear noise from many different sources homing in on the cursed hound. How I hated that thing! It brought nothing but misery in its wake. I could handle the hordes of vampires but that thing was just bad news. From hence forth I named it my archenemy and allowed the knowledge that I had defeated it to keep my spirits up. It was a good thing I had been so pleased by my victory because I soon came face to face with a vampire horde.

I came into some sort of clearing when I realized that one of the wildly dressed vampires was waiting for me. I had known that another encounter was unavoidable and oddly this meeting didn't cause me too much concern. I let a cocky grin come to my face as I prepared to match banter against this undead fiend when a second vampire walked out of the woods. His arrival was spoiled a bit by his quiet cursing as he apparently tried to wipe something off his shoe. I had just about come to terms with his arrival when three more vamps arrived. Over the next several minutes groups of vampires entered the clearing in dribs and drabs. At last, after fifteen vampires had arrived and no one else had come along for several minutes, the original vamp said, "Alright looks like that's everyone then. Now that I don't have to repeat myself, all of you fuck off, I was here first."

The assembled vampires reacted poorly to this of course. Cries of "Bullshit!" and "You gotta make me!" rang through the throng. The mob soon devolved into a bickering

fracas where each individual vampire staked (heh sorry the pun made itself) their claim to my lifeblood. It should have been a worrying sight as sooner or later the argument would have to die down and then I'd probably be dying in a more literal sense but I had a plan. While they fought amongst themselves (and for once the fighting was more than verbal, actual blows being exchanged) I rummaged through my pockets until I found my extra large bag of trail mix. Grinning broadly I tore it open and flung the contents in a wide arc that not coincidentally wound up covering them with assorted nuts and fruit.

That stopped them dead (ha, I kill me) in their tracks. "What the fuck is this?" Demanded one of the noob vampires. Several of the other vampires agreed with him nonverbally, but oddly enough most of them were just too confused by being showered by a light trail snack to be properly angry with me.

My biggest shit-eating grin on my face I told him, "That is trail mix, a rather large bag of different kinds of nuts and dried fruit all mixed together willy nilly."

"So you plan to give us allergies or something?" Inquired another, still obviously confused.

"Nothing of the sort!" I assured her. "I do however, know about Faeries. Before you are able to chase after me you must first sort each individual nut and fruit into small piles according to type."

"Are you fucking kidding me!" Shouted a voice from the crowd.

"I ain't some goddamn maid!" Cried another. Most of the rest chimed in with similar sentiments.

My grin got even bigger, "Still by your own kind's nature you are compelled to do this before chasing me." Now for the killer. "I mean you are Faeries, right?"

Dead silence met this question and in that moment I knew I had them. They weren't Faeries and they knew it, but more importantly they knew the necessity of pretending to be Faeries. And I sounded like I was far more sure of what I knew about Faeries than they were sure of what they knew about them. It didn't matter that they were vampires, because of Herne's madness they were forced to obey the rules. Rules that I was now writing by sheer virtue of some monumental bullshit that they were too scared to call. They collectively looked down at the grass by their feet and imagined how much of a pain in the ass it would be to search among that mess for individual nuts and fruit. They looked at each other to see if any of their group was willing to call bullshit on my lie and risk being wrong. No one was.

"Oh and I can't wait to hear the Traditional Faerie Cleaning Song!" I added.

"The Traditional Faerie Cleaning Song?" One of them moaned.

"Oh yes. I hear it's a delightful melody. Unfortunately I don't know the lyrics, but all the scholars agree that it's what Faeries sing when they do tasks such as this." For a second I was afraid I'd gone too far but having bought into my first piece of bullshit it seemed they were more willing to go for the second bit.

"Fuck this." Said the original vampire. "I'm done. I got one earlier tonight before prey got sparse, there's no way in hell I'm singing the Traditional Faerie Cleaning Song for nothing."

"Come on man, it's not like he can escape." Argued another. "We split up get this done and within an hour or two we can feed him his own entrails."

"You don't get it. Does he seem alarmed by your threats?" Countered the first.

The group took a look at me and all seemed to come to the conclusion that no, I indeed did not seem worried about the prospect of several revenge-minded vampires seeking me out.

"That's because this isn't his only trick. He's probably prepared quite a few things for this and I for one don't feel like putting up with it. I'm out." And he suited actions to his words and left.

The rest of the vampires took this as a cue and slowly filtered out of the clearing giving me dirty looks as they left. Man what a rush! I watched the vampires, so powerful and yet completely helpless against me, leave dejectedly and I felt invincible. As the last vamp left my sight I allowed myself to actually believe that I would survive the night.

Then I heard that awful growl once more. I slowly turned around and there stood my arch nemesis. We both stared at each other across the short distance. We knew that this would be our last encounter, only one of us walking away from this. I had triumphed twice before but I had never managed to really hurt the beast. Furthermore, since it was a vampire dog I didn't have any mystic defenses against it, our struggle would have to take place in the physical realm.

Another long moment passed. There was a connection between us and we both could feel it. We had fought each other too often for it to be otherwise. I respected the beast's tenacity and stubbornness while it understood my bravery and cunning. Neither of us had fared well in our previous standoffs and now would be the time for a true victor to emerge. I knew I had to come at it from a different angle than before, it knew the strategies I had already used against it. Thus I did the one thing I was certain it would not expect.

I turned and ran away. Survival was my victory and facing that thing wouldn't help my cause. Due to the unexpected nature of my actions I had managed to reach the tree line before the hound. With quickness and agility I managed to scramble up a tree with convenient low hanging branches. The mighty Chihuahua raced around my perching barking its hate at me. I had moved beyond its reach and we both knew it. Another standoff was taking place but this time I was at an advantage. The beast could not reach me and I could not move, but I was confident I could handle any vampires that responded to its calls and all I needed to do was wait for morning.

Time passed with me in the tree and my adversary at its base. I quickly grew uncomfortable but knew better than to try and run for it. I wished I'd saved some of the trail mix because I could have used a snack. Still maybe some nuts were left in my pockets. I was rummaging through them when my hands found something I had forgotten about.

Bear Spray is a chemical deterrent for the afore named predators. It has a potency about half again as strong as police grade riot gas. Its use is simple as is necessitated by the situations it is expected to be employed in, simply aim the nozzle of the can at the offending animal and push the button. It is made with a mammal ten, no a hundred times, the body weight of the hapless wretch below me in mind. A nasty grin came across my face.

"I have had you chasing at my heels all night," I told my foe. "You have proven brave and honorable in your pursuit of me, so I give you one chance to leave me be for the rest of the night and I shall allow your retreat with no rancor."

Frustrated growls and yaps were my only response.

"Very well, I think we both knew it would come to this." And with that I loosed my weapon upon my rival.

The Chihuahua let out a hideous yelp and started to rub its suddenly running eyes and nose into the dirt. Finding that this didn't help it rolled onto its back in a gesture of submission, but it was too late; I couldn't undo my attack and the pooch would have to deal with the consequences. Finally the wretched mutt ran off into the night with its tail between its legs. No longer would it be interested in pursuing me and if it did, well I had plenty more where that came from. My victory marked by a faint burning from the back spray, I climbed out of the tree and set off.

Thank god I had service out here. Sure it was spotty but all I needed was to find out exactly where in the middle of nowhere I was and which direction my camp lay. Infrequent updates allowed me to eventually stumble my way back to camp. I wasn't going to run anymore. If trouble came it could find me right here. I rekindled my fire and sat down to wait for dawn. Then she appeared.

In a few short hours everything I had known about her had changed. Now I knew she was a vampire, she had approached me with the knowledge that she would be leading me to my doom, and that she could be oddly sad at the strangest moments. Even with all I had learned about her nothing had changed. She still captivated me as she walked into the firelight. I was still drawn to her as I had been earlier that evening. She was still half dressed and smoking hot. Hey, that last bit's important too.

"Fair lady be welcome at my camp, for it is truly fortunate I am to share such a wonderful evening with one so beautiful as you." I echoed my earlier greeting from tonight.

She flinched as if I had struck her.

That was odd. Why would she react so badly to a friendly greeting? She was Arethusa; who'd shown me the world was more than it seemed, had laughed with me, who'd helped me out at the beginning of the Hunt. Did she think I'd be mad at her? She should have known better than that; it wasn't like she was one of the vampires who were out to kill me after all.

Oh.

I'm an idiot. This wasn't the first time I'd misread my relationship with a woman, only this time I'd be subject to a slightly more fatal 'let's just be friends speech' than normal.

"So." I said at a loss for words.

"So." She replied, finding a seat on the rock she'd chosen earlier.

"Why?" I asked, honestly curious.

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to this," she told me regret written on her face. "I'd allowed myself to hope you'd chance upon a hiding place to wait out the night without encountering one of us. Then when I was allowed to hunt I would avoid you."

"Allowed?" I interjected.

"Herne held the eldest of us back to make things fair for the younger ones. Anyway that had been the plan until you did something terrible."

Oh shit, she'd found out that I'd maced that horrible mutt. She'd seemed fond of the ridiculous thing and I guess harming it had pissed her off. Great that damn Chihuahua was still causing trouble for me after I'd beaten it! It wasn't fair!

"You impressed Herne." She finished, thankfully unaware of what I'd been contemplating.

"And that's... bad?"

"He wants to test you himself. You only glimpsed the meanest fraction of his might tonight. You are dead even though you still draw breath. The moment Herne allows himself to enter the Hunt you will be taken by him, another one of his many trophies to boast about."

"That explains why Herne would want to kill me. Why do you?"

"Well since you're dead anyway I might as well be the one to kill you. It has been so long since I last tasted mortal blood and you look so tasty."

Great, I'd dreamed of the day a woman would describe me as tasty and when the moment actually came it was horribly out of context. Story of my life really. Still that news about Herne was worrying, but it was time to do something about my immediate future. I reached into my pocket for the last item I'd thought might have been of some use against the Fae. I tossed the compass to Arethusa before she could switch from talking about killing me to doing something more proactive about it.

She caught it quickly and examined it curiously. "What is this supposed to be?"

I gave her my best confident look. I was about to spin pure bullshit into whole cloth and confidence was going to be a major factor in selling it. "That is a compass, which by definition uses a magnet or lodestone to seek the north. Now that you have touched it you are bound to that spot until I release you." Time for the killing blow. "It works on any Faerie and that is what you are, isn't it?"

Arethusa burst out laughing. Okay, that wasn't a good sign. I tried to ignore the sinking feeling in my gut and maintain my confident look.

"You figured it out!" She exclaimed looking at me as if I were a child who'd been particularly clever. "Oh my, that's never happened before! Tell me, how did you do it?"

"A lot of little things added up. Once I took a second to think everything came together. Anyway it doesn't matter. You are still bound by your role, so all the Fae's weaknesses apply to you. It wouldn't do to upset your lord, hmm?"

"There are two flaws in that." Uh oh, that wasn't good. I'd been planning on surviving the night by bluffing and if she was going to call I was in big trouble. "First while that was a magnificent lie, Faeries aren't compelled in any fashion by lodestone that I've heard of."

"I've been interested in this stuff since I was a kid, it's very possible I've simply come across something you've never seen." She had to believe this. If she didn't I was in a whole lot of trouble.

"No. See I was raised when Faerie stories were told to children in the dark of the night. None of this watered down pap your generation has been subjected to, I was raised on the real stuff. I too was interested in the unseen world and I begged stories from my nanny who came from the old country. I know whereof I speak when I say lodestone is not a bane of the Fae. That is the first flaw in your defense."

Damn, how old was she? Definitely over a century, maybe even two to match what she'd been telling me.

"The second is that currently Herne is quite a ways off, to give you a running start so to speak, and isn't in any position to oversee anything currently. So even if you had picked an effective defense I don't have to play by those rules right now."

Oh fuck me! This was bad! This was very bad! This was really really bad! This was so bad that if I didn't stop thinking about how bad it was I was going to die! Die horribly! Death by a really hot chick!

Actually that didn't sound like such a bad way to go now that I thought about it. Fortunately that inane thought snapped me out of the loop I'd been going in. I needed to think, my plan to bluff my way through the night had worked well but now it had failed. What could I do that would give me some hope of survival? Was there anything I'd considered earlier that could help me now? A flicker of an idea crossed my mind and I acted before I could fully process it.

"Deal!" I shouted.

"Deal?" Arethusa asked, confused by me once again. "We didn't make any deals. I simply told you I was going to eat you."

Oh yeah baby keep talking like that, no not the time. "Let's make a deal." I clarified.

"You want me to betray Herne? Have you lost your mind?"

"No no, not Herne. I can handle Herne on my own." I lied. "But there must be something you want in exchange for my life."

"Robert, I'm sorry, I truly am, but I am constrained by the life I must lead. There is nothing that you have that I need and I must be extremely careful with any luxuries I bring with me. You mean well but there is nothing you have that you can bargain with."

I was hanging over the metaphoric cliff's edge here. The face was eroding and I was slowly but surely slipping off into the abyss. Desperately I cast about for some way to save myself. Suddenly I had a flash of clarity and I seized it with both hands.

"Actually, I think there is something."

To get her to agree I had to give her a plan that she considered had at least a snowball's chance in hell of surviving Herne. That wasn't such a bad thing since it was something I was going to have to have anyway if I wanted to survive to see daylight. It turned out I surprised her when I finally produced one.

"That could actually work." She allowed. "Still you realize he's very good at that right?"

"I figured as much. If worst comes to worst I'll simply continue to use a skill I've found works very well for me."

"You'll lie?"

"I'll cheat, there's a difference."

"How can you cheat at- no best I don't know, then I can't give it away."

And that was how we wound up leaving my camp together once again. We were searching for a refinement Ruth had made to the plan. Yes she was now Ruth again. When she finally believed I could deliver on my offer the facade of Arethusa drifted away and I saw the girl who had graced my campsite emerge once more. She was

humming as she led me through the woods, almost skipping in her excitement. Soon enough we heard what we were searching for through the trees.

Unfortunately focusing on it was how we missed spotting Christopher and Martin until it was too late to avoid them. All traces of levity fled Ruth's face at their appearance. We silently faced each other, surprise on both parties' faces. Of course, the reasons behind the surprise were different for each of us as it turned out.

"What the fuck is this?" Martin burst out. "Playing with your food, bitch?"

The deal Ruth and I had struck had only covered her not killing me, she was under no obligation to protect me from other vampires. I hadn't realized these two would be part of the Hunt, but now that I thought about it, it made sense. This could have turned out very badly for me if Martin hadn't opened his mouth. I had been contemplating how to convince Ruth to help me out, ranging from begging her for help to trying to leverage what I'd offered her to expand the deal. In one short sentence Martin had made that entirely unnecessary.

"I need not explain myself to one so crass as you." Ruth snapped back. "The mortal is with me. That is all that is necessary for you to know."

"To hell with that. I've put up with this ridiculous bullshit for too long not to go home without a drink. Now you're going to stand aside for us. Christopher, tell her how things are going to happen."

"No. If you were that hungry you should have brought your own like I did." Christopher stepped aside.

"What?" Martin demanded angrily.

"I haven't lived this long by making powerful enemies. Arethusa there is the second oldest of this group. If we worked together we would probably win, but there is an unacceptable risk of my actually dying in such a confrontation. I don't care enough about this to chance it. Besides if I help you and we win you will demand the mortal for yourself, if I stand aside you will likely start the fight anyway and then I get to watch her make you suffer. Standing aside from this matter is far more beneficial to me."

"Your companion seems intelligent. Now is it too much to hope that you know your place as well?" Ruth taunted Martin.

With a wordless cry Martin launched himself at her in a movement that looked like a blur. Faster than I could process Ruth backhanded him into the nearest tree. And I mean into, he left a fair sized dent. The two combatants fell into a style of combat that I could only describe as Ruth bouncing Martin off various pieces of scenery. I was pretty sure Ruth was just playing with him too. Man, she could be scary if she wanted to.

Christopher was lounged against a tree openly enjoying the beating his associate had volunteered for. Since it seemed attention had been diverted away from me, it was time to complete the task I was here for. As fun as it was to watch Ruth kick ass I still needed to worry about Herne and it would probably be best to deal with him when there weren't any potential complications around. So I set off once again into the woods, this time with a very clear idea of where I was going.

Luck was with me and I managed to find what I was looking for before Herne found me. I even had enough time to find a spot with good signal, which was going to

be important before too long. I found a rock and waited. Herne wasn't going to strike quickly from the shadows. He was far too much into the melodramatic for tactics such as that. He would meet me face to face before he tried to kill me. Or so I hoped, on the positive side if I was wrong about this I wouldn't live long enough to be embarrassed by my mistake.

Fortunately for me I wasn't wrong. After an interminable period of time, during which I could still hear the occasional thud and crash from Ruth and Martin as well as the occasional laugh from Christopher, Herne emerged from the forest.

"You've done well mortal." He congratulated me. "You have done more than merely survive in the face of adversity, you have managed to thrive in it. You even managed to sway Arethusa, who I had been certain would prove to be your death, to your cause. You are by far the most worthy mortal I have seen in centuries."

"I thank you mighty Herne, lord of the Hunt." I acknowledged. Then without fanfare I stepped over the ankle deep creek that I'd been waiting by and turned to face him. "Forgive me if I seem rude but I prefer a barrier of running water to shield me during our discourse."

The barrier I was referring to was about ankle deep and no more than a foot wide. Physically, Herne could have easily walked across it and killed me, there was really nothing preventing him from doing so. Even if he couldn't bring himself to break his own Faerie rules he could have found a good sized rock and dammed the trickle so he could come after me.

Mentally however, he could no more cross that little brook than he could fly to the moon unaided. See, he believed in Faerie stories the way some people believed in God. He wasn't just bound by rules and restrictions, he was bound by a narrative flow. He needed his interactions to play out like one of the stories he believed himself to be in.

Thus when I pointed out the obstacle to his attention it became an impassable abyss to his eyes.

Herne took a moment to survey the creek that blocked his path and then let out a loud full bodied laugh. "Well done once more, good Hob! Truly you have proven worthy of my attention!"

"I'm afraid not, lord Herne. Though I have had the good fortune to start well you are far too mighty for the mere parlor tricks I have at my disposal to balk you."

"What is this?" Herne was growing visibly angry now. "So close to the end of your trail you surrender? Where is the spirit that carried you so far as those lesser than you fell? Shall I tear into your flesh to see if unimaginable pain shall cause it to resurface?"

"My spirit has not quailed, oh Herne. I merely point out that the inevitable result of the clash between us will prove unsatisfactory to both of us and humbly suggest a different path for events to take."

"A different path? Hmm, know that I will not tolerate any lessening of the stakes in this contest."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I simply suggest that we be allowed to pit ourselves against each other, strength against strength. And since strength is your strength and not mine I propose a battle of wits."

"A contest of wits you say?"

"Indeed. I propose a challenge of riddles. Should you win I will cross back over the water and my fate shall be once more in your hands."

"And should you win?"

"Oh, I doubt I shall win, for you are wise as you are ancient. Instead I shall aim to continue the challenge until the dawn, whereupon your original proclamation shall stand and I shall have survived the Hunt."

"Yes, 'tis true you have little chance of outright victory against one such as me." A little flattery went quite some ways apparently. "Very well, your challenge is accepted."

Excellent. Now to make sure I won. I doubted Herne would have had a chance to update his riddles out here in the forest. Anything he had would probably be well recorded and the subject of a thousand scholarly papers. If only I'd had any interest in riddles before tonight that might have helped. Time to do something about that.

"What is that object?" Herne asked suddenly suspicious.

"It is my smartphone, lord. I face the mighty Herne tonight and may not live to see the dawn's turning. I shall trust to the great Google the finder of thoughts to carry my hopes of living to the morrow. My parents and friends would worry if I just disappeared, should they understand my situation they shall be proud of me for my courage rather than troubled by my fate." Both technically true statements. If Herne thought that implied that they were in some way connected that was his fault, and I really hadn't lied to him.

"Ah yes I have heard mention of this Google. Very well, so long as it does not interfere with our contest do so with my blessing. As the one at a disadvantage you may begin."

"Thank you, gracious Herne." I scrolled down to the first hit. Now I only had to hope my battery lasted long enough. "What gets wetter the more it dries?"

Daylight streamed outside the cave while I stared outside blearily. My contest with Herne had indeed lasted until the first light touched the sky. Thereupon he declared me the winner of the contest and that he would receive me in his hall this night that he might grant my boon. Then he took off so quickly it seemed he just disappeared. Knowing his true nature I was hardly surprised by this.

What did surprise me was that Ruth appeared to guide me to a nearby hollow she was using as a sort of personal apartment so she didn't have to sleep surrounded by a horde. It spoke of how desperately she wanted what I'd offered that she'd risked immolation to ensure I wouldn't slip away without fulfilling my part of the deal. I wouldn't have welched though, she'd thoroughly impressed just how dangerous she was upon me that night.

The accommodations were a bit cramped so we were pretty close together in here. We made some small talk, but eventually exhaustion overwhelmed both of us. Ruth fell asleep immediately and I was quickly following. It figured; after all that I'd gone through I'd finally gotten to sleep with Ruth and the reality of it was so much more disappointing than my fantasy. Not that I was really all that disappointed in sharing a bed with a hot chick, I'd just kind of hoped that the term sleeping with would be a euphemism rather than a descriptor.

Still, I'd come out of this mess better than I'd any right to expect and I couldn't forget that. I still had a boon to ask of Herne but after that, hopefully I could go my way and have a life expectancy longer than that of a snowflake in a blast furnace. I sighed and closed my eyes, I might as well be rested to face tonight. And with that thought I drifted off into a surprisingly restful sleep.

The feasting hall was crowded as Ruth led me back inside. Once the assembled vampires noticed me I was subjected to a bunch of furious glares. Some were because I'd survived the night and that upset the way these vampires saw the world. Others who'd had run ins with me had a much more personal cast to the looks they gave me. Either way it didn't matter. I was now under Herne's protection and no one here was willing to test that.

Herne himself sat on his throne of bones awaiting my arrival at his feet. He still wasn't wearing underwear, I'd need to scrub my eyes with a gallon of bleach when I got home to get rid of that image. Once I came close enough he rose and addressed the hall. "Here stands a mortal of surpassing courage and wit. He has survived running from the Wild Hunt and as such shall receive a boon. Tell me, mortal, what do you desire of me?"

This was it, the last potential pitfall before I returned home. I could feel the weight of Ruth's gaze on my back. In the end there had really only been one thing I might have access to that could have swayed her to my side. I wish it was because I'd radiated raw sex appeal, but the reality was I'd had to tell her I'd use my boon to get her what she really desired. Now it was time to carry through with that promise.

"I ask that you grant me Arethusa's hand in marriage." My request caused several of the assembled to gasp.

"Ah, a mortal wishes to bring home a Fae wife." Herne nodded. "It has been centuries since I last heard of it happening. You seem to breathe new life into the old ways Hob. Very well so shall it be. Arethusa, this man is now your husband. You shall marry him in whatever fashion he sees fit."

I don't know if Herne had simply never heard of female equality or if he just considered it a concept fit only for sissies. I hope he hadn't pissed off Ruth too badly, I'd be the one that would be closest at hand if she felt like venting. My deal with Ruth had been simple. I'd promised to get her back to civilization. No more running in the woods; proper clothing, good food, the works. The marriage bit was just to give Herne an acceptable excuse to let her leave without openly insulting him. Once we reached the city she was free to go her way and I would go mine. I would have to settle for survival as a reward for my trials last night.

Herne must have noticed something on Martin's face because he glanced at him and then added, "I shall declare her my emissary. Should any harm befall her I shall be most wroth."

Martin burst out. "Hey, he can't do that, can he?"

"He can." Christopher assured him. "So long as he faces the Alma he remains in Yvonne's good graces. Any mischief that befalls Arethusa in her role would most likely... displease our lady."

"But that means I can't go after her!" Martin whined.

"Why would you want to?"

"She hurt me!"

"I am aware, it was amusing. I'm adding my own caveat now. The welfare of the Fae Arethusa and the human Robert are now considered essential to our task. Should either of them seem to be in danger I will take steps to prevent the threat to our interests." Even Martin seemed to understand that Christopher was openly looking for an excuse to kill him now and he turned a shade paler and shut up.

"Very well. I take my leave." I announced.

"Be thee well, mortal." Herne told me.

With that my sojourn amongst the Fae came to a close.

It didn't end there of course. I may not need to deal with the Fae anymore, but there was one vampire that needed tending to. Ruth had disappeared once I started hiking back down to my car. It was a shame, hiking in the dark wasn't fun and I could have used her help but in the end I managed. I didn't even consider waiting for daylight, I wanted off that mountain and nothing was going to stop me.

Well nothing except one completely unexpected sight at the base. Ruth was there waiting for me and she was wearing... normal clothes. I'd been so used to her running around in her unique ensemble that seeing her dressed normally threw me for a loop. "Where'd you get those?" I couldn't help but ask.

"From time to time we needed something from the city." She told me. "I would be the one to go. I needed something that wouldn't arouse suspicion so I got normal clothes. I even have a bit of money since I invested what funds I had and allowed it to mature a few centuries. It helped that I didn't really need money out here, but I always hoped I'd have a chance to go back, and now I do!" She finished on an upbeat note.

"What would you need to go to the city for?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Oh this and that, last time was when I picked up Fluffernutter."

"Fluffernutter?"

"The pooch. I'll miss him you know. It was always my job to find the dogs. I'd pick one that seemed nice and turn it, then bring it home. They were good company when no one else was."

Great. I had acquired a mortal nemesis and its name was... Fluffernutter. I was definitely editing that out if I told this story. Still Ruth seemed kind of sad, since I was going to be traveling with her some ways it behooved me to lift her mood. "Cheer up, once you go on your way you can have as many dogs as you like."

"What makes you think I'm leaving you?" Ruth asked with a cheerful smile on her face.

"Uh, well the deal was to get you back to civilization, I thought the wedding thing was just a means to an end."

"I've had some time to think about it and while I wouldn't have picked you as a husband at first sight, you've come to grow on me."

"Uh, thank you?"

"You're welcome. Besides I like the idea of a man I can break in two if he strays."

Gulp.

"So do you not want to marry me?"

"Well..."

"You're not like my fiancée before I was turned are you. You don't think I'm some sort of vile beast, do you?"

"Of course not, it's just..."

"You won't call me strumpet of Satan?"

"No Ma'am."

Her gaze sharpened.

"Uh... no... darling?" I hazarded.

She made a short shrill of joy and wrapped me up in a hug. Her arms were like steel vises, reminding me suddenly of her strength and the sheer amount of ass I had seen her kick. Oh well, when all you have is a shovel I guess all you can do is dig.

Once she released me and I could breathe again I explained. "It's just that what happened back in the hall wasn't very romantic and wasn't how I expected my proposal to my wife to go."

"Oh how sweet! Very well I will allow you to do a proper proposal later. Not too much later though."

"Of course not, darling."

"I hear that the ring is supposed to be three months of the man's salary now days."

Ouch. It sounded like I wasn't going to be buying video games for quite some time now. I'd start by pawning the camping gear. It had brought nothing but trouble so far.

"I know you're still young and starting out so I'll be matching what you put down so we can buy a ring worthy of me."

"Very kind, darling."

"Now I think we need to set some guiding rules to how things will work. Chip in if there's anything you'd like to add when I'm finished."

"Yes, darling."

"To begin with I don't approve of too much alcohol. There may be a small amount around, but I don't ever want to see you drunk, clear honey?"

"Yes, darling."

"Our finances will be shared of course, but I don't want people thinking us as layabouts so you shall maintain a job that will befit our dignity."

"Yes, darling."

"Oh, and you're a little skinnier than I like my men. Fortunately you are mortal, so that's fixable. I have heard of an institution known as a Gym. You shall join one and between that and a healthy diet you'll be fit as a fiddle in no time."

Urk. "Yes... darling."

How foolish of me, I'd thought I'd escaped mortal peril when I'd left the forest. Instead it looked like it was here with me to stay! Ah well, I'd survived before. Besides as I looked at Ruth's smiling face as she dictated my doom I couldn't help but feel that, maybe, possibly, things had worked out all right after all.

THE END

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