

Marne Deco

A Fairy Lights Story

They ride out from the lights that evening, half to each car, the two and four of them, which is a number that is not yet meaningful but will one day be, and they are silent for the whole way until the narrow tires crunch to a halt on gravel and weeds, as close as they can get on the roads, but Margot is holding Ariane's hand and Ariane is leaning on her shoulder. Once they are all out they can see the headlamps of the taxis bouncing back along the way, down and up each little slope and each tree caught for a moment in the glare, and they cannot see the city, but they cannot see the sky.

They climb single-file up the hill, Ilya at the back behind Joe, Ariane and Margot in the middle, Zoe who has recently returned ahead and Genevieve leading. The wild hunt has been gone from this place for a year now, though far to the east it is just beginning, and another horseman has taken its place, stalking through the streets and the railways and the shipping lanes of the world, a horseman who might as well be an aviator these days, so wide is the reach of the bombs he lets fall. There is only the river now, only the river and the sounds of nature learning how to live again.

There is a cottage at the top of the rise, with smooth walls and a sloping roof that seem raised out of the ground itself, and this first night they do not go inside to set everything in order, and they do not build a fire, but merely sit in the grass, under the night without a sky, and Margot begins by saying what they are all thinking, except perhaps Joe, who is not fae and does not care for the weighty affairs of kings and nobles and empires: is this judgement? Five years ago, they all of them made a choice, and that choice did not fix the course of the affairs of empires, for few are given such power even among the fae, but it was yet a choice for bloodshed over peace, and may be judged in return.

"We think ourselves superior," says Margot, "we call ourselves civilized, and then the earth watches as we grind ourselves to dust. We are not superior. We die the same as folk do, and folk the same as those *they* think savage." She looks at Ilya as she says this, and Ilya remembers, not because they were there, but in the way fae do, and feel the pulse of the mortals they live among: for the Sonoran rocks remember, and the coyotes who prowl there, and the peoples of all the lands of Aztlán who have survived the plagues and melted into their conquerors.

Ilya thinks maybe to say that they did not make that choice five years ago because they thought themselves superior, for any weight can tip a balance, but Ariane is already shaking her head, and her eyes, if they could have seen them, are the steely gray of the

north Atlantic, and the pillars of smoke that, far across it, will one day reach for the sun. Ariane says, "We prove ourselves civilized by learning and making amends," and then, "Let me tell you a story."

"This story comes from Firenze," she says, and she says the word as if it is Breton, not Italian. There is a plague in the story, and the plague is called Spanish, just as the other one was, and the one now too, even though it is not. "Thousands lay dying in its wake, and in desperation, the leading families of the city sent a delegation to the commune of centaurs who lived in the forest nearby, and who had also fallen victim, in the hope that together, the folk and the centaurs could find a cure. Centaurs are aloof from the ways we conduct our business, but they are still of Faerie, and are skilled in divining cause and fate. They made their plan, and proposed that it might succeed, and the families listened, and took their vote in secret.

"They met on a floodplain of the river beneath the moon. The leaders of the folk had elected to bargain their children that the city might live. The chosen champion of the centaurs accepted that sacrifice, and bearing their power as arrows of light, he leapt into the sky, driving the pestilence before him. The heads of the city returned home with heaviness in their hearts, and waited to see if they were freed of the curse.

"By chance, soon after daybreak that day, an Imperial army passed by on the road, for in those days all the north of Italy was a battlefield, and the Court of Europe was broken. There had not been time for a proper burial, and so the captain of the mercenaries, fearing some treachery was afoot, decided to lay siege to the city, so as to seize it for his masters, and its wealth for his own company. And in that siege many more died.

"The spirit of the centaur champion, watching from above, was filled with sadness, and vowed never to let the disease they had spent so much to defeat return to the land, so far as he was able. He shines upon the earth as the stars of Sagittarius, the centaur-archer, and he aims his bow at a tear in the heavens, a place of immense destruction, bounded by a halo of light. He reminds us that what we fear is not unstoppable, and can be turned back, and that wrongs can be righted, and that if we join our efforts, they may yet turn out for the better."

But when Ariane finishes, Genevieve asks, "Is it not said that in later centuries, the folk of that land suffered greatly from invaders, and kings and dukes and holy men? Do the centaurs still remain there, or have they suffered equally? Who is to say what was for the better?"

That is the end of the talking for the night, for words have power and it does not do to keep them flowing when there is nothing to say, and Ilya turns to sit beside Joe, and finds that from this height the lights are visible again to the west, the city sending out a radiance never before seen in the uncounted centuries Ilya has lived, unless perhaps when it was besieged and aflame. Ilya can see even the tower at its heart, for although it can't be made out from here by mere eyes, it burns in the minds of all the folk, here and abroad, a symbol of the age.

Ilya is not a king anymore; the age has less room for kings than it used to, and so therefore do the fae, who are bound to the tides of mortals. The edges of society have closed up, and the frontier has faded away, and the Bourse seems infinitely far from the Southwestern desert. Ilya is not one of those fae who feels at home there, though Genevieve and Ariane are, dealing with all the age-old contracts and instruments of fae business that now have been adopted by the folk. Ilya does not think this arrangement can last more than a few years further; things move too quickly for the fae, who are not used to living memory.

In the morning they open up the closets and the blinds, and sweep the dust from the corners of the cottage, and Ariane fetches water from the well, and Joe unpacks the trunks they have brought, and Margot grows their fairy ring around the edges of the hilltop. In the evening they sit around a campfire, and the embers blend with the fairy lights, and Ilya almost feels at home, but that the night is too warm. But Ilya is also already beginning to forget. In only five years, the whole earth is remade. So Zoe asks her question: "This age has less room for kings, and more for words, and in Geneva they trust in contracts to keep the peace of the nations, and this should reassure us, and yet it does not. Why should this be so?"

Margot laughs at this, a hot, dry laugh like the sirocco, and says, "Words mean nothing, not even to such as us. I will tell you a story that has not happened yet, and still has happened hundreds of times already. It will be short, for there is only tragedy in it, and that is all you need to know. The story opens like this: the Devil washes up on a southern shore, and decides it is so nice of a place to wash up on, that he would very much like to take it for himself.

"He idles and drinks and smokes, and eschews temperance, and lives only for his own enjoyment, and still he holds himself above the natives of the land, and cares for them only as they please or annoy him. He carries a gun, and he shoots one of them dead, and he cares not for the man's life.

"His brethren band together then, for they think themselves civilized, and sentence him to death for the crime. And yet he goes to the grave laughing, for he knows none of them can judge him, and even shayatin are not damned, when there is no authority to pronounce the verdict. You know what I mean," and once more she looks to Ilya. "You know what happens to fae and folk alike when the frontier passes through their lives. When the tide of cold iron drove you west, whose house did you move into? Where now are their songs?"

But Joe speaks, and he says: "We've heard them. They haven't died. Why do we tell stories, if not to prove that words still have power?", and that is the end of the talking.

On the second morning Genevieve tends a garden that grows high with herbs and twisting vines, and Zoe weaves a blanket for them to sit on, twined with the threads of fate, and Ilya tends a stew on the hearth and a loaf in the oven. From the window of the cottage Ilya can see the city, fading like the sky into a glow of pinpoints and constellations as day turns to twilight, and wonders if they will ever see the lamps lit again. The city looks tired. It cannot bear another victory.

So, once they have eaten, Ilya asks their question, which is about the city. Ilya is not of this place, but the other four (three, until recently) are its Court, and know the city and the land and its folk. Ilya is of the age before Westphalia, when perhaps the Court wandered the Marches year upon year and thrived for it, and finds capitals and palaces stifling. But all fae must change.

There is quiet for the span of a minute, but Genevieve volunteers a story. It is an old story, though not because of its age, and they all know it save Joe, who has only seen the cinema posters. "A hanged man lies in the square," begins Genevieve, "and dances no more, and the priest of the city looks down from the heights of his spire, and orders the killing of the woman he lusts for, and he says 'this will kill that', and maybe he is right, for the love of God will move heaven and earth, and men will build steps to the firmament out of stone and glass and the bones of the trampled.

"Was not the city tired even in those days? To bear a thousand years of war, the house of God like a giant's footstep in the river, and the restless dreams of August gunfire yet to ring out. The footsteps of the king's men sound on the steps of the cathedral, bearing ideals of justice, ideals of the night sky, and the bell-ringer drives them off, for he thinks it a place of asylum.

"For this, he is damned, and bound to the wheel of fortune, and given no water, and the flames of hell lick his feet, and he is called the pope of madmen, for only madmen believe in asylum, through the churches, the plazas, the narrow streets and barricades, all exclude others to keep themselves safe.

"And when the city has no more use for them, as is ever the story, the court of miracles moves on, the true Court or another just as high, and the poet is denied a muse, and the guard is only a guard, and the bell-ringer is only a hermit. The city will change, and we will change, and the city will survive, and we will survive."

"But not all of us," says Zoe, and the city behind her burns as if a million points of light could wipe out the emptiness between.

On the fourth evening Ilya finds Joe casting lots by a copy of the *I Ching*, just as perhaps another Joe will do one day, in a future that may not come to pass. His copy is not an old, battered edition handed down through generations, but a cheap translation purchased from a shop in the city before they departed, which has never seen the land of its birth. "My mother used to do this when I was little," he says, and, "I never picked it up myself until now. I know the hexagrams, but I wouldn't be able to read most of the original." And Joe throws the last stalks, but he turns away so Ilya cannot see, and he buries the reading in his heart, for his heart is large and can hold it.

Then, when they have gathered around the fire once again, Joe asks the question, the natural question, which fae and folk alike have ever asked: what does the future hold? And Zoe, who is among them the most clear-sighted into the possibilities of things, and the ways that fates may turn, answers with a story, and if the question is old and yet new, then so too is the answer.

"Three little pigs lived in three little houses on the edge of a dark wood, in which lurked a big bad wolf. Some time ago, the pigs had joined forces and given the wolf a sound thrashing, and a bear who lived on the other side of the forest had lent its strength as well, though they had lost touch afterward. In triumph, the second little pig had fenced off a section of trees outside his yard, and the third little pig had claimed a well that the wolf had long been known to drink from. The first little pig was content to tend his fields, which were many and bountiful, and far from the forest.

"The pigs agreed among them that they must remain vigilant, and never allow the wolf back near their homes. None of them was unhurt by the fight, and each was glad of the quiet, and wished for time enough to regain his health. The first pig beat his swords into

plowshares, and the second pig walked his gardens and passed the long days, and the third pig drank from his new well and thought the water exceptionally sweet. But time's winged chariot hurried on, and the second pig heard howls at night, and was afraid in his heart, but knew that he had friends, and a strong fence, and traps for baiting wolves. And the third pig heard the wolf prowling closer to his well, and put up stakes and signs around it, and the wolf did not come back.

"Now it so happened that the third little pig desired fresh vegetables, and set about claiming his own little corner of the vegetable patch that lay beside the three houses. The first pig thought himself a believer in free access to the patch for all lovers of vegetables, despite that he had already fenced off near half of it for himself, and the second pig the other half; so he came out and berated the third pig, who was much embittered in his heart. The second pig tried to smooth things over, but the first pig had not needed to enter the forest in some time, and thought little of the wolf, or the third pig. And the second pig would not go into the forest alone.

"So it was that when the wolf himself appeared at the third little pig's gate, acting as gentlemanly as anything, and expressed his full support for the third pig's right to vegetables, and his assurances that losing the well was of no concern to him -- ah, then the third pig thought that maybe the wolf was not so bad as he had thought.

"And when the second little pig realized he had no friends left to go wolf hunting with, when he saw the wolf prints and half-eaten rabbits and the hole in his new fence, when by cunning and recklessness the wolf found his way past all his traps -- then, as the second pig lay in bed and dreamed of going hunting in the morning, the wolf huffed and puffed and blew his house down, and ate the second little pig up, all in one gulp."

And Margot asks, "Whose fault is it, then, that the wolf got out?" And each of them feels that perhaps they have sat too long, there on the hilltop.

On the fourth morning Ilya walks alone along the shore. The water of the river holds power, and it marks another border in a land that has known too many. All the land to the northeast is sown with the iron harvest and the iron cross, and fae do not go there anymore, because there are some things that do not change. The lights are out in the city, and if Ilya will see them lit again, then it will be a different Ilya in a different age. For long lifetimes these lines and others will be scars in the heritage of mortals, and so they will also be scars in the hearts of these five companions, for the ways that fae are cursed are different from the ways folk are, and yet so heartbreakingly similar. And as for Joe...

Ilya kneels, in the mud, and for the first time in centuries, prays, for Joe.

Among the fae, sacerdots and hierophants appeal for God's guidance, and kings and courts bicker and rule, and brokers and barristers navigate the tides as best they can; but it is given only to mortals to shape a new age. In the evening Genevieve asks what each of them can do, all six of them, here, now, and Ilya offers up their story.

"Once, in a faraway land, an emperor made war on his neighbor, and was confronted, and vanquished, and overthrown, in a great battle, and his lands were divided up, and came under a harsh law. In that place arose a woman with hair like silver, whose calling was to heal, and who chose to fight, and her band of companions defended the people, and was much loved.

"In the neighboring country, too, which had suffered much in the war, the empress was much troubled, and assailed by a faction which shouted for harsher treatment, lest their enemy come again for them, but she determined to treat them with a fair hand, and forgive them the wrongs of their fathers, for only this way may grudges and hatreds eventually be erased. Beside her stood old friends, a mercenary and his band, and together they won the day.

"And in the largest kingdom of the land, the high priestess, who too preached peace and tolerance, watched with burning concern as the nobles of that place made a new war on those they thought no more than beasts, and all the nations in the land were drawn in, one by one, to aid them or to oppose them, and in every corner of that place chaos was awakened.

"What is the difference between the last story and this one? Perhaps, if there is one, it is the little people, the woman with silver hair, and the mercenary, and their companions, the ones who matter little, until suddenly they matter much, and tell the fates of kings and queens, generals and apostles, the dragon and the magician, even unto a goddess herself, and the ends of the earth. Shall we judge them? They made the choice they knew to be right, and maybe that is where the story ends."

"It does not end," says Ariane, softly. "We merely keep on making choices." So passes the fifth evening.

The next day they tidy the cottage a little, and fix up the furniture, and the fairy ring returns to nature, and the roof once again seems to fade into the ground. ("There's a

Japanese word for this," says Joe, "but I don't remember what it is.") The era of beauty, and the rituals of spring, and the echoes of years still to come, seem in this moment no more weighty than a butterfly among the garden bushes. But the horsemen still roam the land, and the wild hunt has not yet ended, and the Court has business in the city. Time does not wait for things to fall apart and rebuild themselves, and the fae will find the spaces in between, and the ways that frontiers move, and they will live there as they always have, and perhaps they will be happy, but certainly they will be changed. And since only mortals tell tales of the fae, on this last night, Ariane asks the question of Joe: how did we get here?

"Those who follow the fairy lights are either desperate or foolhardy, and on this night, both are in evidence..." And Joe tells them their story.