

Fairy Lights

Those who follow the fairy lights are either desperate or foolhardy, and on this night, both are in evidence. The lights dance and drift, beneath the cold stars and gathering clouds, and on a barren rise perches a single cabin.

Ilya, with a mane of shaggy hair and a well-kept poncho, opens the door. Genevieve, who knocked, curtsies in respect, and says, "We've traveled a long way to see you. May we come in?"

Ilya's eyes reveal nothing, but they step back and gesture inside.

Behind Genevieve, light-footed and self-assured, come Margot and Ariane hand in hand. Margot is tall and grim, and the sirocco is in her hair; Ariane's face is clouded, but the stars are in her eyes. They take the chairs by the hearth, and Ilya sits back at the table where they had been reading, and the sleepy firelight makes their shadows flicker.

"All right," says Ilya, looking between them, "what is it you want me for?"

"We are the queens of the Court," declares Margot, casually regal, and Ilya inclines their head in deference. "And so, I believe, are you."

"Sure," says Ilya. "I was once a king. A very long time ago. So what?"

"No." Genevieve leans forward. "You still are. You left, but you never abdicated."

"The present Court is unstable," Margot continues. "We lack legitimacy. You, on the other hand, have an undisputed claim."

Ilya doesn't like where this is going. "I'm no king under the mountain." They cross their arms and stare at the women. "I'm no king at all. This country doesn't believe in kings."

"Hmph," says Clara, entering from the other room. "Of course it does. Just not in so many words." Clara's hair is white, her skin dark and crow-footed. She makes no sound when she moves.

Margot looks questioningly at Ilya, who shrugs. "A friend. She lives around here, and the fairy ring out back is hers. Our guests are the queens of Faerie, apparently."

“Yes, yes,” says Clara, proffering a bottle. “Tequila? Ilya doesn’t drink.” Margot and Ariane take two glasses, and Margot examines it closely and sniffs it before taking a sip. “In exchange,” Clara gestures at Genevieve, “I could use your help with the fairy ring.” Genevieve nods, and the two of them slip outside again. There is quiet for a while.

“Please,” says Ariane, “We need you. Your people need you.”

“Can’t you—”

“There’s no one else. We went through every possibility. You know how hard that would be. We wouldn’t have come if we knew any other way.”

“You also know,” growls Margot, “how much we suffered. How much we lost.”

“Yes.” Ilya gazes into the fire. “But there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“Oh, for—” and Ilya flinches as Margot levels a finger at them, golden droplets spilling from her glass— “What *have* you done? You ran to the other end of a continent because... what? Having responsibilities wasn’t in style?”

Ilya’s stare is hard, and they match Margot’s expression. “I did what I had to. I left a world that didn’t want kings anymore, and came to one where there was still a frontier. Well, the frontier’s gone. There’s no place in this world for us.”

Arizona is finally a state, the last of the 48, and although it means little in physical terms, it is a name and names have power.

“That’s why you should return with us,” says Genevieve, who’s come back in with Clara. “There may be nothing here for you, but together we can preserve what we still have.”

“And how long will that last? Do you know why I’m here? Did you look around you when you came trudging up to Canossa? The frontier fell back westward year by year, and those of us left here went with it. There was—”

“Oh, don’t you *dare* start that again,” snaps Clara, stalking forward. She casts an eye at the guests. “My people lived here for long ages before yours came and cast us out. Saying you had no choice, because the mortals were coming. The folk, whatever you

call them. Well, you're just the same as them." She pauses. "You always had a choice, Ilya. You just didn't want to admit it to yourself."

Ilya has the grace to look ashamed. No one speaks.

There is a knock at the door.

Joe holds his hat in his hands, feeling foolish and desperate. The breeze has picked up, whistling through the dry hills, clearing tumbleweeds from the gulches. The stains of long travel are on his clothing, and the scars of long toil are on his arms.

Ilya, looking unsure and unsettled, opens the door once again, and Joe says, "Excuse me, please. Could I ask for your help?"

Joe is a laborer, indentured to the farms out west, where the folk have created a new sea by accident. He got on the wrong side of the overseers, and now they want to lynch him. Ilya only has his word to go on, but he isn't lying about that. He got out of town before he realized he had nowhere to go, lost among bare scrub with the vast silent desert ahead of him, and so he followed the lights. He didn't expect this. But he swallows and stands his ground.

"I'm sorry," says Genevieve, and glances at Ilya. "We're in the middle of some business at the moment. I'm sure he can stay until we figure this out?" She won't say it, but it's not business they want said in front of one of the folk.

"This might be a good time to go outside for a bit," whispers Clara, who has appeared beside Joe, and he gratefully accepts.

"It's not my real name," blurts Joe. He doesn't really know why he's saying this, except that he feels he ought to talk to Clara, and he doesn't know what else to say.

"Handname, headname, heartname." Clara points to each in turn. "One you give to others to use. One you call yourself. And one you don't tell to anyone who you don't

want to have power over you. But they're all your name." She sighs. "The name I call myself is in a language none of them speak. So is yours, isn't it?" And Joe nods.

Behind the cabin there's a circle of agave plants growing happily around a pool of clear water, startling in the arid landscape. More startling is the camel lying beside the fairy ring, and watching them with a lidded eye. Joe, who has never seen a camel, starts a bit when he rounds the corner. Clara walks up and scratches it behind the ears.

"The Army brought them in for the war in the desert," she explains, and shrugs. "Then when they decided they weren't useful, they cut them loose. Now, isn't that relatable? Joe... do you know what we are?"

"I heard some stories," says Joe, "from the other workers in camp. The name they used was yōkai."

"Close enough." Clara fiddles with an agave leaf, and in her face is the desert moon. "Ilya has much power in their hands. They have for as long as I've known them. I just fear that... when all this is over, Ilya will not have learned a thing."

She goes over to the camel and climbs atop it, and languorously it rises to its feet. "I don't think we'll meet again, Joe. But if you ever come back to these parts, find my granddaughter, and you'll find me again as her child. So we survive." And she's gone into the gloom.

"You'd best get back inside!" her voice calls. "It's going to rain."

"If the Court collapses, there won't be anything left for you to come back to," Margot is saying. "What are you going to do, stay here until the folk come and turn this hillside into a suburb?"

"Please, come with us," says Ariane. "Help us protect our people."

Ilya says nothing, but Margot glances at Joe, who has just come in, and stands. "Hm. I suppose this has been a waste of our time, then." Ariane looks up at her, but rises as well.

"I'm sorry," she whispers with a last look back, as they file past Ilya.

“Wait.” Joe says something very brave, or very foolish, or both. “I can’t stay here. Take me with you.”

“Fine with me,” says Genevieve. “Come on.”

Ilya’s hand is on Joe’s shoulder. “They’ll help you, but they’ll expect a favor in return. They’ll ask you to tell their story.”

“I don’t understand.” Joe frowns. “Why—”

There is a crack from outside, and it takes Joe a moment to realize that it isn’t thunder.

“I’ll have to tell you later,” Ilya says.

The rain has moved in from the east, but the man with the gun is still there at the foot of the hill. “Send the chink out and no one gets hurt,” he shouts. “I know he’s in there.”

“Brave man,” hisses Genevieve. “What do we do?”

Margot says, “I’m going down there,” but Ilya pulls her aside with a leap from the doorway, and they tumble to the ground. A shot ricochets off the front of the cabin.

“Are you crazy?” Ilya tries to keep their voice low. “A cold iron revolver will kill you six times over. We go back, and we lose him in the hills.”

But behind the cabin, the arroyos have filled with runoff, dark streams rushing and recombining across the hillside.

“What? What’s the problem?” Joe whispers.

“Running water,” says Ilya.

Ariane and Margot look around, but there’s nowhere further to go, and Ilya is wondering whether they can take the man, and maybe it’s possible, if he doesn’t have the range advantage. But Ilya isn’t strong, and the man is bound to have friends, or a posse, who will show up eventually. If only—

“Gotcha,” says the man with the gun, stepping around the corner and leveling his revolver at Ilya’s chest, until Joe grapples him from the side and knocks his skull in with a rock.

“Oh, God,” cries Clara, dismounting from the camel. “What happened? I turned around when I heard shots.”

Ilya looks toward Joe. “It seems I owe you.”

Joe is trying to keep his voice steady, although his hands are still shaking and he’s making it all up as he goes along. “All right. I don’t know what’s going on with you four. But I know my mother was born in an empire that doesn’t exist anymore. I’ve heard nothing good out of there since. If you have the power to make a difference...” He trails off. “If I get to ask something of you, then I ask you to do the right thing. Whatever that is.” Ilya looks away. Clara says nothing.

They’re not sure if the man with the gun is dead or not, and when the waters subside, they leave his body in the fairy ring.

In Yuma they buy passage east, turning the cold iron to their side, for tickets are contracts and contracts have power. Clara sees them off at the station, and when they look back, she is gone, and there is nothing else between the desert and the open sky.

The fae spend most of their time looking out the windows of the train, seeing a world Joe can only catch glimpses of, and they say little to each other. Other lands might have great cities of Faerie, in the spaces between civilization, and great courtly processions winding between them, whenever the seasons change.

In America, there are none.

They pass vast mesas and river valleys, then rolling forests and bayous. They wait at depots, disembark and switch trains in obedience to a timetable that Joe doesn’t understand, and once in an empty departure hall, early in the morning, he feels that perhaps this is where the boundary between worlds is thin. But their train rolls on through the cities, bright and shining with promises of new riches and new life.

In America, what's left of the Courts make their homes among electric lights and high-rises, and they reach out along lines of power, canals and telegraph wires, and they are jealous of their rights.

One night, after they have turned north, Joe finds Ilya in an empty dining car. "You said you'd tell me later." He sits. "About stories."

"I did." Ilya sighs.

"We are the fae. You are the folk. We have no stories; we have no history. Only mortals tell tales of the fae. And what mortals believe of themselves, becomes true of us in turn. When they believe in magic, divine right, and the mysteries of nature, then we are sorcerer-kings of the forest. When they don't..." They shrug.

"My lifetime is many times yours. But I can remember no further than any of you. Before that, I don't know. I don't know when I was born. I don't know where. I know that once, I stopped being a king, and I came over the ocean. And I fought in a war. I remember... I remember the war."

In America, the doves fall from the sky and the crow spreads its wings over the South; barons bind the land in ties of steel, and the people are crucified on a cross of gold.

Ilya's eyes are closed now. "We're vain, I suppose. And we like sweet words said about us, since they tell us who we are."

Joe can't think of anything to say. After a while, he realizes that Ilya has slumped slightly to the side, and doesn't respond when Joe calls their name.

"It's a piece of a bullet," says Genevieve, pulling open Ilya's clothing. "I can get it out, but I can't heal the wound here."

"Fool," hisses Ariane. "Why didn't they say anything?"

Ilya's side is oozing something, and is not a color skin should be. "Okay," says Joe. "What do we need to do?"

They get off in a small Virginia town, under a glamor Ariane casts, so they don't look like they're carrying a body. They needn't have bothered; there are no folk around, only still houses giving way to still trees, there on the eastern fringes of the Appalachians. Joe thinks they're going to look for a physician, but instead Genevieve leads them directly into the woods, without any trail to follow, and the woods swallow them up. Joe looks this way and that, when it seems like the trees are shifting around them, and when he turns back, there is a building in front of them.

It's not a great castle or grand palace, as might be found in the old world, not a hill-mound or shrine, but a simple fort, like those built two centuries ago to keep the French and the Indians out. The palisades are grown over with moss, and the flagpole with vines, and the ground is soft grass and paving stones. There is a chamber inside with a bed where they leave Ilya and Genevieve, to do what she can.

The next morning Joe decides to walk into town by himself, and although it's nowhere in sight when he sets out, a few steps later he rounds a tree and finds himself on a street. In truth he wants to see if he can find some coffee, and maybe the company of people who aren't fae. But the storekeep looks at him strangely, and no one seems quite comfortable around him, and Joe thinks perhaps it's best to leave.

So Joe goes back into the forest, until there are only trees and underbrush around him, and turns to his left three times as he's been told to. But something catches his eye.

It's a small cairn of stones, with a pair of sticks fashioned into a cross on top. And since he hasn't been taught that it might be a bad idea, Joe walks up and touches it, and he sees a vision.

Once, there *were* cities of Faerie here, and they moved with the seasons, and grew fat under the sun. But they burned. The fae were driven west, into the shrinking frontier, right alongside the folk. And then the conquerors themselves had a war, a great one, and ground themselves to dust. So there are no more cities, but the land remembers.

Joe stares at the pile of stones for a while longer, and then he turns to his left the third time, and the fort is there in front of him again, and inside Ilya is screaming.

“—you planning on telling me this?!”

Joe doesn't want to intrude again, and settles just outside the doorway instead.

“Of course we were going to,” comes Genevieve’s voice. “Please—”

“You didn’t think I’d want to come with you if I knew, is that it? Well, you were right.”

“You didn’t want to come anyway,” says Margot. “But you’re here now.”

“Here!” spits Ilya. “Sure, this is a great place to be. Do you know why they called it the Battle of the Wilderness? I was *here*. We were here. We fought here and we died here.”

Genevieve says something Joe doesn’t catch.

“And when you showed up I thought— I thought maybe you had done better, over on your side of the sea. But it’s just the same there, isn’t it?”

“It’s not over,” says Ariane. “We can rebuild, if only we have your help. The High Court of France—”

“There *is no* High Court!” Ilya yells, then hisses as their wound pulls. “It’s dead, and gone, and there’s nothing I or you or anyone can do to put the continent back together.”

“There’s always something we can do,” says Ariane. But Ilya doesn’t reply, and a moment later Joe jumps to his feet as the queens of France troop out past him. Margot gives him only a brief glance.

Ilya is lying on the bed, their torso bandaged and glowing with a soft light. Seeing Joe, they let their head fall back. “I don’t know what to do. It’s hard to see what’s right.” And Joe says nothing.

By the time they scurry like rats into New York, weeks have passed, and they need to scramble to book passage on a transatlantic liner. Genevieve finds them hotel accommodations for the duration, an elaborately furnished suite where both Joe and Ilya feel out of place.

“We need to return to Paris,” Ariane tells Ilya. “I hope you’ll join us. But you have to choose.”

Fae know about bargains and contracts, and the reins of power in New York are clutched greedily by lawyers and financiers, picking over tax loopholes and market inefficiencies, bankrolling projects for ends only they know, picking up and dropping the lives of their lessers whenever they find it convenient.

The rest of the fae, the ones who fled to the city or flooded in from overseas after the war, live packed in tenement districts marked out by boundaries they don't have the power to cross, and every year the margins grow tighter.

"You really did leave it all behind, huh?" Joe asks Ilya. It's the last night in the city and all five of them are on the balcony, Genevieve gazing down the street, Margot and Ariane leaning on each other, Ilya at the little table, and Joe in the corner.

"We fought against ourselves," says Ilya. "We fought with you and against you. We felled our forests and spent our gold to win the war. We didn't expect... We swore we would never again do anything to make your folk turn your guns on us. And many of us went west."

"So what about the ones who were already there? What about Clara?"

Ilya again says nothing, and Joe (who calls himself Zhou, although Ilya has never asked about this) decides that perhaps it's time to tell a story of his own.

"My mother once told me about an old fool," he begins, "who was so annoyed by how long the road around the mountains was, that he declared he would move the mountain out of the way. One day an old sage came to his house just to laugh at him, and tell him he would never finish. But the old fool replied that even after he died, his children would keep working, and his children's children, and one day the road would be straight."

Joe leans forward a bit. "Ilya, I think... I don't know how much power you have, yourself. But I think your people will listen to you, and that means you can change things. If you do the right thing now... then someday, things will be better for it."

Joe doesn't know if he believes it himself. The women are looking at him, their eyes shaded in the twilight. Ilya is gazing across the alleys and roofs of Manhattan. But in the morning, when they head to the harbor, Ilya is there.

The fairy periplus of the North Atlantic stretches from the New Colossus on Liberty Island to the sunken city of Ys, stone frigates and ghost ships and lately the wreck of the *Titanic*, and Las Médulas where the Romans learned the ruin of mountains. These are places the folk tell tales about, and so they exist too in the world of the fae.

When finally the liner makes port in Le Havre, Joe feels something strange, a sense of freedom from the indenture that has bound him. In 1315, the King declared that any slave who set foot in France was free, and even if the folk did not always follow it themselves, it was still a law and laws have power.

The Court of France resides in a townhouse made of twisting, sinuous wood and metal, and the interior seems decorated to resemble a forest, soaring trunks and hanging leaves, and tall windows letting in the summer sun. But here too are electric lights and telephones, an elevator and an automobile garage. Ariane heads off before they even arrive, saying she has urgent business at the exchange; Genevieve holds court downstairs; and Margot shows Ilya and Joe to the guest rooms before vanishing.

Ilya, too, eventually makes an itinerary and sets out, trying to shore up support for the Court, and to put back together what had been shattered. And Joe is left with nothing to do but to wander the house and the city.

The halls of the court host fae of all sorts, woodwoses of the north and ankou from Brittany and jinn from Algeria, but also the high society of the folk, bankers, socialites, industrialists, dancers, politicians, architects, playwrights, stockbrokers, and the old nobility that survived the Revolutions. They are there to make deals and trade promises, to gain profit or inspiration or leverage or all three, and above all looms the shadow of war.

Once, there was a High Court that claimed dominion over all the lands of Europe, because mortals both hoped and feared that this would come to pass, and so it did in Faerie. In the middle of the last century the fae went to war, all over the world, and if tales had been told of it by the folk, they might have wondered how such noble people could do such things to each other. They might have thought about what the folk did to each other too, then, for what mortals believe of themselves becomes true of the fae in turn.

Time passes strangely in the City of Lights. The days turn, and Joe feels maybe he should get started on this storytelling business, but he also feels out of his depth, and

lost, and very small. He walks the streets a little, but all he seems to find are people talking in a language he doesn't know, and something in the air that makes him sneeze.

One day he's returning from the riverbank when he sees Margot picking up a paper from the newsstand on the corner, feeling grateful for the familiar face, and that's when the front of the townhouse disappears in a blast that knocks both of them off their feet.

Ears still ringing, Joe follows Margot into the rubble that spills out onto the road. Genevieve and Ariane, who were elsewhere in the house, are triaging those caught in the blast, and a few bystanders are rushing to help as well.

"Oh, thank God you're safe," Ariane says when she sees them. "Can you help us—"

But Margot pulls them over to the side. "I'm sorry, but we're out of time." She tosses the newspaper onto what's left of a table.

"What do you mean, we're out of time?" Ilya comes over from the back of the room. "I have contacts I'm working with. We can still—"

"The Court of Germany has cut off relations," Margot interrupts. "We're out of time."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ilya hisses. "*You* brought me here. You did everything to convince me we had a chance to revive the High Court and mend this continent again. And now you're saying we're done?! What am I even here for, then?"

Genevieve looks into their eyes. "You're here to help us and lead us. It's still your choice. You don't owe us."

"But even if events are out of our control," adds Ariane, "there are still things to be done."

Ilya is silent. Joe thinks he sees something in their eyes, for just a moment: a memory, perhaps, of what power means.

"We're going to London," says Margot.

Underneath the Tower of London there is a chamber, and in the chamber is a flock of ravens, and among the ravens there is a head: the head of Brân the Blessed, which was buried here to ward England from attack.

“Mine were the redcoats, the East Indiamen, the golden cavalry of St. George,” the head intones as they approach. “I was at Culloden, at Blenheim, and at Rorke’s Drift too. What have you come for, travellers?”

Ilya steps forward. “We represent the Court of France. We request your aid and counsel.”

“*Longtemps*,” Brân says, with a tinge of sadness and familiarity. “You misunderstand me. What have *you* come for?”

“I...” Ilya begins, and glances at Joe. “I’ve come to do what’s right for my people.”

“No,” sighs Brân. “There is no right thing, Ilya, and you are not the hero of this story. If there was an age when mortals believed in heroes who did right, then that age is over. We will do what is in our nature, and in our obligations, for even scraps of paper have power.”

“I don’t understand,” says Ilya.

“Then let me be clear. If you do not fight, then your story is over, and you and your people will be swallowed up. If you do fight, then those who follow you will die, and those you once called brothers will die. The rivers will run and the valleys will fill with worse than blood.”

And Joe sees it, because Brân shows it to them: angels raising their arms above the water at Mons, and mushroom rings around shell holes in a forest blasted to splinters, and an iron harvest that poisons the land forever, and gradually he realizes that he’s retching on the floor.

When Joe looks up, Ilya is staring at him, and Joe thinks many things in that moment.

He thinks of the look on Ilya’s face, and their dreams of sweet words, and what it means to have their name remembered. He thinks of tumbleweeds, and camels in the Sonoran desert, and what Clara said to him. He wonders if Ilya fights for their people, or only for an idea of them.

“I’m sorry,” whispers Joe, but Ilya has already turned away.

“Choose,” says Brân, and in that moment Joe knows the Wild Hunt has begun. The lights are going out all over Faerie, and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.