

## TWO KNIGHTS

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

What is that man doing? one had asked in pre-dawn, and another had asked in the morning's bright hours.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

The answer, both times, had been more or less the same bitterly passive information accompanied with the same joke.

These are not the actions of a man. He is a child who will get himself killed by his petulance. Eaten by wild wolves because he goes out to the woods thinking himself one of them.

This is not a man, but a boy who would starve himself in protest because he cannot accept the death of his hamster.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

The long, slow walk from the forge temple to the bluff slope was often a noisy, raucous affair. A celebration. A parade. As Faer'yün made the walk, his ring in his hands and alone, only a few made remarks among themselves, and most politely averted their gaze. Most knew why he made this walk alone. Most knew that his husband was his dog. Most had met the tall and personable hound on Faer'yün and Mish's visits on market days.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

He had brought his ring into creation in the dead hours of the night prior, stepping alone into the forge temple with his pound of iron, his ten pounds of holy fuelwood, and a skin of his husband's urine, enough to douse into the white flames now and then and make the spirits hiss and pause and consider him. When the ring was made he picked it up. Had the ring been

forged by normal means he would have felt only the pound of weight again that he had walked in with, some climbers' tackle that he might barely squeeze his hand through. Instead, the ring forged as it was, though indeed still the same mortal weight, was also pressed down upon heavily by the locked-away spirits whom he had pestered all through the night. Upon picking up the ring, Faer'yün quickly had need to hold the cumbersome object in both hands rather than one, and would be hurrying if he trudged with it at a pace of one mile to the hour.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

So, ring in his hands, in the pre-dawn morning, Faer'yün had left the mouth of the forge temple on a straight and slow shot towards the base of the bluffs that loomed over the thatched-roofed dwellings, the bluffs that at that hour blocked out a region of the stars.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

Most, thankfully, had not made remarks on the fact of his mannish formal garb of a black tunic and grey trousers. His eldest uncle, though the grey man had not said a word while looking at him, rudely remarked to his own company that morning, I knew we were wrong to ever tell her that her meddling was cute. Later, a young boy to his mother had asked in what he thought was a whisper, Will the spirits be angered that he used to be a girl? The mother, in some of the best kindness Faer'yün had been given in town that day, said in an equally loud whisper to the boy, I don't think so Dea'yan, and then she began shuffling the boy away along a side street. Will they care that he's alone? No, I don't think so Dea'yan. Why is he alone? Sometimes people go to the other side for reasons besides weddings, Dea'yan.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

The best kindness in town that day came from his boyhood friend Silna'yan, now Silna'yün, who walked beside him. Briefly, but the only one to do so. He hadn't said much, but the words that were said, Faer'yün had hoped to hear some version of for so many years. We don't chat much these days, eh? Both of us such recluses. Such woodsmen. As one to another, and you the greater than I, Faer'yün, not a drop of the profundity of what

you do today is lost on me. Not a drop. My every blessing goes with you.

And with that said, Silna'yün had parted away, and left Faer'yün to his business.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

In what was all in all a relative lack of ceremony, Faer'yün arrived at the base of the bluff in the afternoon, and ascended up a slight grassy slope into the mouth of the through-cave, into its dark, into its cold breath. Once inside, the spirits of his ring stopped pushing down on him. Indeed, as though arriving at a different current in a riptide, the spirits instead began pulling on Faer'yün, taking him lightly and swiftly through the tunnel away from his planet, through his sun, and onto a planet in facing rotation to his.

It was the way of all planets here. Opposite the fire planet, called by some the big star, the little sun, or the candle, was the ice planet, whose surface was so reflective that she was often mistaken for her brother and called the same names. Opposite the dwarf, the giant. Opposite the oil dot, the grey dot. Many dozen others. And opposite the planet of deeds, which Faer'yün had left on an afternoon with an iron ring in both hands, was the planet of records, on which he had arrived with an iron ring in both hands for to place it.

Though alike in rotation, the planet of records was not like the planet of deeds in geography. Rather than emerge from the mouth of another cave, Faer'yün had emerged from between two trees as though stepping around a doorway. He stood in a grove of trees, a vast grove, which grew atop a shelf along a mountain. Up and down this mountain, at intervals, were more shelves, some bearing groves, some only beginnings of groves, and a number of shelves were yet blank. From his vantage a good way up the mountain he had arrived on, Faer'yün could look out into the distance and see that mountains dotted this planet too densely to count, with thick jungle in between the bases. As Faer'yün had looked out at all of this, he had made sure to keep one hand on his iron ring, and with his other hand, he idly felt at an iron nail that rested along the length of his sternum, hung there from a necklace of twine.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

As he had wandered through the grove, he had seen many trees with totems fastened to them, and many trees without.

*Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

He had known when he had arrived at his own tree, because it was the only one that, when contemplating over it, he did not get the impression that he would be immediately expelled back to his own planet for tampering with it. And, though he was no great spiritualist to read the details, the tree in fact looked like him in some ways that were obvious enough, even to the layman. A scar along one branch that looked like the scar on his left bicep, from when a pissy horse had bitten him as a child. A thinner, symmetrical, more purposeful pair of scars midway up the tree's pale trunk. And, when he had approached from a distance, the leaves had been a rough though remarkably true sketch portrait of his face. The face of an infant as the wind stirred, then nothing in the stillness, then in a building gust had been the face of a small girl, then a small boy, then a teenager, and then the man. The wind then died down, and did not presage what his face might look like in its old age. Given his business there that day, he had known that the wind was right not to.

Now, Faer'yün stood before his tree of records, held to its trunk a ring forged of the essence of his husband, and was nailing in a big iron spike from which to forever hang it. The wood did not give way to this intrusion easily, and he stood working at the tree for quite some time, every beat of the hammer another year of his own life he was transferring to his husband. He drove in the final taps: *Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

Then he stepped back, let the ring hang, and admired it for a while.

With him done with his work, the spirits did not tolerate his being there for very much longer. He politely closed his eyes, took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, he was again in the dark and cold of the through-cave, a white veil of daylight visible some distance ahead across the sandy tunnel floor. He smiled, and took his first returning breath of the cold air into his chest. Holding himself upright and proud with no great effort, he walked forward to greet the remainder of the day.

On the trail approaching his cabin, Faer'yün eyed a dry branch on the trail ahead. When he arrived at it, he stepped on it.

A moment later, an ink-black creature erupted out of the woods onto the trail farther ahead, turned to Faer'yün, and sprinted straight for him. In three seconds Faer'yün was felled by the beast, and with counter-swipes of his hands he for a short while fended off the harshest of the scratches and play-bites from his husband Mish. The transfer of life had worked for a surety: this love and familiarity with one another, Mish had blessed Faer'yün's life with for the last five years and some, but this rabid energy, Faer'yün had not seen in Mish since two autumns ago. The two wrestled on the trail there, and Faer'yün intermittently tossed pieces of the broken stick, which Mish snatched up in his jaws and crushed to wet splinters before leaping back into it with Faer'yün to take another swipe.

After a few repetitions of this, Mish leapt into a position of standing a pace away from his human husband, panting, but his eyes still gleaming with energy, daring Faer'yün to make a move. Mish's tail still wagged so quickly that Faer'yün knew an attempt at lowering himself in for a hug would only result in further swipes from the imposingly clawed dog, and an attempt to go in for a kiss would risk loosened teeth. So Faer'yün stepped forward matter-of-factly, posture heavy and unplayful, and merely gave the black dog's scruff a loving rub in passing as he got back to walking along the trail to their cabin. Mish joined in the walk, making galloping loops ahead and back to his husband, ahead and back to his husband, always back to his husband.

As they came upon the small clearing of their cabin, Mish walked beside Faer'yün. Then, the dog's tall ears turned towards something in the clearing, and he blasted forth as though he were shot from a cannon and his legs were trying to keep up with the run. The squirrel began to flee at once, but made towards the stream, encountered the water, turned left to scrambled over the pebbles, and from that point the dog was upon him, and the squirrel was made quick work of, pinned and

then given a precise and powerful bite. Mish stared down at the kill briefly to be sure the swift thing would not run away again or bite him back. Then, satisfied, Mish looked up across the clearing at Faer'yün, tail wagging, expression proud.

In a deepened voice of mature praise, Faer'yün called to the dog, Good Mish, o, so fast Mish! Good squirrel. Good kill.

As he continued to talk of praise, Faer'yün proceeded through the clearing towards where the dog stood.

To one side of the clearing, where Mish stood, was a stream which usually had running through it gentle clear waters that were good for drinking, and smooth pebbles along the banks. Amid the clearing, a campfire ring. And across the clearing, atop quite a small hill that was a runt to the hills surrounding and a dwarf to the hills nearby, was built a simple cabin. Small such that the hearth could warm the room mightily in the winter. Homely with its tufts of shed black fur forming little groups here and there around the perimeter of the floor.

Faer'yün knelt at the dead squirrel, and turned it over in thorough appraisals under Mish's eyes. Good, he finally said to Mish, and reached over and gave the dog a couple of pats on the side of the shoulder. Then Faer'yün took off his boots, picked the squirrel up, and waded across the stream with it, Mish splashing through the stream too alongside. They stepped through the woods around trees and bushes until arriving at a grassy hillside, a pocket in which to do messy work, away from the center of their grounds.

Faer'yün dressed the squirrel while Mish observed with diligent fascination. When the work was done, the small creature was separated into a fur for Faer'yün, cuts of meat for Mish, and what remained of the innards they left to the woods there on the hillside.

The two made their way back to their clearing. Faer'yün got a fire going, cooked the squirrel's flesh, and handed the pieces to Mish as they were ready. The dog ate gently and gladly out of his human husband's hand.

The two then walked a couple of laps around the clearing, not a long task, as there wasn't much to it, but the men had an appreciation for minding that no things were amiss in such spaces as concerned them. Mish lifted a leg at a tree beside the

trailhead back to town and relieved himself for quite some time. As he did, the husbands variously looked into each other's eyes or off into the woods. On the second lap around the clearing, Mish lapped up a great deal of water.

The two came back to the campfire. They sat at it side by side. Faer'yün wrapped an arm over his man, and pet the dog as they sat, Faer'yün's eyes to the flames, Mish's ears and nose to the woods. Then, with just a slightly slower stroke to the scruff, the husbands turned to each other, appraised each other's eyes, and gave themselves over to each other's kissing, which shortly led to a more intimate display there beside the fire.

In all, the two had a raucous night of abandon with one another, chasing and feinting around their clearing, intermittent carnal givings, splashing and swimming in the stream, feasting from their stores of preserves, and ultimately falling into deep slumber flesh to fur beside the burning fire.

In the morning, Faer'yün woke on the grass with his nose buried in the scents of the thick fluff of fur at Mish's chest, and a feeling of drool at the corner of his mouth. The warmth along the front of his body connecting to the heat of the thinner-furred underside of the dog was a sort of paradise. Faer'yün pulled himself in closer with the dog. The dog, awakened, stretched against Faer'yün, and then craned his head down to point his warm muzzle to the human. As the birds chirped in the cool morning around them and the smell of last night's fire ambled past, Mish and Faer'yün shared some soft morning kisses, and then Faer'yün cradled the dog for a while, the dog's breathing nose resting in the pocket under the human's chin, as the human pet him.

Mish eventually stretched again and yawned, and with that, the two men disentangled from one another and stood up. Mish trotted a brief distance away to relieve himself and mark a middling section of the clearing. Faer'yün stood in place, finding his joints unusually sore that morning, and he did some stretches beside the faintly smoking remains of the fire while Mish did some appraising laps around the clearing.

There were easy enough days ahead of the two, for a time. Always there was work to do, but for the moment, not so much of great excitement. Faer'yün went to the cabin and dressed in

his usual attire for cool autumn days such as this. A coarse and undyed tunic, brown trousers, thick wool socks, and boots. Mish came trotting in through the doorway as Faer'yün was seated atop a chest, bent over forward and tying the boot laces. The dog came straight over and kissed the human briefly, then continued forward and hopped onto the bed, and laid down to watch for the human to be done with the knotwork.

When Faer'yün stood up, Mish stood up as well, wagging. The two set out, Faer'yün closing the cabin door behind them. With a hand axe in tow, Faer'yün went with Mish into the woods to add to their stores of firewood.

There was no hurry to it. Faer'yün took to the work more lightly than he normally might, in fact, as his joints still held on to the soreness of that morning. He sighed a bit as he thought about it, while carrying a few logs back to the clearing. He had certainly heard no shortage of old men feigning horror at his propensity to sleep on the ground. He had not gotten the joke, and had more or less considered the old men weak of will, not made of the same hardness as himself. But, with Mish's age decreased and his own increased, he was now perhaps getting his first true impressions of the latter half of the balancing.

Faer'yün glanced up to see a black streak crashing around through the brush, and he smiled. If the price of renewed youth in the dog was that the human might now prefer to spend more of his nights in his bed than on the grass, then he supposed he could own up to some small ignorant folly from his youth, and join the ranks of grumbling old men. He had already been a homebody. A curmudgeon was not so great a step.

Faer'yün saw the edge of the clearing ahead.

Mish, tromping and sniffing, advanced far ahead of the human up to the clearing's edge. There, the dog's posture shifted, hairs on his back raised, and he shot forward into the clearing, barking of enormous offense at some transgression.

Faer'yün ran forward to catch up, burden of logs still in his arms.

When he arrived upon the edge of the clearing himself, he saw Silna'yün, his friend, standing near the campfire ring. Mish walked in fast circles around the intruder, all hair still raised, though flying tail and lack of barks or growls gave away a



happiness that this abhorrent egregious intruder was a friend. Silna'yün, though not daring to take a step, raised a hand in a wave as he saw Faer'yün exiting from the woods.

Good guard, Faer'yün called to Mish, in a voice of deep praise, a voice he so often had occasion to use with the man. Good find, good spot, good friend, good help. Mish, in the midst of these called praises, stopped his circling of the visitor, and crossed the clearing back to his husband. Faer'yün dropped the logs aside and met Mish in a crouch, so he could rub and pet the dog fully as the dog walked back and forth against him and wagged.

Faer'yün then stood, and he and Mish came together to meet the visitor.

What youth in him! Silna'yün remarked to Faer'yün, looking at the lively dog. He's your same Mish? Not a wilder pup of his you'd never mentioned?

Faer'yün, playing along, gave assurances that this was in spite of appearances the very same dog.

Good, yes, wonderful, then if he is he and you are you then my presents are all labeled rightly.

With that, Silna'yün unshouldered his pack. He set the immense thing standing up at his feet, loosened a pair of fasteners holding the top shut, and began withdrawing parcel after parcel and setting the colorful packages around himself on the grass. Mish took big sniffs of them all, nose pressed close against the sides of them as he did.

Still rummaging and setting things out, Silna'yün went on and said, I'll spoil his presents to your human ears, it's mostly things from the butcher, and a little from the tailor. I even paid visit to the cobbler, on rumor that some folks are having dog shoes made for the winter, but in the course of our conversation I came to realize, rather on my own, that of course if Mish had need of such a thing, his master would have already got him it. The offer stands that if you would like a two-pair of shoes for him I can arrange it, but as it was I left the cobbler's shop with exchange only of pleasantries.

By the time he was done and stood upright from his pack, there was a score and then some of colorfully papered parcels laid out around him.

Faer'yün stepped over to where Mish stood sniffing eagerly at a package wrapped in bright green paper. The human knelt at the dog, and pet him slowly as he looked around at the gifts.

This is so much, Faer'yün said, knowing that to say it was too much would cause insult in how true of a hit it would be.

I did become carried away, perhaps, Silna'yün said with a warm, put-on ruefulness. He stood behind his pack, hands resting over the top of it, as though it were a soldier's tall shield. He did not go on to offer any apology over the presents.

Still petting Mish, who had sat down and was watching and listening upon noticing the pauses in the air between the humans, Faer'yün offered, I take it these are in good tidings over yesterday's doings. Why so many, is all that I ask.

Still standing with his hands resting on his pack before him, and with a tightly guarded mask of joviality, Silna'yün sniffled, and said, Making up for lost time. I was already far enough behind, eh? Now, I worry you've set me back even farther.

Faer'yün tried to speak, and found nothing.

Already now both made sorely vulnerable, the two humans each stepped cautiously aside from their shields, and hugged one another.

The gifts were all very strongly to Mish's liking. Quite a number of bones and smoked meats, much of which Faer'yün put away to parcel out later, though certainly too with no shortage given now. There was also a blanket for the husbands to share, a stuffed rabbit toy and a stuffed deer toy for Mish which he gladly took guardship of alongside whichever bone he was chewing, and a new knife for Faer'yün excellently made.

Silna'yün remarked, I would have liked to get you something more, in the line of spirits, ale, wine, tobacco, but when inquiring out your tastes among the merchants, I've come to the impression that you've become quite the abstainer.

Amused, Faer'yün pondered on that. Abstainer, no. I think I have just tended to find my revels elsewhere. I haven't had a cup of ale since we were last at the pub, the one bloody halfway up the bluff face.

Faer'yün! Ye madman! That was four, five summers ago!

Faer'yün contemplated on that, and indeed, so it was.

Silna'yün, on invitation, stayed the evening and sat around a fire with Faer'yün and Mish as the larger raw cuts of beef were cooked. Silna'yün did in fact produce four skins of wine from his pack, the very last of the pack's contents he assured, and the humans drank as they chatted the night away. Mish was offered a portion of wine as well, but refused it and gladly resumed work on a pig femur. Faer'yün agreed, at one point, to visit the pub on the bluff face some evening in the coming days. Late in the night, with an empty pack, a full stomach, and good spirits, Silna'yün sauntered away back up the trail towards town, loudly bellowing a drinking song to the night frogs and crickets. Faer'yün made his stumbling way to the cabin up the short hill, not helped by the lively dog who took the stumbling as a game and made playful barks and swipes. The two did engage in their usual revelry of sorts on the doorstep, before then finally making their way inside onto the bed together. There, they fell into a good sleep befitting of their good night.

The following afternoon, Faer'yün packed a day bag, holding in it some small furs to trade, a water skin, and some coinage, among a few items of miscellany. The flint, for one, was more a woodsman's totem of comfort than it was a likely necessity on a trip into town. Mish laid at the edge of the bed, chin on his paws, watching his husband pack. He then, with all the same interest, watched his husband change into his formal wear, the black tunic and grey trousers.

Late afternoon, Mish was ever the popular personality around town, flocked to by children who crowded to pet the friendly, handsome, large dog whose owner was occupied making small chat at the stalls of long acquainted local barterers. He was given a fair deal on the furs he sold. The most of them were from game that he had not taken for the fur, being long since furnished enough in those, but rather for the meat to smoke and be kept in stores for his husband for the coming winter. For his own stock he had been at work making preserves of wild berries and stores of wild veg and nuts that, while some of the varieties were likely to survive the winter, were also all certainly easier found before snowfall.

When his business at the market was done, Faer'yün was tempted by the road out of town, back to home, where he could

continue squaring things away, sharing in Mish's good company and in Mish's good company alone, as had more or less served him beyond adequately in the preceding seasons. But a promise was his business in town, and as he was an honest enough man and the promise made to a wonderful fellow, Faer'yün turned instead up the road towards the bluff. Mish came closely alongside.

Together, as the evening fell upon them, Mish and Faer'yün stepped into the pub that was halfway up the bluff beside town. A din of merry voices filled the air. Mish stalked hastily in and began at making the rounds immediately, approaching groups at all tables and booths to sniff at the humans and their foods. Some ignored the dog, others delighted in his visit and offered praise and pets and some portions of fried potato wedges, which seemed to be the predominant dish that night. One man, upon being nosed at by the dog, roared a curse and arose ready to kick the animal, only to get a better look at which animal it was, and lift his gaze to indeed find the animal's other half standing in the pub's doorway, watching.

The man retook his seat, and glowered down at his potatoes.

Faer'yün continued to glare.

A moment later, the man glanced over to see if he was still being watched, and then shuddered. Embarrassed, caught out, the man called to Faer'yün, Well I didn't, did I?

Faer'yün raised his eyebrows, a show of incredulity that that was all the man had for himself.

Mish glanced alertly between the belligerent and Faer'yün, waiting for a verdict.

Faer'yün let out a puff of air, and turned towards the bar. Mish came trotting over to join him. When Faer'yün sat at a stool, Mish sat on the floor beside him, facing the belligerent man who kept cautiously glancing back, until eventually finishing his drink and making an exit.

Later into the evening, Faer'yün heard his name called, and spun around on his stool to see Silna'yün entering, alongside a small troupe of other friends whom Faer'yün hadn't spoken with for longer time than he could properly place.

The night was merry, and in the years that followed, Faer'yün and Mish became fixtures of the town's pubs, or at least, so it

felt when an excited rise would come over the din at the arrival of the black dog. Twenty nine days out of thirty, the human and hound husbands still kept to themselves in their pocket of the woods. But when they did have occasion to go into town for trade and the like, the two gladly made an evening of it as well, and the town made no fuss at all of welcoming the stiff human and the lively dog.

On a night over five winters after Faer'yün had given half of his years to Mish, the two men walked through town from one pub to another. Faer'yün had hoped to find Silna'yün or one of his sisters, Mera'gan or Nes'gan, as he had brought with him into town a small gift that he had wished to impart. An agate stone, near the size of his fist, found as he and Mish had been on a hike through the bluffs. Orange, the color of Silna'yün's birth month, not Faer'yün's, which was a fine enough pretense to be rid of the thing.

Silna'yün had not been found though, at the pub in the town's center that night, and so the husbands, after waiting it out for a pint, now made the trek to the pub on the edge of town by the river. With them was Chim'gan, a friend who had been at the pub who the husbands had sat with for the pint. Sober, she was a quiet, modest woman. Drunk, she was a font of bold advice and ravenous to pry at sensitive matters. This night, she had been at the pub for some time before the husbands had arrived, and was drunk.

As they walked, she said loudly to Faer'yün, The next time a farmer around here kicks it, you need to jump on that opportunity.

Pardon? Faer'yün asked, trying to keep a serious composure.

You are going to buy a farm by this time next spring. You are so good with animals.

Indeed, Chim'gan.

So good, Chim'gan repeated, and then went on, As a start, maybe some breeding work, ah? Get Mish a little lady friend to suit him? Would you like that Mish? Hm? Mish?

Mish looked uncomfortably up at Faer'yün regarding the way he was being condescended to.

Faer'yün stooped for a few steps to give Mish a few assuring pats to the side.

Chim'gan continued, Feh, maybe after this many years he wouldn't even know what to do with a bitch, so used to his husband accommodating. Arrarrarr, you want me to mount that flee-ridden mongrel, that hairy beast? You want me, me! the great Mish! to copulate with an animal? I think not! Down here at once, Faer'gan! Let me show you what this studhood is deserving of!

Tears of laughter augmented Chim'gan's cheeks as she shrieked out the last lines. Faer'yün felt he could do little other than blush and bear it, and hope that more friends might provide the woman other topics when the next pub was reached.

Eventually through getting the most of her laughs out, Chim'gan wiped at her eyes, and said, I misspoke in there. Even with the joke, even speaking as Mish, I should have called you Faer'yün, not Faer'gan.

I was not so greatly pained by it, in the context, but thank you.

Does he think of you as his husband, though? Not as his wife? That was what I stumbled over.

As she said it she stumbled over an uneven stone in the street, and then caught her balance again on Faer'yün's offered arm. They continued on like that, Faer'yün's arm weighed down as they went.

Faer'yün admitted, By scent, and by the pleasures of the flesh, he likely does indeed think he has a wife. In all other matters of living, he has a husband. Either way, my care as concerns him is only that he think well of me.

Chim'gan gave a thoughtful hum as she walked along, eyes closed, leaning on Faer'yün's arm.

Any strangers looking at us would think you were my father, Chim'gan said.

Faer'yün thought on that, and then said, I suppose so.

How many years are left for you? Chim'gan asked sleepily.

Faer'yün answered, Some, but perhaps little more than five. As a natural consequence of balancing our number of years left, I have fettered the pace at which the years age him, and, in balance, spurred on the pace at which the years age me.

The two friends and Mish arrived at the pub by the river.

More seasons went by. Faer'yün and Mish spent the springs on long hikes, the summers splashing and lolling about in the streams and lakes, the autumns in foraging and hunts, and the winters snuggled together in their cabin on their bed.

On a night nearing nine autumns after Faer'yün had given half his years to Mish, the two men sat at a bench outside of the pub in the town center. Faer'yün, a bit drunk, sat with a pint from inside in one hand, and his other hand rested on Mish, who had climbed up onto the bench too and sat beside him. The both of them had the startings of grey in their hair, Mish in the muzzle, Faer'yün in some streaks at the temples. It was past midnight, and much of the merriment from inside had died down, their friends gone home, and last call now held in Faer'yün's hand. He took a drink.

Mish turned his head over, and kissed his human husband on the side of the mouth. The human, on lazy reflex, parted his mouth for the dog, and turned in as well so the two of them could exchange careful loving licks at each other's tongues.

Faer'yün leaned down and gave a parting smooch to the side of Mish's neck, planting the kiss deep within the fluff, and then sat upright again, and had another sip from his ale.

The two looked around the square. Across the way from them, a man slowly walked across their view, some burden of wooden beams balanced at his side. For a time, his were the only footsteps, and the rest of the town was quiet.

The man paused. He set his burden down.

From behind him, another man quickly walked up, and struck him with a staff. The stricken man collapsed. The man with the staff turned, and began walking away as quickly as he had approached.

Mish, seeing what had unfolded just as well as Faer'yün, gave an irate bark, followed by a concerned growl.

Faer'yün looked around the square once more. Barring some person lurking in shadows or peering out from within some shuttered window, none had seen this deed besides himself and Mish.

The retreating figure was nearly around a corner, off to some minor street.

Faer'yün did hesitate. What he had just seen, he had seen other versions of quite a number of times. A squirrel crushed in Mish's jaws. A deer taking a fall struck by an arrow that he himself had sent flying to it. And here, a human. A thought settled in Faer'yün that, in his heart of hearts, he felt no affinity for humans greater than any else. To see a man struck dead was a surprise. Whether it was anything more than that, he wasn't quite certain.

It was Mish's reaction that brought Faer'yün around. There was a concern in the dog at what he saw. And indeed, now so directed, Faer'yün saw it too, in two parts. The first was waste. The retreating man took nothing from the fallen man before fleeing. The second, true even if unpoetic, was threat. So often, the husbands made laps around their clearing, searching into the nearby woods for anything amiss, anything that might pose to them a danger. Here in town now was such a danger, retreating such that it might hide until able to later strike again.

Careful, follow, Faer'yün commanded.

The dog hurried down from the bench, and ran after the attacker who was just leaving sight around a corner. Faer'yün ran after his husband. The attacker did not so much run, even after glancing over his shoulder and seeing that he was being pursued, but he had gotten a head start, and evaded Faer'yün around several corners and narrow streets. Mish, though no doubt able to close the distance at a moment's notice, did not get ahead of the sight of his human husband, and would stand at the mouths of alleys barking the next way. In this manner the husbands pursued the attacker to an edge of town bordered by the woods, which he quickly stepped into. To one who did not realize he was being pursued by woodsmen, it may have seemed like a tidy escape.

Faer'yün picked up his run to a sprint, crashing through the brush alongside Mish after this man.

Shortly, they broke through out of the brush, into a small, even, circular clearing, where long grass moved like the waves of a lake on that night. In the center of the clearing, no longer fleeing and indeed facing the men, was the one they had been after. Faer'yün came to a kneel, sliding over the wet grass briefly, to wrap an arm around the dog's neck, palm firmly



holding him back at the chest. At this asking, Mish did indeed come to a stop, standing growling, hair raised, within five strides of his violent desires. But, at his human husband's asking, he did stand still, rather than close such a meager distance. Faer'yün, satisfied the dog would indeed stay, gently took his hand off the dog's chest, and stood to face and appraise who they had gotten.

The man stood in place, there among the grass, in the light of a waning gibbous. He wore formal attire, a black tunic and grey trousers, much like Faer'yün's very own which he wore that very night. The man was, in fact, one whom Faer'yün had seen about town now and then, though his name, he knew not. One hand rested on his staff, which stood beside him, his very same height. Now seeing it better, Faer'yün saw that it was not a staff in strict terms, but a farmer's scythe. Faer'yün scoffed upon seeing the gleam of the blade, given the man would look a fool in a wheat field harvesting while dressed in his finest as he was. The man's face was cleanshaven. The man's brow was pinched together and his upper lip raised in something of a snarl. Confusion. The man regarded the husbands who had pursued him with confusion.

What have you done? Faer'yün barked.

What have you done? the man asked back, though with none of the same aggression, none of the same haste. His voice was both more rasping and more highly pitched than Faer'yün had expected. It sounded like the croaking voice one would give to a frog when telling a make-believe story to a child.

In his same slow, frog-like voice, the man went on, You should not have seen me. My calculations are without error.

The man looked down at something, which he lifted up to breast height. A codex, open to some middle page. He then looked up at Faer'yün, down at Mish, and then up at Faer'yün again, and said, with his visage moved from confusion to warm amusement,

O, how interesting. Though my calculations remain as errorless as the rotations of the planets, it seems I had not accounted for your amendment to my data. Faer'yün, I presume, and beside you where all those years disappeared to. Well met. I am Death.

Mish's posture recoiled suddenly, and he turned in to his husband with a whine.

Faer'yün took a moment to realize what worried the dog. Not the name. It was not a name he would have occasion to know, himself. Kill, catch, and even the dead object of prey, certainly. The name itself, Death, was in some ways too abstract. The night frogs and crickets had utterly stopped singing. The wind did not blow, yet it did not leave a calm stillness, but in fact a rather tempestuous stillness. The grass stood in choppy waves frozen. The trees craned all to one way, but quivered not a hair. The passage of time had been halted.

Death went on, I am impressed, in truth. Ordinarily, I only cross paths like this with those who have cheated me.

Faer'yün, his words alone Mish's all too airy shield, spoke, You must be very busy. Would that we had known it was you, we would not have slowed your haste.

Death laughed, the sound of it more frog-like than ever.

O, do not worry yourself. As the words seem to flick constantly across my tongue now and here, rest assured that I have come and gone from this conversation many times, and my hands have been very busy elsewhere, in woods and in towns. As I have said, and as many besides myself have repeated, my calculations are, more or less, without error. Only anomalies such as yourself can muddle things.

Faer'yün countered, Strew my brain thread from thread across this yard, and nowhere in it will you find I ever had intention to cheat you.

Death's ribbiting laugh came even more enthusiastically.

O, indeed, indeed! You misunderstand. We meet here with no malice, none at all. You still have time left, good Faer'yün. Well.

Death vanished his scyth, and in its place held a pen. He made a small mark in his codex.

Some time.

Be that you tell me it is fleeting, we may like to leave here and be back to it.

Are you one for bartering, sir? Death asked.

Faer'yün, though in this moment wishing he had a more leery head about him, was one for bartering indeed. He said to Death, You have my ear.

Anomalies who cheat my calculations are easiest addressed by anomalies alike. A keeper of the law transgresses the very law he keeps that he may apprehend the ill-meaning transgressors. A keeper of the law who never scrapped nor swindled would be a dullard. If you both would become my knights, and end those whose years have overstepped their course, then in fair payment I would give the amount of half of those overstepped years to you, and the other half to the very one whose ring is hung by a nail driven through your tree. I would give you such powers as you would need for the job. The freedom to move as spirits yourselves through the planet of records, to find out your marks. The magic to kill without my being there.

Death disappeared his codex and pen, and in each hand, held forth a black apple.

In his mind's eye, Faer'yün saw the grey that was peppered among Mish's black chin.

Faer'yün took an apple, bit it, and then took the other, and held it down to Mish.

The dog took a bite of the apple offered.

Death stepped forward, and kissed the cheek of each of the two husbands before him, one and then the other.

Good hunting, Faer'fey, and Mish'fey.

—

Hollow cheeks. A missing ear. An interrupted halo of thin hair remaining. A poor audience of teeth in the theater of his mouth. Faer'fey had stood, arms crossed, looking at this tree of records for some time, as Mish'fey sniffed up and down the trunk. Eight years, the man had lived past his mortal term, and he did not look otherwise. The leaves of the tree in a gentle wind showed the face of an ordinary enough boy. In a stronger wind, the leaves shifted to show an ugly enough elder. And in a wind that howled was shown that the man's extra years had not been kind to him. Stepping closer, Faer'fey examined the grooves in the bark of the tree. The man had attended school as a youth. His first kiss had been with another boy at his school. On two occasions, he tortured rats to death. He enjoyed helping the cook-maid in the kitchen but was scolded if caught mingling

with the help. When he married, his marriage lasted fifty and one years, until the death of his wife to ailments of the lungs. They had three sons early in their marriage, and one daughter some years later. He was a devoted husband and loved nothing more than attending social functions with her at his side, particularly delighting in the gossip the two of them would share during the carriage ride home. For a career, he was a brilliant mathematician, and had broken open theorems that seemed to be becoming the bases for new branches of mathematics entirely. He spent the years after his wife's death secluded in his manor. He was to die of heart failure having attained the age of eighty and one years, but had hired a powerful witch to detach his mortal body from all conception of any of his deeds, and hired a physician to remove his heart and replace it with a pig's. The play had given him eight more years to stew about in his manor. Perhaps in his writings, there were conjectures on mathematics that would turn the world on its head. A grey man and a black dog came in through an unlocked door one day and cut out the pig's heart, putting the mathematician's extended term to rest.

A tightly curled beard. The bones of once-brilliant birds now piercings in his ears, nose, and lips. The tree of records for this man was littered from trunk to twig with scars that spoke of broken bones, gaping cuts, strong poisonings, searing burns. The man was a high leader of a holy order of conquerors, his writhing proclamations gospel. He had never known any life but torment, branded on each heel before he had fully left his mother's dead womb. He was to live zero minutes, but had in all his hours lived among such a miasma of death, a quota of animals slaughtered and their blood never not upon him, that he had become a part of an undetectable blot within Death's formulas, and he lived twenty and one years before a black-hooded assassin stole matter-of-factly across his camp, and with a simple knife ended what Death's grandeur had not been able to sting.

The beak and eyes of an eagle. The antlers of a great stag. A scar along the back of his neck where a guillotine had once malfunctioned. This man was a king who on fifty occasions had eluded Death under the protection of another god-spirit. He was

eight hundred and ninety and eight. On the day the last of his protections expired, the castle's corridors were abuzz with Death's knights, and Faer'fey and Mish'fey were not the ones to secure the kill on him, though they had seen it.

Such were the records of Faer'fey and Mish'fey's service as knights under Death.

One day, some decades after a then-Faer'yün had given half of his years to a then-Mish, the husbands were exiting the mouth of the through-cave at the base of the bluff. As Faer'fey's eyes readjusted to full daylight, he all at once noticed the presence of a figure standing beside him, and he wheeled to face them, taking a hop back, hand reaching to hover at the hilt of his knife. Mish'fey wheeled around likewise and barked, bared his teeth.

Peace, Faer'fey, the man said. He was dressed in a dark blue robe of fine materials, hood drawn up upon his head. He wore a goatee, and smiled as though the husbands before him were about to be his playthings.

The robed man continued, Would that we had more time for introductions, but alas, you will have to take a stranger at his word. I am a defected knight of Death, come to warn you that Death has gone to your tree of records and had you marked.

And Mish'fey's tree as well?

Yes, the robed man said.

His calculations are indeed as predictable as he has always bragged, then, Faer'yün said, and resumed walking away from the mouth of the cave, towards town. Mish came along beside, ears attuned to hear if the stranger took any steps to follow.

The stranger, now rather more alarmed than gleeful, called after the husbands, If your next mark be in this town, killing him will no longer earn you any favors.

Faer'yün stopped, and looked over his shoulder at the man to say, Indeed. We are no longer killers. Our bargain with Death never included the word eternity. And even so it was generous. We have seen many more good seasons come and go in our woods than I should have once though possible. But I am a woodsman. I have known, from the hare whose flesh feeds my husband to the riverbed whose water has run dry, that eternity is not the way of things here.

With that, Faer'yün and Mish continued down towards the town, passed through it with no great ceremony, and proceeded on to the path to their clearing.

There in their woods, Faer'yün and Mish splashed through their stream, and Mish was given a feast of the last of the stores of dried meat. Lastly, the husbands went on a walk together. Faer'yün was struck down midway through taking a step, and at the same instant, Mish was struck down midway through taking a curious sniff of his husband's hand.