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THE GREAT FAERIE STRIKE by SPENCER ELLSWORTH Published by Stink Eye Press

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The CREAT Facric Strike

by

Spencer Illsworth

CREAT CREAT Faerie Strike

(or Puckish Luck)

An Account of the Upheaval within the Otherworld of 1851 and the Strange Creatures, Conflicts, and Consequences that Attended Such

Chapter One



In Which our Vampire Faces the Trials of Madness, Memory, and Filial Duty

ANE LEANED OUT THE CARRIAGE WINDOW AND LOOKED BACK, FORCED herself to stare at the asylum as it disappeared into the distance.

The windows each had their own set of wrought-iron bars. Evenly spaced trees framed the perfectly square building. And the gate at the end of the driveway, also wrought-iron with massive black bars, looked like a smiling mouth—that had closed on over a year of her life.

She burned it all into memory with that gaze. Her seventeenth year of life, a year of bare rooms, steam baths, restraints, and Bible readings.

And she whispered to herself, "I am not mad."

"Jane, close the window." Her mother pulled the drapes. "You mustn't take a chill!"

"I wanted to see the countryside."

"Too much excitement for right now, dear. Rest. Next month, we will retire to your aunt Rebecca's house in the country, and we might take some long walks—oh, but not too long—and learn to play whist! You'll love whist, dear. Sharpens the mind. Unless that sounds like too much excitement? No, it's a dangerous pursuit, whist. Interferes with relaxation."

"Whatever you think is best, Mother," Jane said.

Her mother's eyes glimmered with tears. "From your mouth to God's ears.

How many prayers I've said, Jane—" She pressed Jane's hand in hers, unable to continue.

Jane leaned her head on her mother's breast. The heart beneath thundered, outpacing the clip-clop of the horses.

She remembered old Doctor Lark frowning, eyeing his stethoscope as if he suspected it of foul play after pressing it to Jane's chest. Every time, the same thing. I'd swear to Providence, I've heard but one heartbeat in all the time I've attended to her.

It was how Jane knew she was not human.

She whispered the words again like a catechism, sounding each syllable clearly to her own ears. "I'm not mad."

The stink of London reached them soon enough: the rot of cesspools, the dry stink of coal smoke, the too-sweet smell of broken gas mains. Jane carefully inclined her head to peer past the drapes without her mother noticing. In the distance, new rows of smokestacks and buildings rose along the skyline, obscured by coal dust that turned the sun into a red dot. By the roadside, sewing women walked, sharing around tins of hand cream. A phossy girl from the match factory, abscessed jaw wrapped in rags, limped behind them. Men stained ochre from the brickyard groaned and massaged sore backs.

"Jane!" her mother called. "Close the drapes! It's quite disturbing you!"

"London changes so quickly." A woman on the corner, holding three babes, cried to passersby that she had been turned from her home by her landlord.

Her mother yanked the drapes closed. "This 'progress'. . . our Lord must surely return this year to end such wickedness."

The carriage rolled to a stop in Shoreditch, and her mother put on a broad, overeager smile. "Upstairs we go! Rest before dinner, then a little rest after, and then bed!"

The house had changed. The fires weren't lit. End tables were missing favorite knickknacks. Jane touched the banister, and her hand came away dusty. "Mother, where is the servant girl?"

"Dear, you needn't worry about such a thing, not now!"

How much had that asylum cost? There had been no servants here in months.

"Rest!" Her mother prodded Jane upstairs, opening the door to the bedroom. Jane's four-poster, chest of drawers, and washing table stood dusty and neat as before. "Just as you left it." Her mother sat Jane on the bed, raising a cloud of dust, and pressed Jane's hand. "Such prayers I said. And now you're home."

Jane's eyes strayed to the chest of drawers. "Mother, I . . . I'll need that rest." "Of course, of course!" She kissed Jane on the forehead and left the room, calling back, "I'll get the fire lit."

The door closed.

Jane sprang up from her bed.

She yanked out the bottom drawer in her chest, tossed old, camphor-smelling petticoats aside, and felt for the small box. "Come now, come now, you're there. I know you are—" The box came away in her hands. Just an old matchbox, but inside . . .

Jane clawed it open, shook its contents out. The wrench and lockpicks clattered to the floor from her trembling hands, and the tiny vial, no bigger than her pinky finger, landed in her palm.

It was real.

"I'm not mad," Jane said and giggled to herself, a high piercing giggle. "I'm not mad!"

Witchwater was real.

Jane took a deep breath, gathered up the picks, and shoved them into the bun of her pinned-up hair. It took a few tries as she was shaking. "No time," she muttered to herself. "Must go." From another drawer and carefully tucked into a corset, she withdrew a box of folded papers, wedging them down the back of her shirt, bracing them against the corset she was already wearing.

Once downstairs, she saw her mother bent over the fire, grunting as she scraped out yesterday's ashes and wedged kindling into the grate. Jane felt a strange pang of sympathy—*Mother* was laying the fire?—but she crushed it. The woman had spent her money to put Jane away, and she would get no sympathy. "Mother," Jane said.

"Oh, Jane, dear!" Her mother turned around, her face now soot-blackened. She stepped away from the fireplace. "Dear, you must rest. Believe me, it's best—" Jane threw the witchwater.

The few drops splashed on the bridge of her mother's nose, leaking trails down through the soot. "Jane, what \dots "

And then, following the trails of water, the color leaked right out of her mother's irises, pooled along the bottom of her eyes. She stood frozen as a wax figure.

"Mother, listen. I've been back a while now. Several months."

"Several . . . months?"

"I've got a job. I work at a newspaper, writing stories."

"A newspaper?" Her mother twitched and spoke in a muddled voice as if she were chewing on wool. "One of those horrific rags, proclaiming the evils of the world? Dear, you are better than—"

"You approve, Mother."

The old woman's jaw tensed and then relaxed. "I approve."

"I've got to go out now. Business for the newspaper."

"Yes."

Jane let out a great breath of relief, started for the door, but turned. She leaned in close to her mother and said, "Who is my father?"

Her mother shook violently, doubled over as though a snake were twisting around inside her guts. "I-I-I cannot say! I cannot—"

"Never you mind, Mother." Some secrets were buried too deep for witchwater.

Jane put on her sturdy thick-heeled boots, threw the door open, ran into the stinking street, and bellowed as loud as she could, "I'm not mad!"

Horses, a herd of pigs, and men and women all turned toward her.

Jane yelled at all of them, "I'm not mad!"

"Oy, yeah, little bird. Sane folk, they bellow at me pigs all the time!" said a nearby swineherd.

Jane grinned at him. "I'm glad you agree."

She ran down the London street, dodging carriages and cattle, leaping over piles of horse dung and puddles. She just had to find the door and reach the Otherworld—and never be caught again.



It had all really started with the new doctor, five years ago. He'd entered the house, taken one look at Jane, and his eyes had widened. While her mother complained of Jane's hunger pangs and longing for rare beef, he looked in Jane's mouth, and, strangely, touched her teeth. And then stood up and changed Jane's life.

"In the interests of the girl, I think it's best we be frank. Jane's father was a vampire, was he not?"

"What?" Jane's mother replied. "I'll thank you not to spin fancies!"

"Madam," he'd said, "the Otherworld has been part of my trade for some time. I can tell you this is clearly Hecatian anemia." He smiled and patted Jane's leg.

"You mustn't believe the stories of vampires, dear. They won't turn you with a bite or change into bats. They're living creatures, same as you and I, though their hearts are notoriously shriveled and weak and beat but once a day." He turned and reached into his bag. "Now whilst they are notoriously secretive, I can tell you that a vampire does need to eat flesh, uncooked. I've got—"

That was when Jane's mother swatted him with her umbrella.

"Ow! Madam, I-"

"Out! Out of my house!" She beat at his face with the umbrella. "Take your heresies from this house! We fear God here!" Thump went the umbrella. "We fear God!"

For all that he fled the raging umbrella, he didn't go far. The next day, Jane went out to fetch a few flowers from the market, and a voice called from a nearby shopfront, "Jane."

The doctor stood there, holding a small stoppered bottle, smiling at her.

Young Jane had swallowed, found her gaze drawn to the bottle. There was something about it. "Mother says I'm not to mention you."

"Well, Adam got us all here by doing something he shouldn't. Don't you fret." He came forward, crouched next to her. "I've got to get back to Blackpool, but I've brought you something to put peaks in those cheeks."

"Is that blood?"

"Cow's blood. Thinned of course with water and a small amount of alcohol. The butcher at the Fields Market has been paid up for the month to supply you with such. Try some."

He unstoppered the flask.

Young Jane wanted to say no, to back away, run to her mother—but then the smell hit her, and she went dizzy. She'd always liked the smell of fresh beef, and this was like that but richer, intoxicating. She took a drink.

Strength flushed along her limbs immediately. Jane couldn't help it. She took a few more deep, filling draughts. For the first time, she didn't feel sickly. Her weariness, her dizziness, all replaced by a surge of energy. "Thank you, sir. It is—thank you!"

"I can't imagine what led your mother to take up with a vampire. Either he was an extraordinary fellow or . . . well, this is more germane to you." He handed her a slip of paper with an address on it.

"Your practice?" It was a strain to stop drinking long enough to ask the questions.

"A school. One more suited to you. I make a generous donation each year, so they should be quite willing to cover your first year's tuition. Perhaps your mother will be more pliable by then—easy, you'll choke!"

Jane gulped the rest of the drink, coughed, sprayed blood all over her chin. The doctor dabbed his handkerchief on her face with a laugh. "There, now you look a proper vampire!" His face grew serious. "Now remember, you mustn't consume human blood, merely livestock. One doesn't want to be put away as rabid."

"Yes sir." She sucked down more blood. "Yes of course."



That was how it started that magnificent day. Then three years at Guldenburg School in the Otherworld, learning the hidden world from goblins, fooling her mother into thinking she was at a private finishing school. Excursions into the wild wood and the City Beyond.

And then . . .

Then she'd become tired of secrets and confronted her mother. I know my father was a vampire, and I know you weren't assaulted, for a vampire would rather eat a human than violate her. Tell me, Mother. Who was he?

Her mother's normally strained smile vanished, and pink cheeks went pale. Promising to answer after tea, the damnable woman instead slipped laudanum into Jane's drink.

Jane had awoken to find herself pressed into bonds by her mother's churchmen, her mother sobbing, "She's gone mad, she's seeing fancies, she cannot be reasoned with!"

Never again.

Now, Jane ran down streets, cut across alleys, around carriages and herds of cows, ignored the cored-out feeling in her stomach. London grew dimmer, the gas lamps beginning to glow.

Jane was startled to see a green ring, drawn on the brick of a nearby building in chalk. Peering down the alley, Jane just made out a tiny golden keyhole set in the air. No human's eyes would have caught the sight.

"So quick! Oh my!" She lifted her skirts and trod into the alley, out of breath. There were a half-dozen doors to the Otherworld in London, but they moved around, and Jane had spent whole days wandering the city trying to find the

ring-symbols that would denote an entrance. "It's as they say," she said to herself. "Puckish luck comes to all who walk the City Beyond." And a moment later, "I shouldn't talk to myself. I'll sound mad."

There had been talk of a newspaper for the City Beyond London, just before she went to the asylum—a newspaper that paid in pounds sterling, not faerie gold.

A newspaper where she could work answering questions.

Jane gently pressed her finger against the floating keyhole.

The air shivered. A terrible screaming whistle like a thousand trains running at high speed echoed in Jane's ears. Jane stumbled backward as a round door appeared, the shape first and then the details. It was all metal, burnished and riveted.

Steel? In Faerie? Who would work with iron in a realm where it was poison? An impossible thing stuck its head through the door.

"Proper authorization?" It was a round, metal ball, riveted together with two glowing bulbs like gas lamps wired to its head—two gleaming gas lamps like eyes. Its automated voice rang, rumbled, all gears and mechanized clattering.

"Goodness me," Jane choked. "I come . . . I've come from ah, Guldenburg School, and I'll answer any riddle—"

"No riddles! Proper authorization needed." The voice was like a wounded dog's howl, mixed with the scratch of breaking charcoal. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but . . . I heard about a newspaper, and—"

"Ridley Door Co. respectfully denies your entreaty!" The door slammed back into place with a great clang, and the whole door shivered in the air and vanished.

"No!" Jane ran forward, trying to seize the door, and ran right through it. Glimmering motes hung in the air, the only traces of the gateway. "No! I need to get to the Otherworld! I need to find work not with humans. They think—" An ugly sob worked its way up Jane's throat. She fought it down. She would *not* cry, and she was *not* mad!

"Old Pedge still keeps his door. No metal men. In Regent's Park by and by."

A short man, dressed in a vivid green suit, stood at the end of the alley. It was difficult to make out the man's face, even though his hair seemed unusually bright—vivid shades of white and orange, dancing like flame.

"Oh, thank you, sir," Jane said. "You know of the City Beyond London then?"

But between two blinks, the fellow was gone.

Did I just imagine all that? Did I . . . oh, dear, am I still in the asylum? Am I having visions? Am I—

No. The smells of London were real. The filthy alley was real. And Regent's Park was merely a three-mile walk. "I'm not mad, and I'm not giving up."



Night and rain both increased in Regent's Park. She was soon enough soaked, walking the sports pitches and the horse paths, looking for anything that resembled a faerie ring, till a rough male voice shouted, "Oy, yeh mad bird, out of the way!"

Jane spun around. "I'm not mad! I'm not—" A small figure ran right around her.

Murgalak's Fun Human Facts

Humans worry a great deal about maladies of the mind and insanity. Historically, only a few wise humans have figured out that it is better to simply remove the offending head and grow a new one. We goblins do hope for the rest of them.

Despite the darkness, the figure bolted without pause as if he could see perfectly.

Despite his height, his deep voice rumbled like a man's.

Neither of which were entirely human traits.

She ran after him.

The short man stopped at a stand of trees, bent down, and touched

something on the ground. Jane just made it out now: a barely discernible ring of mushrooms, sprouted in the humus under that tree.

"Pedge! Open up, you! Well coopered, I am! Been a long night, but we've got your cheese."

Of course. Cheese. It made a pixie, a boggart, or a redcap drunker than all the whiskey in the world.

The short fellow was definitely an Otherworlder.

The air shimmered. The smell of a wild, windy heath came through the door. An uneven, spreading circle of warm light appeared in the air.

The Otherworld opened again. "Oh," Jane muttered, "this is the sort of door I recognize." She steeled herself.

A madgekin merchant stuck his head out of the circle of golden light, a great

hairy head, thickly mustached and without a nose but clad in great dark goggles. Two hairy, spidery legs reached out from Otherworld to human world. "Give it here."

The small figure replied, "Hand over the hoof and let us in, Pedge."

"The cheese first, gnome."

The short fellow was a gnome? What sort of gnome stole for a living?

"It's raining like Oberon's piss!" the gnome said. "I'm no leg. One shilling!"

The madgekin produced a dirty shilling and pulled the gnome through with one hairy arm.

Jane bolted. No time to ask about gnomes—or why fey creatures were now using human money. She ran to the shrinking circle of golden light that marked the door and leapt through.

She seemed to hang there, suspended for an eternal second. The smells were suddenly sharper: the cheese a distinct, rich curdled smell overlaid on the reek of spices too rich and dizzying for the human world. The light, deeper and brighter than the human world, enveloped her, warm like a blanket.

Then Jane crashed into the madgekin, bounced off him, tripped over the gnome, and as her first act in the Otherworld in a year, knocked over a stack of crates.

"Ow. Oh dear." Shaking her head to clear it, she opened her eyes to see a madgekin's lair, packed with human items, stacks and stacks of cloth and crates, boots, and barrels.

And a very angry madgekin standing over her: a great swollen furry creature clad in a vest and hat, one of its furry spidery arms raised, holding a cudgel, its golden eyes burning above thick mustachios.

"You never paid for passage!"

The gnome picked himself up off the ground and swore, muttering something about great clumsy vampires.

Jane stumbled to her feet. "I'll answer a riddle, sir, I'll—" She ducked the cudgel. "Please, I'll pay passage—"

"You'll pay, yeh suckabucket!" The madgekin swung the cudgel, again and again, and Jane danced away from it until she knocked over a pile of crockery that went crashing to the ground. "Git! Git!"

"Sir, I—" *Oh, bother this.* Jane bolted out of the madgekin's lair, stumbled through a stand of trees, and clambered up a rise to get away from the raging furry arms.

The sky came into view, the eternal twilight of the City Beyond, littered with smeared, flaming stars. She let out a great, heaving breath.

It was real.

She was home.

She wasn't mad, the witchwater had worked, she'd found a door, and she breathed at last the sweet, unreal air of—

She doubled over, hacking and coughing. Something burned, made her feel as though her lungs were coals. Jane coughed so hard that her vision burst with stars.

When her vision cleared, Jane's breath caught again, not from the air. And she realized she'd missed some things on first glance.

Smokestacks rose on the horizon.

They poured green smoke into the gray sky, obscuring the flaming purple stars. And below them, squared-off buildings made a row, just like those marking warehouses and mills. In the distance, more smokestacks and towering buildings, glowing with a light like gas lamps.

The gnome came around the corner. "You got old Pedge well in a hugger-mugger back there, miss. Best get scarce."

"What happened?" Jane whispered, staring at the horrid horizon. "What happened to the Otherworld?"

"You been away?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

The gnome made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a groan. "Progress got us too."

Chapter Two

In which the (un) Gnomish Spirit of our Gnome is Introduced and Many a Word is Said, some Shameful, some Shaming

HARLES THE GNOME BROKE OFF A CRUMB OF CHEESE AND HANDED IT TO the mad girl.

She ignored it, staring straight ahead, looking right heartbroken by the horizon.

Well, that was no surprise to anyone. The sight of Ridleyville, the collective warehouses and factories, was enough to make any Otherworlder spit. And he worked there every day.

Take today, when he would spend ten hours pouring the alchemical substances that captured seven leagues from the air and funneled them into seven-league boots—all so the rich could fly off to Paris.

"What happened?"

"The werewolves happened."

"Werewolves? What have werewolves to do with industry?"

"You heard of that old Malcolm Ridley fellow? What studied out his condition, grannied out how to be a wolf whenever he wanted?"

She frowned. "Oh yes. There were rumors in my last year of school. A rich man who could transform into the wolf at will and control his urges in said form by the help of potions."

"That's the dodger," Charles said. It made him angry just to say it. "Fellow bought up the whole Otherworld. A whole group of them, all werewolves and alchemists and humans who're in on the secret of the City Beyond. Found and shut down most madgekin doors. Pedge, back there, he squeaks by, but he's about the only one left, sitting on an unmonitored gate. They've made a right slap-bang job of it, factories turning out amulets and alchemical salves, shirts that won't rip or wear, seven-league boots, invisibility cloaks to sneak around on the missus. But we've got coin in our pockets."

"That's . . . that's mad!"

"We're all a bit mad now—"

"I'm not!" She turned a furious face on Charles. "I'm not mad!"

"Eh, of course not, miss. Sorry. We're all well on our chump." Mad as a boxed hare, this one.

She had yellow eyes like a vampire but faded, and her skin wasn't quite the full ashy gray of a true suckabucket.

Whatever the case, she weren't too awful-looking. Charles held up the last crumb of cheese. "I got a few minutes before work. Why don't we see what kind of fun there is to be had?"

Her glare was hot as cannon shot. "You forget yourself, sir. A gnome shouldn't—"

"Oy, then be on your way." Should've known. "A gnome shouldn't enjoy life? Shouldn't like a drink and a bricky lass?" Always they asked that. What kind of gnome are you? "You get any more huffy, you'll pop your corset."

"I am trying to find a newspaper office—"

"Cross the river. In the Towering Market. Off!"

She looked in the direction of the Black Fork, the river steaming with alchemical waste. "I suppose it costs a good bit to ferry the river," she said as though talking to herself.

Charles couldn't help it; he had a soft spot for the mad ones. He dug out the shilling Pedge had given him for the cheese. "Here now."

"What? I don't need—"

"That'll get you across the river. Get you something to fill the belly too."

Her lagging face softened. "Thank you, sir, and I'm sorry. I do not mean to seem ungrateful—"

"Off with yeh." Charles tromped in the other direction to work. This had better be a nice, uneventful day.



"Attention!"

The voice rang out from behind the iron gates of the workhouse.

"What's this now?" Charles's head snapped. They'd been waiting outside the factory, a full twenty minutes late. Down quota from yesterday too, a right rotten combination. He exchanged a confused look with the boggart to his right.

A human stepped out of the factory, walked up to the factory gates. The

human was dressed all in finery, crowned by a hatless head of red hair thinned with gray. On his lapel, a pin of a wolf worked in silver.

That's Malcolm Ridley himself, the old werewolf tycoon. The very swell Charles had been talking to that odd girl about, who owned

Progress is the great goal of humanity, and its pursuit tends to make most humans miserable. This confirms the well-known theory that humans are a kind of depressed ant.

half the Otherworld. What was he doing here? And why were the factory gates still closed?

Behind him, oddly enough, came a whole pack of gray-skinned, knobby-headed vampires.

Other Otherworlders crowded the outside of the gates as close as they could be without getting burned by wrought-iron. Charles went down on his belly and wriggled under a massive badgebear's legs until he could see.

Ridley spoke. "In the interests of progress, the Ridley family has come to an agreement with the vampire clans of the Otherworld. Left without any access to the human world, they starved. No ready supply of blood was available. Our alchemists have been hard at work on a substance that mimics blood, and I am pleased to say we have created an excellent replica that will satisfy their need for nutrition."

"We gotta work with suckabuckets now?" a badgebear grumbled.

"The vampires will take over the cotton mill and the seven-league boot line. Those of you who have an excellent work record will be reassigned. For now, please make your way to the Ridley Center for the Deserving Otherworld Poor—"

The crowd grumbled. Charles, forgetting himself, leaned so far forward that he touched the iron gate and swore, yanking himself away from the burning metal. "What is this?"

"I told you," the werewolf swell said. "Progress."

Charles couldn't say how it happened. He reached down to the paving stones, found a loose one, snatched it up. He could only think about that shilling he'd let go, his aunt and uncle and nephew waiting on Charles's wages to bring home dinner, and he lifted the stone and yelled, "We're being sacked!"

Charles threw the stone.

It shattered next to Malcolm Ridley.

The werewolf didn't move. Didn't move even when pixies shouted and flew up over the walls and fluttered at the vampires, tossing what few tiny rocks they could carry. Didn't move when a badgebear threw herself against the gate, growling and shaking it, ignoring the burn of the iron. Malcolm Ridley walked forward and said, cool as the sea, "I have called Iron Riders for those who will not go in order." His red sideburns bristled, grew longer, and his voice deepened, grew ragged and growling as a wolf's. "Best you run before I too get a hunger."

Iron-shod wheels rang on stone nearby.

Charles bolted. He ran around the side of the workhouse, toward the shore of the river and the hill to the shipping docks. He ducked into an alley between two warehouses, and his eyes widened.

Another worker hid in the alley next to him. A wood-nymph in a dress stained with the alchemical substances used to treat wood products.

"Charles?" she said, her voice trembling. "Oh, Charley, I knew it! I knew you would come back to me!"

"Hullo, Elmina," Charles said to his old flame. Backing away, he stopped himself just at the mouth of the alley. "Oy, and not a minute to talk. Shame."

"Charles, wait! You need me! I saw it in my roots! Now that you're quit of that hussy—"

Charles turned around to run and crashed right into a fellow—a human. They tumbled to the ground and down the hill with Elmina's voice echoing as she chased them, the sound of steel-shod wheels clattering over her wails.

"Excuse me, sir," the fellow said as he picked himself up, dusting off his fine linen trousers. He was dressed up, all cotton, a right square-rigged swell just like Ridley. "All is chaos and violence, but I'm trying to find Ridley Ent—"

"She'll know!" Charles said, and just as the fellow reached out a hand, Charles shoved him at Elmina.

Swell and wood nymph went down in a heap, him muttering, "Oof, so sorry, miss," and her wailing, "Wait, Charley!"

Charles nearly bolted until he noticed something had fallen from the fellow's

pocket. He picked it up. A heavy box of some sort of metal—but not iron as that would make his skin sizzle.

Charles turned the box over in his hands. A stylized *R*, the symbol of Ridley Manufacturing, had been emblazoned on the other side.

Some good news at last. Charles tucked the box inside his jacket pocket and muttered, "You'll get this back, swell, for buckets of coin!"

The fellow, trying to extricate himself from Elmina, couldn't answer.

Above, at the crest of the hill, glowing gas-lamp eyes appeared, and bulbous, spidery metal bodies on wheels. Like wheeled metal spiders, Iron Riders sprouted multiple arms, crackling at the ends with alchemical fire.

One hundred percent steel-forged iron. Ridley's enforcers.

Charles ran to the round hub of docks folks called Coins-Teeth. Ahead of him, a badgebear seized the crates destined for the ferries and threw them down on the pavement.

Charles scrambled through the fray, his short stature keeping him out of reach of most blows, and clambered up on the dock. It was all broken crates, drifts of sawdust and splinters, but come on, come on—

Charles seized a seven-league boot from a pile of packing sawdust. He felt around for its mate. And then the badgebear screamed, a great, high-keening roar.

Charles turned around to see the Iron Riders. One seized the badgebear in iron spidery arms. The badgebear's orange-black hide flashed green with the shock of alchemical fire, and then it fell, a smoking body, into the river shallows.

Another Rider clambered with its scuttling arms up the docks and, touching down, wheeled straight for Charles across the planks. Its gleaming lamp-eyes fixed Charles, and its spidery arms gleamed with alchemical fire.

Charles wedged himself into the single seven-league boot. "Away! Anywhere! Away dammit!"

Green fire crackled nearby, so close his beard smoked.

The seven-league boot launched him right up into the sky.

He careened like a madman through green smoke, beneath the twilight sky and the flaming stars. The whole of City Beyond gaped under him: the Black Fork, the river steaming green, the orderly warehouse streets of Ridleyville, and then the vast expanse of trees and vines and faerie lights that was the Choke, his home—

"No, too far, too far!" Charles yelled.

That only led him to spin faster. Charles sicked up the cheese, fragments of vomit flying through the air. The boot flew him down, spinning right toward a massive tree, in a vicious loop over and over, and Charles shouted, "Back, back, stop, stop—"

He crashed into a tree, bouncing through branches, off one great bough that rattled his bones, and thudded into a swath of grass, rolling a good ten paces across the ground.

"Bloody Puck's guts," Charles groaned. Everything hurt. "Bloody Puck's guts!" He spat out a thick wad of phlegm and muttered to the gnome god, not that the fellow listened. "I always heard gnomes were durable, but I'm not balmy enough to test it!"

Charles took a deep breath of the stinking air. Alive. Alive, and the Iron Rider with empty hands.

Alive and . . . full skint. No work.

"Whole game's a dodge!" he muttered, clambering to his feet. "Whole Otherworld barely gets by, all so alchemists and werewolves can have fancy parties! Seven-league boots for holidays! Invisibility cloaks to sneak around on the missus!" And here was Charles, no job, schooling unfinished, poor as Puck's donkey... and nothing else, except maybe his uncle.

Uncle.

Thinking of Riordan, Charles briefly wondered whether he could go back and beg forgiveness for starting a riot, get some more work in the factories.

Suppose it was too late for that once one threw a brick.

"Uncle," Charles breathed again. "Oy, this'll be the right end to the day."



Charles faced the massive, hoary oak where his family lived, its branches hanging over the Black Fork. It had taken three hours to find his way home through the wilderness of the Choke. The seven-league boot, as they did in time, had shrunk to fit in his palm, and Charles pocketed it next to the box.

He was bruised, scratched, had barely escaped a couple of hungry vines, but this he dreaded more than Iron Riders.

"Nothing for it." Charles started up the stairs.

His aunt Susan sat engrossed in her knitting—the glittering carded wool of a unicorn yak. Due to a leg injury, she couldn't work, and her blankets sold for only a few pence with the manufactured blankets to compete with. His little cousin George stared straight ahead, little black eyes intensely focused on the opposite wall. George had been working in a factory, but Charles had managed a few funds to send him to school two days a week.

And Uncle Riordan sat in his preferred chair, smoking his pipe, absorbed in his daily study of *The Gnome God's Reliable Prayer Book*. He glanced up at his nephew, frowned. "Charles, you're filthy. And home early."

Charles opened his mouth to say it and found he couldn't. "Ah, well, we're up quota and . . . I had a bit of a tumble in the Choke on the way out of work."

"Punctuality is the glorious sheen of reliability," Uncle Riordan quoted, one of his many aphorisms from the *Reliable Prayer Book*.

"George," Charles said, flopping down on a chair next to their small table. "Would you fetch your cousin Charles a bit to eat?"

"But Uncle Charles, I'm playing guard. I have to stand at my post till William gets back. I've been here four hours already."

Riordan put down the prayer book. "I stood at my post once for sixteen hours when I was your age, George."

"Really, Father? The best I've managed so far is six hours, but William says I'm getting better."

"Those heady days of childhood." Riordan gave his son a measured smile and turned his gaze back to Charles, and his eyes narrowed. "You've vomited, Charles! And what's this on your fist? Blood?"

"Ah, about that . . ." Charles swallowed. He couldn't say it was his own; gnomes had to go under a hacksaw before they'd even shed a drop. "Footpads, Uncle. I had to defend, and me stomach . . ."

"Heed not the flirtatiousness of untruth, you gnomes."

Charles couldn't say it. They needed his funds. Charles's factory pay came more reliably and at a higher wage than Riordan's servant pay, paid for George's schooling and the wool Susan needed.

"Do not tell me you were in a fight at work. Such a thing will little impress your employer and stinks of the lesser creatures who do not know reliability."

"I'm out me wages, Uncle." Charles put a hand to his mouth. Oh, blooming hell, he'd said it.

"What?" Susan said.

"For fighting?" Riordan said. "Charles, I told you there would be severe—"

"Whole factory was let go! The werewolves made up some kind of blood

mixture and are paying the vampires in it. Don't know what on earth it is, but the suckabuckets have my job now and not a shilling left, and I'm . . . I'm well sorry, Uncle." Charles self-consciously shoved his bloody hand under his trouser leg. "They didn't throw us out kindly."

Silence. Aunt Susan exchanged a glance with Riordan, their expressions troubled.

"I'll get you a meal, Uncle Charles," George said and left his self-appointed guard post. George returned with a plate of yellow eggs faceup and a few strips of liver turned distinctly green. "Liver and eggs, just as reliable as ever from our reliable kitchen, Cousin Charles."

"Thank you, George." Charles spooned the liver and eggs in his mouth, trying to ignore the fact that the liver had gone green lately.

They needed a new enchantment on the oven, and he'd been planning to cover the cost. That wouldn't happen now either.

"Charles, come with me," Riordan said, standing. He walked out the door, along the branches of the great tree in the gleaming green light that steamed off the river. "We must talk."

"Oh, thirteen hells," Charles whispered to himself and followed his uncle.

Riordan waited on an upper branch of the tree, the Black Fork steaming green below him. Pixies littered the branches below their perch, giggling, tossing bits of cheap fake cheese made of milk and straw at each other. Faerie lights drifted up from the pixies, illuminating the dour creases in Riordan's face.

"Charles, what am I to do with you?"

Charles slumped down against the tree and didn't look at his uncle. "Oy, Uncle, I've a sour chivvy already. And it en't me fault!"

"Truly? You mean you were forced to engage in fisticuffs and given no hope of future work?"

It hurt how easily Riordan saw the truth. Charles could have followed the werewolf swell's rules and still had some hope of a wage. But there'd been a brick there, and he'd picked the thing up . . .

Riordan raised his face to the heavens as if making sure the gnome god heard. "To think I brought you to London to be a clergyman. To finish school, Charles! The clergy would have given purpose and direction to this fire of yours, employed it in the service of the gnome god in His Eternal Reliability. Here you are, school incomplete, a year into your work, your future traded for pliable women and cheese?"

"It's me hot head," he said weakly.

"God gave you the agency He has given every other creature."

Riordan was right. No one forced him to pick up the brick or to toss it. His hot head hadn't forced Charles to chase the ladies and skive off his schoolwork till he flunked out.

"The reliable gnome can stand at the center of a forest fire and only take a bit of char. The less reliable will burn away in the fire of passion." Riordan stepped past Charles. "I must go to work. Mister Eddington will attend a party and requires additional help. I was going to ask you to accompany me. It would be well for you to acquire some experience as a manservant; I am too old to acquire a full butler's position, but you might yet do so and earn far better wages than manufacturing. Now, I think your evening would be better spent in prayer."

Charles stumbled to his feet, nearly falling out of the tree with haste as Riordan walked away. "Wait . . . Uncle. Hang on. I'll go with you. We need the wages. I'll compose myself reliably. I swear it on the gnome god."

"You need not swear by Providence, for Providence is reliable without provocation," Riordan quoted.

"Right," Charles said. "Let me come."

Riordan's dour face, lit bright green by the river below, softened. Charles thought he saw something, a ghost of the hope his uncle'd once had for him. "Both my suits are hanging. Take the spare and use pins to account for size. Wash well." He started back toward the house and stopped, pivoted slowly to give Charles the most disapproving look he'd ever seen from under that wrinkled brow. "This is the last test, Charles."

"Aye," Charles said. "Where's this party, Uncle?"

"Ridley Manor."



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