

Oh Human Child

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"It was a fairy." Jacob pulled the aluminum baseball bat out of his closet and laid it across his bed.

"What?" Tyler looked up from the comic book. He wasn't reading it, he was just sort of holding it awkwardly. He did a lot of things awkwardly, if you wanted to be painfully honest. Dropping trays in the lunch room, never showing up on time, always saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Right now he was pretending to read the same comic he'd been pretending to read when he'd heard about Jacob's parents' divorce a few weeks ago. He hadn't offered a comforting word, he hadn't offered a shoulder to cry on, he'd just pretended to be very absorbed in what he (wasn't) reading, hating himself and wishing he knew what to say.

"A fairy took my brother." Jacob, on the other hand, was fairly popular at school. He was smart without being brainy, athletic without being a total jock. What impressed Tyler most of all was the way he could talk to girls like it wasn't a big deal.

Tyler didn't know how to respond. He'd been feeling awkward, and sweaty, and overweight - even more so than usual - since hearing the news. His skin felt flushed and his scalp itched. He felt like a big dumb heel - Jacob was his best (only) friend, and he had no idea what to do or say or what was expected of him.

After Jacob's mom had let Tyler in, his friend hadn't said a word, so Tyler had defaulted to standing around, making half-hearted attempts to spur conversation, having second-thoughts about the sleep-over their parents had arranged. They'd eventually settled into an uncomfortable silence, broken only when Jacob started talking about fairies.

"My mom said that your mom said that the cops said-"

"No." The certainty of the word stopped Tyler cold. "A fairy took him."

"He was kidnapped?" The words escaped in a conspiratorial whisper. Echoes of parental warnings to avoid weird old men in cars came flooding back to Tyler, a dread of strangers that had evolved into a distrust of adults in general. Not that, in his experience, kids his own age could be trusted much further.

"Taken. Sort of." Jacob floundered a little, as if looking for the right words.

Tyler averted his gaze, embarrassed and not even knowing why. It had always unnerved Tyler a little just how clean Jacob's room was. It went beyond the "a place for everything and everything in its place" mantra that his own father espoused; Jacob's room practically had a stark un-lived-in sparseness to it. What few toys he kept were placed neatly on his shelves, his clothes were hung neatly in the closet rather than strewn across its floor, and his bed was always made. It just... weirded Tyler out a little.

"Why did your mom say-"

"I couldn't tell her." Jacob's turned away quickly, kneeling to pull a wooden cigar box out from under his bed. "Just like I couldn't tell my dad, or the cops, or anybody. Maybe Gran. I'm taking a risk here telling you." He glanced up from the box. "I swear to god if you laugh I will never talk to you again."

"No, no, I believe you."

"Gran left this to me." Jacob opened the box and pulled out a necklace with a small Celtic knot-work pendant. "Okay, so. The fairy came around last night. Calling. Singing to Ethan. I don't know what else. It was like... you remember that old movie your brother made us watch? The one with the aliens? Where, like, the one dude couldn't move but like he knew they were all around him?"

"Communion." Tyler shuddered. It had given him nightmares for weeks.

"Yeah. It was like that. I could hear it whispering, and I could hear Ethan talking, but I couldn't move or get up or even scream. Like, I could try to scream, but all that'd come out is a whisper."

"Aliens kidnapped your brother?"

"What? No, that's dumb. It was a fairy. Gran used to tell me stories about them, old stories that her gran had told her - about how they'd do chores for milk, pull tricks on people they didn't like, and how sometimes... sometimes they'd take kids."

Oh, Tyler thought. A FAIRY fairy. Understanding what Jacob meant made things both better and worse. He grew quiet and still again, not sure exactly what to do or how to react to his best friend admitting a belief in mythological creatures. His eyes flickered to the comic he'd left on Jacob's desk.

Jacob set his jaw. "You don't believe me."

"Well..."

His friend shook his head. "That's okay. I didn't think that they were real either, not until last night. Then the fairy showed up, and I started remembering all the stories Gran would tell me."

Tyler's hand edged towards the comic.

"You're gonna help me anyway, right?" Jacob grabbed his arm, his eyes pleading. "You'll stick by me. That's what friends do, even if they think their friends are crazy."

"I don't think you're crazy."

Jacob gave a weak half-smile and slipped the necklace over his head.

"Is that, like, an anti-fairy necklace?"

"No, it just... it reminds me of Gran, and it makes me feel better."

"Do you think it's going to come back?" Tyler wasn't sure he believed in fairies, but if he did he was pretty sure he was afraid of them. He was having third-thoughts about this sleepover.

"No reason for it to. We're too old. They only like to take little kids."

"Oh, good."

"We're going to go out and get Ethan back."

Sneaking out was easier than Tyler had expected. Jacob's parents were exhausted and distracted from the worry over their younger son, enough that they scarcely paid attention to the older.

An hour after the adults had gone to bed and Tyler had started to hope that his friend hadn't been serious about the whole "going to rescue Ethan from the fairies" thing, Jacob climbed out of bed and shook him to make sure he was awake. Wordlessly Jacob tossed him his coat, zipped his own up, and the pair slipped out into the cold winter's night.

The boys' breath fogged into small clouds as they walked their bikes slowly and through the streets, the crunch of their tires in the snow the only companion to Tyler's heavy breathing. Their families lived in an unincorporated suburb, mostly filled with unsold and uninhabited identical pastel-colored model homes scattered throughout a largely wooded area. Plenty of room for a six-year-old to wander off and get lost in. A part of Tyler hoped that the whole fairy thing was true - Ethan had been missing for a freezing sixteen hours.

"Okay, we're far enough." Jacob climbed onto his bike, and Tyler followed suit. His was an older bike - his brother's hand-me-down - and while it still rode fine, its rusted chain was unfortunately loud, and the last thing the boys wanted was to wake Jacob's parents.

"What's the plan?" Hushed as it was, Tyler's voice sounded enormous in the still night.

"We look for a fairy mound. Or some standing stones. Gran said that clover or mushrooms in a circular pattern were also signs of Fairy, but it's winter, so I think a mound or stones are a better bet."

"What's a fairy mound?"

"It's like a hill. I think. Fairies live underneath it."

The pair gazed around at the vast emptiness of the woods on either side of the road for a few moments before Tyler spoke up again. "What about the Bridge?"

In the dark of winter's night the old cobblestone and mortar bridge definitely looked like something out of a fairy tale, and lit by moonlight it was very easy to think of the woods surrounding it as an enchanted forest. The stream it had been built over had long since dried up save for a thin trickle in the late spring and early fall. In mid-winter it was completely barren, leaving the bridge a strange anachronistic monument in the middle of a gravel-paved bicycle trail.

The boys crossed it swiftly, glancing over its sides into the ditch below.

Jacob left his bike at the far end, scrambling down the side of the ditch to the stream's bed, Tyler slipping down after.

The span under the bridge was a short passage of dark earth, shielded from moon and snow, littered with junk. The boys had - in happier daylight hours - played on and around the bridge, but Tyler had always refused to venture underneath, citing a fear of spiders. He hesitated only a moment before following Jacob underneath, instinctively crouching low to avoid even brushing against webs or eggs or whatever spiders might be able to last the winter.

"Did you grab a flashlight?" he asked.

Jacob shook his head, moving slowly over the unseen ground.

Tyler followed, mindful of the junk that had been stashed under the bridge. The old mattresses, rusted broken bikes, unsalvageable car parts, and assorted trash sort of ruined the fairy-tale atmosphere, and he felt a bit silly.

"Who's dat trip trappin' unner ma bridge?" The gravelly voice seemed to fill the dark space, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

Tyler felt his heart stop. He instinctively turned to bolt back into the safety of the open woods, foot tangling in a coil of something unseen and sending him crashing to the frozen earth, even as Jacob flattened himself against the bridge's structure.

"Eh? Who's dat? Trip trappin'?" Old and hoary, the voice sounded like steel stumbling on whiskey-soaked breath over rotten teeth.

Something large shifted in the darkness.

"You-" Jacob's voice caught, but he steadied himself and the grip on his bat. "You the fairy that took my brother?"

"What? Who you callin' a faerie?" the voice growled, and Tyler found himself trying to scramble to his feet again, only to get tangled up in whatever it was he'd tripped over in the dark. "I ain't no faerie, yer a faerie. Imma troll, and yer unner ma bridge!"

A light was struck, small in the dark, and across the span of the under-bridge Tyler found himself staring at what he first took to be a homeless drifter lighting a cigar. As the match-light neared its face he was horrified and fascinated to see no withered flesh, but rather a collection of junk and garbage, formed into the crude facsimile of a man's face. The hands that held the match and the cigar were rather rusted rivets and pipe held together with coiled wire.

"Oh, what the hell." Tyler was frozen, his hands stopping in their efforts to free himself.

"Yeah, whadda hell ya doing unner ma bridge?" The troll waved the match to extinguish it, and the darkness returned save for the cherry-red butt of his cigar.. "Ya come bustin' in unner here, tonight of all nights, an' 'm gonna hava eat ya just on principle. Ain't nuffin' personal, kid."

"Shit!" Tyler squeaked, cold hands pulling at the coils tightening around his ankles.

They began to drag him in the direction of the voice in the darkness.

"Ain't nuffin' personal," the voice repeated. "Don' worry, I ain' really gon' eatcha. Jes' chew yer up a bit. Don' really got nuffin' to digest wit, see?"

"Stop!" Jacob shouted.

"Rules is rules." The Troll sounded almost apologetic. "Comes unner my bridge at da Solstice, an' I gots to eats it. 'S tradition."

Jacob stepped into the darkness, swinging his bat in a wide arc. "I said stop!"

Tyler could hear the aluminum connect with something that wasn't entirely solid, powerfully enough to elicit a cry of pain from the Troll.

He felt the coils around his ankle loosen, and he scrambled away. He could see Jacob as he kept swinging at the darkness.

The bat was ripped from his friend's hands as sharp rusted wire slithered up Jacob's legs like snakes, pulling him off of his feet and sending him crashing to the ground. Half of a car's transmission swung at Tyler as he neared the edge of the under-bridge, knocking him painfully back to the ground with a thud.

"Yer come unner MY bridge on DIS night an' attacks me?" the troll's voice thundered, reverberating from the earth and stone.

Jagged shards of metal formed themselves into a gaping maw at the far edge of the bridge, and the wires started pulling Jacob towards them.

"Let us go! We're just looking for my brother!" Jacob screamed.

"Yer brudder? Hrm." The wires stopped pulling on the boy. "I hadda brudder once. Why you fink yer brudder gonna come unner my bridge?"

Jacob struggled, but while the wires had stopped pulling him forward, they hadn't let him go. "Something - a fairy - came and took him last night."

"Wann't me. I can't leave my bridge. Not even tonight. Not without good reason." The coils loosened around Jacob. "You... you're a good brudder. Brave. My brudder was a good brudder too."

Jacob stumbled back, away, joining Tyler as they ran out from under the bridge.

"Ya find yer brudder. Ya takes care of him. I'm letting ya go, and I don't gotta, so that's a favor, gots it? You pays me back by taking care of yer brudder." The voice was fading as the boys bolted out under the open sky, clawing their way up the side of the ditch back to the path. "Ask the crone. She might know."

"What's a crone?" Tyler asked.

"S' like a witch. I think."

Tyler lay alongside Jacob in the snow, waiting for his breathing and heartbeat to slow before speaking again. An occasional snuffle escaped his nose, his jacket and jeans were torn, and as the adrenaline left his system it was replaced by a coldness that seeped up from the ground and into his bones. He sat up, looking at the bridge in the distance before turning to his friend.

"Are we going to follow the Troll's advice?"

"I don't have any other ideas."

"So... the Witch House?"

"Yeah."

There were lots of stories about the witch house. According to Tyler's brother Mike, it had been owned by a group of Satanists who used to do rituals there, involving the sacrifice of black cats every Halloween. Someone else had told them that they heard it had been owned by a crazy rich guy back during the depression, who had built a special room to talk to the dead. A third popular rumor was that the place was a secluded meeting spot for a secret group of the weirdos to play out their sick and twisted fantasies on kidnapped people. All the different stories agreed on a few common elements - a police raid, a fire, and that sometimes... sometimes... the witches/dead people/rich sickos would come back for more.

Tyler relayed all three stories to Jacob as they walked their bikes over to it. You know, in case he'd forgotten and wanted to change his mind.

He didn't.

Sitting at the end of a long overgrown gravel drive it wasn't much to look at, but as Tyler started towards it he could feel the weight of its tragic history. The fire part was obviously true - little remained standing of the property in the woods besides the foundation of an old swimming pool and some floor tiles. Random bricks littered the field that had grown up where the property had been, and if you didn't know where it was, you would just walk by the lot on your way past it. Tyler had been there twice - the first time, when Mike had showed a group of the younger kids the place a year ago, and again on a dare on Halloween after trick-or-treating.

It was the most heroic thing Tyler had ever done. He'd won half of Jacob's candy, and he hoped a little bit of his respect.

This visit was worse. The encounter with the troll had Tyler's mind all twisted up. He'd been scared on Halloween, yeah, but it was more of a 'fun' scare, like a horror movie or a haunted house. Now, though - that thing, that troll had been real. He'd felt it. It'd hurt him. And if it was real, then the witches (or ghosts or rich weirdos) were probably real, too. He could feel their eyes watching him as he and Jacob crossed the weed-choked grounds towards the pool.

"You! Boys! What are you doing out so late?"

Tyler almost dropped his bike and ran before he recognized the voice as belonging to Mrs. Sonja, the old woman whose property abutted the Witch House's. She was his favorite neighbor - every fall she'd make maple candy that she'd sell on-line to people all over the country, and Jacob and Tyler always served as her 'test subjects'. It was startling to see her coming out of the woods in a jacket and her dressing gown.

Jacob glanced at Tyler before responding. "We're... we're looking for Ethan."

Mrs. Sonja's expression softened a little, and she strode up to the boys, hands in the sleeves of

her jacket.

"Well, he's not here. This was one of the first places the police checked. And you shouldn't be here either. Not tonight of all nights."

She swept by the boys, frail but firm hands placing an insistent pressure on their backs, guiding them back towards the overgrown drive.

"Why not tonight? What's tonight?" Tyler asked, remembering something similar the troll had said.

"The Solstice?" Jacob asked.

"Yes." Mrs. Sonja slowed, sounding surprised. "Mary told you about the solstice?"

"No. Not Gran. It was... someone else."

"A troll." Tyler ignored the pained look Jacob gave him.

Mrs. Sonja stopped in her tracks, turning the boys to face her. Her pale eyes bored into Tyler's. "A troll. Down at the bridge? You went there?"

Tyler nodded.

"You... you know about the troll?" Jacob asked.

Mrs. Sonja's gaze flickered over the boys, taking in the dirt, the mussed hair, their torn clothes. "You'd better come inside. I can't send you home to your parents looking like that."

Under the fluorescent lights of Mrs. Sonja's bathroom everything looked much much worse. Tyler had had a nose-bleed, and his arms and legs were covered with tiny scratches, visible once the mud had been washed away.

"Am I going to need a tetanus shot?" he asked as he rejoined Jacob and Mrs. Sonja in the kitchen, drawn by the scent of the hot chocolate boiling on the stove.

"It would be a good idea.. Now boys, tell me about the troll."

"Under the bridge," Jacob began. "He... he let us go when he found out we were looking for Ethan. Said something about a crone."

Mrs. Sonja's face puckered.

"That's why we went to the Witch House. Do you know what it meant?"

"I know some things. Your Gran knew some things, too."

"She didn't know about the Troll."

"This isn't the Ireland of her girlhood, or my own grandmother's Croatia for that matter." Mrs. Sonja poured the hot chocolate from its saucepan into mugs for the boys. "But all the same, the Fae are real. At least, some nights they're real. More real than others. Why did you think the troll had taken Ethan?"

"I heard him. Or something. Some other faerie whispering and singing to Ethan, and I couldn't move. Then it was morning and he was gone."

A look of deep sadness came over Mrs. Sonja's face.

"Oh, Jacob, I'm so sorry. Something came and took your brother, but it wasn't a troll. They don't take children, unless the children wander into their territory. No, if something came and stole Ethan from his bed, it wasn't a troll."

"Then what took my brother?"

"I don't know. Not yet. But I can help you find out. Wait here."

Tyler took a long sip of his hot chocolate as he watched her go. "I think that Mrs. Sonja is the crone," he shared in a conspiratorial whisper.

"No shit, Sherlock."

The old woman returned, handing Jacob a small metal tin. "This is faerie ointment. The Fae are all around us, Jacob, but most of the time we can't see them. Certain nights - like the solstice - they have a stronger physical presence, and can even cross over and affect our world. Like the troll."

"Like what took my brother." Jacob unscrewed the lid, wrinkling his nose at the smell of the cream it held.

"Like what took your brother. If you take this cream and smear it on your eyes, you'll be able to see the Fae in their true form. And not just tonight, but all nights, and all days."

His brow furrowed as he looked dubiously into the tin. "...On my eyes?"

"On your eyes. You'll be able to see the Fae and their works, and with that, you can see what took Ethan."

Tyler put his mug aside and spoke up. "Can you go to the cops? Or Jacob's parents? Explain things for us?"

"Explain what? You're out on your own this late because they wouldn't believe you if you tried to explain it to them. They can't. And they can't believe me, either. Faeries and Trolls and such don't fit into the world that most people want to believe they live in. If a child challenges that belief they write it off as an overactive imagination. If an adult challenges it - well, let's just say that most people aren't so charitable."

"I have to save my brother," Jacob spoke gravely, lifting the tin. "Nobody else will."

"I have two warnings for you before you make that choice," Mrs. Sonja seemed almost reluctant to bring them up. "First, if you use the ointment you can see them, but they'll know it. They'll know that you can see them, and they can affect you more than they can affect other people. A *domovoi* in someone's kitchen might make them accidentally drop a pot or pan, or knock a plate off the table, but if you put that ointment on they will be a part of your world - and you a part of theirs. Secondly, this is permanent. There's no going back. This will change your life forever. You need to ask yourself, Jacob - is saving your brother worth giving up any chance at a normal life yourself?"

"Yes." Jacob didn't even hesitate, slathering his fingers before rubbing them into his eyes. "Oh god it stings."

"I'm sure it does," Mrs. Sonja replied dryly.

"Tyler, I can't ask you to-"

"Oh god it burns." Tyler whimpered, putting the tin back onto the table. "It's like jalapeno. In my eyes."

"Don't be such a baby," Jacob replied, but Tyler could hear the gratitude in his voice, and that made it worthwhile.

"It won't sting for long, but you should get a move on. The Solstice ends at sunrise, and you need to find Ethan before then."

Jacob squinted towards the sound of Mrs. Sonja's voice. "I thought this stuff would fix my eyes for good?"

"It is permanent - but after sunrise, Ethan will be trapped in the Faerie lands. You'll be able to see him, but getting him out is another matter entirely. So don't delay."

Jacob blinked a few more times before zipping up his jacket. "Come on, Tyler."

"I still can't see!"

"Give it a second."

The outside world was a blur of light and dark, black shapes that must have been trees against a snowy background. The boys found their bicycles, walking them along the road, squinting while their vision slowly returned. Shapes moved through the world all around them, on all sides, flitting things that moved through snow-drifts and leapt from tree to tree, always just out of sight. As fast as Tyler turned, he couldn't seem to get one in his field of vision for more than a moment, and when he slipped and almost fell a tinkling laughter of tiny bells reached his ears.

"There. Look."

Jacob pointed towards the distance, where a glow had spread along the horizon.

"Oh, shit, is it sunrise?"

"What? No, it's like three in the morning. Something... something's happening there."

"Should we check it out?"

"I don't have any better ideas."

The pair hopped on their bikes, riding them down the street towards one of the scattered subdivisions, where the wooded areas gave way to neat lawns, clean white fences, and real-estate agency signs. On a small cul-de-sac, one of the model homes - believed empty and uninhabited - shone with a golden light from every opening. As the boys drew nearer, they could hear a strange music from within, and see shadowed figures moving in front of the windows. Footprints led from the street towards the front door. Large ones, small ones, human, animal, shod, and barefoot. The boys left their bikes by the side of the garage and walked up to the front door, baseball bat in Jacob's hand.

"Should we knock?" Tyler asked.

Jacob shook his head, turning the knob and opening the door. Slightly blurry as their eyes still were, the light from inside was initially blinding to the boys, Jacob shielding his face with an arm while Tyler looked away. Slowly, gradually they managed to see inside, awe and wonder visible on their faces.

What should have been the model house's living room had somehow become a vast hall of stone and marble, decorated with rich velvet tapestries. Tyler took a quick look inside, then craned his neck back to compare it to the outside of the house, obviously too small to contain the grand hall before them.

The hall stretched off into the distance, lit not by electric bulbs or flaming sconces, but by globes of ambient light that seemed to hover like hummingbirds at every pillar. In the center of the hall lay a long banquet table, and Tyler found his mouth watering at the delicious smells wafting over to the doorway.

Even more fantastic than the hall were the creatures inhabiting it. The room was filled with faeries of every shape and size, from those that looked almost-human to those that didn't even look like living things until they turned to look in your direction. Tiny insect-winged pixies flitted about, overhead or through the crowd, while satyrs' hooves clattered on the stone floors. Human-sized rabbits

in waistcoats mingled with tall, lanky giants, stooped to converse, long graceless arms dragging along the floor. The Fae talked and chattered and ate and mingled, occasionally glancing over at the pair of humans staring, wide-eyed, through the doorway.

"Come in come in come in or go out; it's rude to leave the door open like that!" The voice came, high and tinny, from a rushing gnome that stopped barely long enough to spit them out before rushing off again.

Giving each other one final glance the boys stepped across the threshold and into the room.

"See if you can spot Ethan," Jacob whispered.

Tyler nodded, and the pair split up. He stepped past spider-limbed reptiles, hobos with cat ears, and plant people with frond-like teeth. There was, Tyler was embarrassed to note, a common theme of toplessness among the female whatever's, and before long the he had seen more bare breasts than he had in his entire prior life. His face red and flushed, eyes fixated on a point above most revelers' heads, he almost tripped over a pale blue girl sitting on a stool.

She, thankfully, was wearing a shift that covered her chest.

"Careful there - oh, a human!"

"Uh, yeah. Yes," he stammered, managing not to stare down her shift. Mostly.

A broad grin crossed the faerie's face. "I'm Jenny. A Sprite. We don't see many humans in places like this."

"I'm a human. I mean, I'm Tyler. We're uh... looking for my friend's brother. He... he was taken? Sorry, I'm not good with girls."

"Aww. Why not?"

"They... uh, they make me nervous?"

The sprite's grin broadened in a way that made Tyler acutely uncomfortable. He kept talking to try and distance himself from it. "They don't like me."

"I like you just fine."

"Real... I mean, human girls. The ones in my classes? They don't like me."

"Why not?"

"Well. Because I'm sort of awkward. And fat. And weird."

"Those are silly reasons not to like someone."

"I sweat when I eat, I wheeze when I run, I'm always late to class, and I tend to ramble on incoherently whenever I try and talk to a pretty girl."

The sprite laughed the sound of bells. "Human girls sound stupid. I'm sorry that you're so sad, Tyler."

"I'm not sad."

"Yes you are. I'm sorry." The sprite switched from mercurial laughter to the verge of tears herself. "The human world is so very cruel. Look around you - look. Do you think faeries care if someone is fat or shy or stinky or talks funny?"

"You think I talk funny?"

"Focus, Tyler. I'm saying that to us, it doesn't matter if you do. We care about someone's insides, and you seem like a very interesting human."

"Gee, thanks!" Tyler beamed at what seemed like the nicest thing anyone had ever said about him.

He snatched a grape off of a nearby platter and popped it into his mouth, oblivious to how the sprite's smile widened just a little bit further.

Jacob, meanwhile, had been making his way through the crowded room, along the side of the table. It was almost ridiculously long, and layered with a wide variety of delicious looking foods, but he remembered his Gran's warnings about eating anything offered by the Fae and kept his hands to himself. He barely noticed the way that the crowd parted ahead of him and reformed behind him, or the way that they were very carefully not paying any attention to him, the strange human in their midst. When he reached the head of the table he found a thin and elfin man wearing a crown of laurels sitting in a plush throne, a young boy sitting in his lap.

"Ethan!" Jacob cried, rushing towards his brother. The elf shifted his brother to the chair's armrest and stood, tall and thin, rigid like iron.

"Welcome, human child, to my table," he spoke with a steady syrup voice that seemed to physically wriggle into the Jacob's ears.

There was a certain dark regality to the elf's posture. It was almost painful looking up at him, his flawless skin, too-perfect teeth, impeccably coiffed hair. The elf's turquoise eyes seemed to simultaneously pierce through Jacob, and to slide over him as inconsequential. The boy felt very plain and dirty next to him.

Ethan looked up, slowly, eyes half-lidded, managing a slow wave towards his brother before turning his attention back to the plate of cookies in front of him.

The sight of his younger brother snapped Jacob out of his momentary daze. "Let my brother go!"

"Your brother is free to go at any time he chooses," the elf gestured. "Just as you are free to stay - should you so desire."

Jacob frowned. His Gran had told him that the fair folk were tricky, and not to be trusted.

"So I can just take him and leave?"

"He can go. If he so chooses."

Something about the way the elf put it set Jacob on edge, and he slowly advanced towards his brother. The elf backed respectfully away, long arms folded unnaturally behind his back.

"Come on, Ethan. Let's go home."

"No," Ethan sighed, looking up. "Want to stay."

"Dude, I think he's drugged." Tyler emerged from the crowd to rejoin his friend.

"Drugged?" the elf laughed, a sound that echoed through the watching crowd, growing louder and less friendly as it was passed along. "No, no drugs. Ethan has spent the last day in Avalon, the world of my people. A land of joy, of dancing, of merriment, of eternal youth and eternal play. There's no sickness, no war, no bed-times, and no punishment. He may be a bit tired, but I assure you that his desire to stay is natural."

"But it's not real!" Jacob shook his bat. "It's not the real world."

"Real?" the elf said. "Let me speak unto you of this 'real' world you seem so enamored of. Sorrow is real. Pain. Suffering. In the real world, your parents are getting a divorce. In the real world, Tyler is bullied, picked on, taunted because of his weight and his inability to kick a ball. In the real world, grandmothers die and friends move away. Tell me then – what is it of the real world that you hold so dear?"

"It's... it's real!" Jacob shouted. "Life isn't supposed to be easy. It's not supposed to be. Life is hard, and life is painful, and that's just what it is. All you're talking about - it's all just pretending that life doesn't suck."

The elf turned away from Jacob with a mock yawn that drew additional titters from the assembled Fae. He gave them a wink as he sat sideways along the table. "Oh, I do think you're losing your audience, human child."

"I don't care. I don't care about them, and I don't care about you. I'm taking my brother and going home."

Jacob advanced again, halting as the elf swung himself off of the table, interposed before his brother. "It's Not That Simple," he intoned. "As I said, I cannot keep your brother here, and you cannot force him to go. It is his choice."

"His choice?" Tyler asked. "But he's just a little kid!"

"That's a rule of the Real World," the elf wagged a finger at him. "Faerie has its own laws. You would do well to learn that, if you are to stay with us."

"Nobody's staying," Jacob growled, advancing with his bat raised. The elf stepped out of his way again, bowing slightly. Jacob glared as he walked past, up to his brother. "C'mon Ethan, time to go."

"No. Wanna stay."

Jacob tucked the bat under his arm and stooped to pick his younger brother up. He strained for a moment, adjusted his grip, and tried again. The boy seemed stuck to the chair, while the elf laughed gaily at his efforts.

"Let him go!"

"I told you, it's not me keeping him here." A tone of annoyance had crept into the elf's voice. "Are you simple? Deaf? I told you. It's his choice to stay or go."

"Bullshit. You're keeping him here with your magic!"

"My magic?" the Faerie laughed. "Faerie magic can do many things, but all men have free will. Even foolish little boys. My glamours can convince, they can seduce, they can trick - but they cannot compel."

"Come on, Ethan," Jacob turned back to his brother, a note of pleading creeping into his voice. "Come on. Mom and Dad are worrying about you. They called the police. They want you home."

"No!" Ethan shouted, slapping a hand on the table. "They don't care. They don't care about our family, because of the divorce. How 'bout you stay with me, Jacob? Stay here with me. Just us. We don't need mom and dad here, the fairies take care of us."

"They care! It's... just that..."

"It's okay, Jacob," the elf said. "It's okay to be upset. It's okay to be angry. Your parents are just being selfish. They don't care about how their disagreements affect you, or your brother, or how hard it will be on you to choose between them. They just care about making things easier on themselves. It's not fair."

"Not fair! Stay with me?" Ethan asked, smiling. "There's cake. And pie. And ice cream all the time. And funny faeries."

"Ethan..." Jacob raised his hands again, weakly, then let them drop to his sides.

"The child has made his choice, Human," the faerie spoke gently. "You have as well, even if you're having difficulty admitting it to yourself. I suggest you go - time moves differently here, and the sun will be up soon. If you remain beyond dawn, you will remain until the next Solstice - and perhaps well beyond that."

Defeat in his every movement, Jacob turned to Tyler. "Come on. Let's go."

There was a sudden explosion of air as the front door slammed open. Heads, human and otherwise, swiveled to see a collection of junk - old tires, rusted car parts, rebar, and copper wire - shuffle itself through the door. "I Objectify!" came a voice like screeching metal as the troll raised itself up into a vaguely humanoid shape in the doorway.

"Troll!" The elf seemed genuinely surprised. "How is it that you have left your bridge, even on this night of nights?"

The troll shambled into the hall, bits of trash falling off in clumps. The assembled Fae host backed away from it in concern and disgust.

"I gots a claim! I'm allowed to travels when I gots a claim!"

"So the ancient laws say. What is this claim, then, that you would intrude on your betters?"

The troll drew itself up into an impressive height and leveled a rusted-screw finger at Jacob and Tyler. "Dese boys! Dese boys owes a boon. A favor I give dem in allowing dem to leave my domain uneaten, and dey say they offer me a favor, and dey not gimmie da favor!"

"Interesting. You do get around, Jacob." The elf sat, chin in hand, while a wave of gossip flushed through the crowd of fae. "And you want... what, to take them back to your bridge and eat them?"

"No! No. Wants ma boon. Wants what dey owes me."

"Very well. Take what is owed, and go. I find you unseemly."

"Yeah, I'm unseemly an all dat." The animated trash heap's head flexed into what might have been a grin. It stalked up to Jacob and Tyler and seemed to size them up before turning to Ethan. "Time-a-go, runt."

With a swoop and a flourish the trash heap picked Ethan up off the ground, turned, and thrust the child into Jacob's arms.

"What?" The elf was on his feet in an instant, screeching.. "That's not possible!"

"Dey owe me da savin' o' dat brudder! I take what I'm owed!"

"The laws say that none may leave lest they choose of their own will!" The elf hissed, cat-like, as he drew his hand back. A long and thin blade unsheathed from nothingness in its wake.

The trash-troll turned slowly, great glowing eyes leveling with the elf. "Some laws is older n' others." His voice dropped low. "And da law of returns is older 'n me. Older 'n ya." The lights around the pillars began to dim, and the troll hunched closer to the elf as the shadows in the corners grew tall. His deep voice dropped to a low rumble. "You want to get all unseelies? Over dem?"

The prince seemed to waver in indecision before re-sheathing his blade into the air with a frustrated grunt. "FINE. Fine. Fine. Go. Begone. Take your brat and go, human child, and consider your debts to the Troll paid. But mark me well, Jacob Kelly - you have made a poor choice of enemy this day. Live the rest of your life knowing that when you grow old and feeble-minded, I will stay forever young and strong, and one of these days I will come for you - or your brother, or your parents. Live with that fear until your dying day."

"Ya cursin' dem?" The troll asked with a snort.

"No. Making a promise of my own."

The troll turned to the boys. "Hey, you kids. Get outta here. I gotta get back to ma bridge."

Outside, Tyler and Jacob stood in the cold while Ethan slept in Jacob's arms.

"Why did you - I mean thanks for everything, but why did you save us?" Jacob asked.

"Because fuck dat guy, dats why. Because I hadda brudder once, and I couldna save him none. You a brave kid, and not alla us is like dat prick. I want you should know that some of us ain't so bad."

"Thanks."

"Still gonna eat you if I catch you unner ma bridge."

"...got it."

Without a further word, the troll lumbered away from them, down the street. Tyler watched him go before turning to Jacob.

"Hey, man... no offense, but after that... I really just kinda want to go home."

"Yeah, no. No problem." Jacob adjusted his sleeping brother.

"What are you going to tell them about finding him?"

"I'll just say that we found him stumbling around the woods. You didn't want to deal with the cops and excitement so you went home. Sound good?"

"Sounds good."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Yeah." For a moment, Tyler wavered wanting to add something, but just shook his head.

"Goodnight, Jacob."

"Goodnight." Jacob hoisted his sleeping brother again and started off, pushing his bike with his free hand.

Tyler watched him go, then gazed towards the east, where the sky had started to lighten. He watched the dawn's color bleed out into the winter sky until just before the sun broke above the horizon, then walked back to the door.

Jenny the sprite was waiting for him, a wide grin on her face. "I'd knew you'd be back."

"I'm not too late am I?"

"No. And you never will be again."