

To Die a Thousand Times

v.1.1.0

by Thomas B. Dair

I am walking home with my Spiritbound. It's late at night but the mild summer's breeze makes for a lovely walk. There are no other Fae Folk around so it's just me, my Spiritbound, and the full moon peeking out between the Realm Oak's branches; the latter two's white colours, fur and stone respectively, engaged in a subconscious battle of shine. But the moon is no match for my wolf, I think and smile as I look to him.

Though tired, I am on my way to see my childhood friend. Ever since she joined the Iron Barks as a Forester those seasons ago, I haven't seen her a lot. And I miss her with all my heart.

She doesn't actually know that I'm coming. I've heard from my friend, a high ranking officer of the Iron Barks, that she and her Forester partner have returned earlier today. I can't wait to see her beautiful surprise when I knock on her root-dwelling's door. My heart starts racing just by the thought.

But I don't just want to surprise her, though. I found a gorgeous Sleeping Veil, a rare one glowing with its amber light. I found it while trending the roots and the olden sleepers, and I want my friend to have it. I think about telling her how it's almost as beautiful as her, how the mushroom's shine lights up the surroundings almost as much as her smile. But I dismiss the idea, it's silly. Well, maybe I'll tell her. If the timing feels right.

The dew laden grass is making my feet cold and wet, and I think about how I should have worn my boots even though I do like walking around bare feet. My Spiritbound doesn't seem to mind his paws getting wet. Besides, we're almost at the Realm Oak root where my childhood friend has her dwelling, and the pounding of my heart counteracts the coldness.

I hear laughter. It's hers, I can pick those sweet notes out even among a full revelry grove. Hearing her laugh automatically makes me smile.

But my smile quickly fades. I hear someone else's laughter: a man's voice, and my pounding heart instantly drops. A sudden worry washes over me and I find it a hard time to move my cold, dew-wet feet. My Spiritbound knows something is wrong. He whines as he lowers his face to touch my hand holding the shining Sleeping Veil. He wants us to go home, that no good can come of what's next. I should listen to him. I know that. But I can't. I just have to know what's going on, have to know if my worst fear is coming true. That fear which I never really believed but was always there. How could I believe it? It never made any sense that it was there, at least not to me.

I hide behind some brambles with blackberries ripening. I have a clear view of my childhood friend's rounded door from here. My Spiritbound pleads me to leave with a low whimper but I tell him to be quiet. I still know that I should be listening to him, and yet, my turning stomach compels me to wait and look.

As I look on from the berry brambles, I see my childhood friend. I see her beautiful, blonde hair with decorating feathers. Her back is turned but she is softly lit by the acorn carved

lantern hanging off the side of the root. She's wearing a simple green dress, the one I always liked seeing her in, as she stands on her toes and holds her arms around someone still in the shadows. The laughter has stopped, just like the beats of my heart.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, contemplating my next move. Should I reveal myself and break up whatever they're doing? No, I don't have the right to do that. I so want to listen to my Spiritbound, he has always been the wiser of the two of us, but my body seems unable to move. What do I do? What can I do?

Then, a click and my eyes open wide just like the rounded door. At that moment my body unfreezes and I walk towards the window next to my childhood friend's door, the one that is now closed. And while I say to myself that I'm merely walking, my knees are awfully bent and my head low. But entertaining the notion that I might be sneaking means admitting that I am someone who I don't want to be. My Spiritbound does not follow me, or what I think is the first time.

I arrive at the flowerbox beneath the windows, rounded like the door and with single crossed bars. The flowers themselves are long gone. A quick thought about how I would have taken care of them, had my childhood friend asked, crosses my mind. Then it goes straight back to the horrendous situation that I have put myself in.

I lie to myself, thinking that there is no turning back now. But of course there is, and I know this as I look back to my Spiritbound and his shiny dandelion eyes. Between the brambles and the sinking night, they are now the only parts of him visible.

The talking and laughing inside dies out and I take it as my cue; I slowly rise up to the windows themselves. Whether I'm scared of being caught in my dubious act or of what I'm about to see, I do not know. Maybe it's a bit of both? But I suppress my feelings and keep rising. Slowly.

My eyes finally rise above the sill. The first thing I see are the white scales of my childhood friend's Spiritbound as he has claimed a spot by the window to rest. Its slow-moving stomach is blocking my view so, at the further risk of getting caught, I continue my ascent and hope that my moon-white hair will blend in with the white scales.

It doesn't take long before I find what I so dread and yet am so strangely determined to see with my own dandelion eyes; my childhood friend and her nightly visitor standing all close together by the bedside in the charmingly candle-lit dwelling.

I desperately want to convince myself that what I'm seeing isn't real. That what I'm seeing isn't happening. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

Finally, I come to some sense and quickly slide down, away from sigh. I sit down, my back pressed against the side of the root that makes up the dwelling wall. My breath is heavy from the knife stabbed straight into my heart. The pain is so intense that I can neither move nor speak, and so my teary eyes scout for my wolf, my Spiritbound. I hope that he didn't leave me to die from this insane notion. But I can't find him and instead accept my fate.

My eyes are closed and the tears silently streaming down my face when I suddenly feel the cold, wet snout and fuzzy fur on my hands which had been resting on my wound. As I open my eyes, I'm met with a shiny dandelion kindness and a rough tongue licking my tears away. The pain is terribly heavy but my Spiritbound still manages to get me up on his back and carry me home, away from where the sharp blade mutilated my heart.

I stand by the work table, roots hanging down from everywhere on the cave ceiling. Some are even touching my face, but I don't care. I'm just staring into nothing, my hands idly working the Sleeping Veil paste that my mentor asked for.

I used to like helping people enter the Amber Sleep but lately I spend most of my time doing nothing. I don't even find joy in my mentor's or my Spiritbound's attempts to cheer me up.

My mentor's Spiritbound makes me jump as she lands on my work table. I don't know how long I was staring into the nothingness but the owl asks me if I didn't hear her Spiritbound calling, or any of the moaning soon-to-be-Sleepers wailing in pain for the paste. I tell her sorry, as she nibbles at my hands with her beak, and hurry to my mentor performing the Rite.

Handing the overly done paste to the Druid, he once again asks me why I am acting so strangely and that it has been going on for the last two moon cycles now. I don't really give much of an answer. My mentor seems to accept it. The Sleepers-in-wait requires his attention.

I seize the opportunity to turn around and slip away unnoticed. Except, I don't get very far before freezing up.

Through the root archway my childhood friend and her lover appear. She's laughing that same laugh as she did on that dreadful night. They don't seem to notice me standing there in the middle of the entrance chamber.

The giggling stops; my childhood friend now standing close to her lover in a mirror of the scene that won't stop seizing my mind. I blink and shake my head to make sure that what I'm seeing is actually happening. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, she takes off her dress now-

What actually takes me away from the sight is the spear thrust into my gut. Without warning, or any trouble at all, it pierced right through the fabric of my Tree Attendant's robe offering so limited protection.

With no knowledge of who wielded the spear, its tip still soaking the brown fabric with the blood from my stomach, I stand there perfectly still. I'm unable to move and cannot seem to muster any sound nor voice either. It's just me, all alone right there in the middle of the entrance chamber. Not even the roots are coming to help me.

But it might as well be the same; there is no helping me from the gut-wrenching pain of the attack which followed *that* scene. So I accept my fate and prepare myself to enter The Amber Sleep, gushing blood guiding my way. Maybe I should ask my mentor for some of the paste that I had just made. It should help ease my suffering as I slip away.

I awake to the sound of rain and lead-less branches banging on the walls and windows of my root dwelling. Except I wasn't actually asleep, so waking up is a lie that I tell myself because I should be sound asleep at this time of the night. But this is the new norm and has been for some time now.

Thunder comes crashing down outside and lights up my dwelling for however brief a moment. I'm not proud of the state of what I see; my dwelling is dirty and food stocks are low. But so is my energy to do something, anything really. At least my beans and lentils have a long

shelf life. In fact, if it wasn't for my Tree Attendancy and my Spiritbound, I would just prefer to never leave this filth.

The light of the thunder is thankfully over just as soon as it came. I thank the Amber Father and the Umber Mother for that. The darkness means that I don't have to look at my dwelling.

My Spiritbound sleepily licks my forehead as I grab his fur for a little bit of comfort. His curled up presence in the bed soothes me and takes my mind off *that* image, if only for a moment. But the very next moment after it's back. And I'm back to staring at the ceiling in the darkness. This time my Spiritbound is my pillow. He doesn't mind.

Attempting to ride *that* scene from my head, I once again start singing the hymns. I sing with an almost silent whisper since I don't want to wake my Spiritbound and I'm fully aware of how terrible my voice is. Even with effort.

Though they may not be exactly relatable, those old Faean songs of lost love and broken hearts do seem to help somehow. Even some about The Amber Sleep gives me a little bit of serenity, and I can use every bit of that right now.

Thunder comes crashing again, once more lighting up my dwelling, and I suddenly see them right there in my kitchen. The giggling rushes to my ears, instantly filling my body with horror. The songs don't help anymore. In fact they have completely vanished from my mind.

Another lightning brightens my dwelling; I see them standing close again, my childhood friend still in that beautiful green dress of hers. I attempt to reason with myself. What the continued thunder reveals in the darkness isn't real. It can't be real. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

I sit up with a jerk and loudly exclaim for the images to stop. My poor Spiritbound wakes up with a startled whimper, though he quickly goes back to sleep as he realises what is happening once again. He urges me to join him but I tell that I can't. Not right now, at least, not after what I just saw. I don't know how.

Another crashing thunder, another flash of light reveals the broken pieces of a vase that used to stand on my bedside table. I must have knocked it over. The dried flowers lie among the pieces on the floor.

As the flashes of hard light enters and exits my dwelling, I pick up one of the broken vase pieces. The darkness doesn't reveal its simple clay look but it can't stop me from feeling its weight. I ponder over how strange it is that such a small piece of vase can be this heavy. And sharp. I tighten my fist around it and moments after I feel a small stream coming down my forearm. The pain is negligible compared to the hurt in my chest and cramps in my stomach. Suddenly, a terrible idea enters my mind, and it won't seem to leave. At least it replaces *that* scene which the lightning so mercilessly revealed, if but for a moment.

I lie back down with a groan and heavy breath, my head resting on the steady rising and falling chest of my Spiritbound. The thundering outside has stopped and complete darkness has now taken over my dwelling again. This, in turn, also means that I can't see the blood travelling down into my hands. But I can feel them; the floods pooling in my palms before quickly overflowing, soaking the bedding as well.

Feelings of contentment push the pains aside as I prepare myself. My dwelling might be part of one of The Realm Tree's larger roots but those meant to take us to The Amber Sleep

aren't. My only hope is that my Spiritbound will forgive me. But he's still just lying there, breathing steadily and so I believe him to be with me on this final of decisions.

I close my eyes and finally drift into a sleep haunted no more.

As I make sure not to step into the puddles of the melting snow, I scout for my Spiritbound. He is somewhere near in the forests, even if I'm not entirely sure where.

It has been hard months in more ways than usual; the winter was hard, cold, and the snow fell taller than any Fae Folk. That also meant my Spiritbound was unable to go on his hunts. We don't like hunting but a wolf has certain instincts so it has always been quietly tolerated. And the fact that I can hardly keep up with him is a testament to his eagerness.

And at least I can get to walk. Walking is good for the spirit as my mentor always says. I want to believe him, I really do, and both the Amber Father and the Umber mother must know how I desperately need something good in my life.

I scale the decomposing body of a fallen beech tree, as I think about the only problem with walking; when you do it alone, you leave your mind to wander away from you. And I don't like it when it wanders because I already know its destination.

But I can't help it.

Looking up still shows me the underside of the Realm Oak's crown, in case I was wondering if we had strayed too far or not.

My mind walks to a slightly unexpected destination, to a conversation I had a couple days ago with my childhood friend. One of the few we've had ever since *that* night. We had bumped into each other per chance just as she was about to go on patrol. She and her lizard Spiritbound were in a hurry, so the conversation was shorter than I had hoped. But maybe that was just as well. I couldn't have said all the things I wanted to even if I had the time.

She was actually the one who surprised me; if I had seen her first, I'm not sure if I even would have approached her. Chances are high that I avoid her altogether at this point.

But my childhood friend caught me off guard like nothing had happened. She told me how she and her Spiritbound misses me and mine. I had to remind myself to not read too much into that, however hard that was, and, well, she didn't need to know how I had been avoiding her. She had carried on excusing herself with being busy, which was true; the Foresters of the Iron Barks could be gone for months at a time, especially right now. Thinking back, I didn't actually say much. I mostly just stood there, longing. And almost silently said my goodbyes back when she and her Spiritbound turned around and off on their way. Afterwards, as it turned out, I had just been standing there, watching them hurry away.

I feel a sudden *SNAP*, taking me back to the wet forests. Putting my finger to my long canines, I can taste the blood in my mouth. Looks like my Spiritbound's hunt was successful, a little to my dismay but so must things be. I scour the forest floor for anything that will take this nasty, almost dry, taste away. Without luck, I instead pick up some melting snow while removing any dirt that it may carry.

The snow doesn't really help in taking away the taste but at least my wolf will be back soon. Then we can go home to our dwelling in our roots. Walking isn't really helping with my wandering mind anyway.

As if right on due, I start thinking about my childhood friend again; being in the beginning of her patrol, she shouldn't be too far away and I wonder if she and her Forester partner might

be nearby. A part of me hopes that she is but I try to make a conscious effort of telling myself “no.” This conflict inside of me is exhausting, and as I follow an animal trail in the forest floor, I wish for it all to end sooner rather than later.

I almost trip and fall as I absentmindedly attempt to jump over another log, this one a birch. I do quickly find my balance again, but as I look up again, I freeze.

It’s them. My childhood friend and her Forester partner, her lover, as well as their Spiritbounds. Coming out from between the trees they still haven’t seen me. I should have ample time to move out of sight, and yet I can’t. I guess the four were indeed very close by.

Now the couple is almost in front of me and somehow they still haven’t noticed me standing right here. Their giggles is like torture to my ears and I close my eyes as my childhood friend stands up on her toes, closing her arms around her partner and lover.

When I open my eyes once again, the couple is unfortunately still there. I tell myself that it doesn’t make any sense, that they should have noticed me by now. And yet, they won’t go away with their dreadfully tender kissing.

I attempt to convince my own mind yet again that the scene in front of me simply isn’t happening. And it’s all in my head, but she’s touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

The arrows fly swiftly through the cool late Winter Cycle’s air with whispering of death. I hardly notice them before they pierce my robe, the tips travelling all the way through and poking my thick, grey cloak on the other side; two arrows to the lungs, one for my stomach. I drop down to my knees as a direct result. My heart hurts, I cannot breathe, and my stomach is sick and cramping.

In my last moments, I don’t even wonder who shot the arrows. The pain I’ve felt ever since the Summer Cycle has been unbearable, so I should be thanking him or her, whoever they might be. I just wished that my Spiritbound was here. Just for comfort and nothing else. But I don’t always get what I wish for. Or at all for that matter.

The couple is gone and it’s nice to know that this pain will be so, soon enough. I lie down on the wet and cold floor of the forests, just waiting for what will be my last wheezing breath. Waiting for everything to go away.

My toes are trying to grab the beautiful green grass. The suns are warming my bare feet, and a little bit of my legs, as I sit here under the crown of a beech by the Moon Lake. I don’t have many thoughts as I sit here, chin buried in my arms, arms across my knees. I am staring out over the calm waters on this beautiful day of the Summer Cycle.

Except I don’t see the beauty. Not today either. I’m not sure that I even know what beauty looks like anymore. Everything might as well be dreary, damp, and cold. It’s not like I care anymore.

My Spiritbound is of another opinion, lying happily in the warming light next to me, belly up and tongue out. I appreciate his attempts at cheering me up but they are just now working. Actually, they haven’t worked for a long time, if ever. Nothing is.

I wonder why we’re sitting here by the lake. It used to be my childhood friend and I’s favourite spot. We could spend hours playing here with our Spiritbounds or simply just lying head to head in the grass, looking up at the Realm Oak’s lush crown or the suns being chased by the moon. One time we even saw the dancing lights colour up the dark, glinting sky.

That will never happen again. When I last spoke to my childhood friend, she invited me to her wedding at the Winter Revelries. The dancing lights were beautiful but what made them special was seeing them alone with her, watching as she danced along to the moving colours. If she's getting married, she'll want her husband with her instead and she'll still be dancing just as happily, maybe even more.

I want her to be happy, I think as my stare unwavering out over the still lake. But I would also like to experience happiness myself again, someday. I try to remember the last time that I felt truly happy; was it really a whole cycle ago when me and my Spiritbound were bringing my childhood friend the glowing Sleeping Veil? Somehow I both have a hard time believing that while it also makes perfect sense. I feel like crying just thinking about it but no tears are reaching the surface. Not like it matters anyway.

I ask my Spiritbound what to do. He answers with a snore and barely changes his posture, only to try and catch some more of the warming suns. I don't blame him. I cannot be an easy Spiritbound, and all of the solutions he has come up with so far have either not worked or I haven't had the will to try them. I would ignore me as well after being needlessly asked the same question over and over again if my help wasn't heeded.

Another idea crosses my mind, not for the first time, though I have never actually said it out aloud. I ask my Spiritbound what he thinks about going out into the world beyond the Realm Oak. I add that I know it's unheard of, that it would just be me and him.

The large wolf finally sits up and looks at me with two dandelions full of worry. I answer that I know it's drastic and that it's just an idea, not a decision. We're bound by our spirits and so I won't ever take him places where he doesn't want to go. But now that the idea is planted in my head, I can feel it being difficult to uproot. I don't tell my Spiritbound that but I think he already knows. He usually does.

His answer comes without hesitation, pressing his big, furry head against mine. I tell him thanks, and promise him that it won't be forever, should it even come to that. But I also say that we shouldn't be hasty. Luck may still award us with some hope. I mostly say it to reassure my Spiritbound. I don't actually believe it.

I think about how hope could even go about returning to someone like me as I place my chin back into my arms and knees. And right then my attention is drawn away from the calm waters.

My heart starts beating faster and my breath gets more sporadic. I see them, right there on the grass by the edge of the dead-still lake. They're sitting on a grey linen cloth, he in a shadow from a nearby bush, she still in her green dress which haunts me so.

I hear my childhood friend's giggle and brace myself for what's coming. I know it all too well by now. I don't even take my eyes away as I am bound to see their kiss no matter what I do. So it comes. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now.

Let me go.