

# To Die a Thousand Times

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I am walking the long way home with my Spiritbound. It's late at night but the mild breeze of Summer's Cycle makes for a lovely walk. There are no other Fae Folk around so it's just me, my Spiritbound, and the full moon peeking in between the massive crown of the Oak-Between-Realms; the white colours of the latter two, fur and stone respectively, engaged in a subconscious battle of shine. *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 cycles ago, I haven't seen her a lot. And I miss her with all my heart.

She doesn't actually know that I'm on my way. I've heard from our mutual Iron Bark friend that she and her Forester partner should 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 glow 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. I do like walking around bare feet, though, especially now during the Summer's Cycle. My Spiritbound doesn't seem to mind his paws getting wet. Besides, we're almost at the large Oak-Between-Realms root where my childhood friend has her dwelling, and the pounding of my heart counteracts the coldness of my toes.

I hear laughter. It's hers. I can pick those sweet notes out even among a full revelry grove. Hearing her laugh spontaneously grows a smile on my face.

But my smile quickly withers away again. I hear someone else's laughter, a man's voice. It forces my pounding heart to drop. A sudden worry washes over me and I find it impossible to move my cold, dew-wet feet.

My Spiritbound knows something is wrong. He whines as he lowers his wet nose to touch my hand holding the glowing 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 have to know what's going on, to know if my worst fear is coming true. That fear which I never really acknowledged but was always there, always lingering in shallow waters. How could I believe it? It never made any sense, at least not to me.

I hide behind some brambles with ripening blackberries. 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 quiet. Maybe it was a little harsher than I intended, I am well aware of

that. Especially since I should be listening to him. And yet, my turning stomach compels me to wait and look.

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 large root. She's wearing that simple dress, the one with colours of the Spring's Cycle, the one I always liked seeing her in. Standing on her toes, she's holding her arms around someone 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. Except my body seems unable to move. *What do I do? What can I do?*

Just then, a click, and my eyes open wide much like the rounded door. Sounds of footsteps, boots and small hooves, walking on wood, then another click. My body unfreezes and I walk towards the small, round single crossbarred windows sitting next to the root-dwelling's entrance. And while I say to myself that I'm merely walking, my knees are awfully bent and my head low. But entertaining the notion, the fact that I might be sneaking, means admitting that I am someone who I don't want to be. My Spiritbound does not follow me, for what I think is the first time of our life.

I arrive at the flowerbox ornamenting the outer windows. 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. The next thought 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; with shaking knees, 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. Still slowly.

My eyes finally climb above the sill. The first thing I see are the white scales of my childhood friend's Spiritbound as he has claimed a nest by the window. His lazy stomach moving up and down is blocking my view so, at the further risk of getting caught, I continue my ascent and hope that my moon-white hair blends in with the scales.

Second thing I notice is another Spiritbound, one I haven't really noticed before; the thick, brown bristles of a pig, also resting like its scaly friend. I think it looks terribly out of place on the floor of that pretty dwelling so my eyes move on after a last look of disdain.

It doesn't take my own dandelion eyes long before they find what I so dread and yet am so strangely determined to discover; my childhood friend and her nightly visitor standing close together by the bedside in the charming candle light.

Time slows down. Or maybe it's just my breath and heart that stops yet again. There is only me and them, them and their pressing of lips against each other, with mute darkness all around us. I desperately want to convince myself that what I'm seeing isn't real. And that it's all

somehow a trick, an illusion. 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 sight. I sit, my back pressed against the bark of the root that makes up one of the dwelling walls. My breath is going again but it's heavy from the knife stabbed straight into my heart. The pain is so intense that I once again can neither move nor this time speak. I scout through tears for my wolf, my Spiritbound, and hope that he didn't leave me to die from this insane notion. But I can't find him and must instead accept my fate.

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

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I stand by the work table, roots hanging down from everywhere on the cave ceiling. Some are moving out of their way to touch my face, but I don't care. I'm just staring into nothing, my hands idly working the mortar to get 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 for that matter, 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 old owl's cooing asks me if I didn't hear her Spiritbound's calls, or any of the 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 strange? That it has been going on for the last two moon cycles now and that they're worried about me, him and his Spiritbound. I don't really give much of an answer. My mentor seems to accept it. The Sleepers-in-wait requires his attention.

I take the opportunity and slip away unnoticed. Except, I don't get very far before my body freezes up again like so many other times.

Through the archway of dried roots, the one going all the way up to the surface, my childhood friend and her lover appear. She's laughing. That same laugh. The one she did on that dreadful night. The pair don't seem to notice me as I stand here in the middle of the entrance chamber.

The giggling stops; my childhood friend is now leaning against her lover in a mirror of the scene that won't stop seizing my mind. I shake my head and pinch my arm. Maybe *I'm* asleep and it's just a horrific nightmare in front of me. That it isn't happening and that it isn't real. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

What actually forces me away from the gruesome sight is the spear thrust through my guts. Without warning, or any trouble at all, it pierced right through my Tree Attendant's robe which offered so limited protection.

I stand perfectly still as I examine the spearhead still sticking out while soaking the brown fabric, turning it so very dark. I have no knowledge of who wielded the spear nor does it

matter. I'm unable to move and cannot seem to muster any voice, or even sound, either. It's just me, all alone right there in the middle of the chamber. Not even the roots are coming for me but they must be on their way. A fresh one like me must make a feast for them.

But it might as well be the same; there is no helping me from the gut-wrenching pain of the spear's attack which followed *that* scene. So I accept my fate and prepare myself for the roots to lead me into 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.

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I awake to the sound of rain and leaf-less branches drumming 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. I tell it because I *should* be sound asleep at this time of night. But this is the new norm and has been for some time now. I don't know if I miss it, sleeping that is. And I don't even know if I care.

Lightning comes crashing down outside and illuminates my dwelling for however brief a moment. The thunder comes rolling not a moment after. I'm not proud of the state of what I see in the fleeting light; 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 Attendantcy and my Spiritbound, I would prefer to never leave this filth.

The flash of light is thankfully over just as soon as it came. I thank the Amber Father and the Umber Mother for that. The darkness hides most of what I don't want to see.

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

Another attempt at riding *that* scene from my head; I once again start singing the hymns. I sing with an almost silent whisper. I don't want to wake my Spiritbound and I'm fully aware of how terrible my musical 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 everything I can find right now.

Lightning comes crashing again, once more brightening my dwelling, and I 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, another light in my dwelling; I see them standing so close again, my childhood friend still in that beautiful green dress of hers. I attempt to reason with myself. What the continued storm reveals in the darkness isn't real. I tell myself that 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 scream for it to stop. My poor Spiritbound wakes up with a startled whimper, but he quickly goes back to sleep as he realises what is happening once again. He urges me to join him. I tell that I can't. Not right now, at least, not after what I just saw. I don't know how.

Another crash, another flash reveals the broken pieces of a vase that used to stand on my bedside table. I must have knocked it over, only I don't remember when or how. The dried flowers lie among the pieces on the floor.

As the flashes of hard light enters and exits my dwelling again, I pick up a piece of the broken vase. 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 thing can be this heavy after all. 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. If nothing else it replaces *that* scene which the lightning so mercilessly revealed, if but for a moment.

Moments pass and I lie back down with a groan, my head resting on the steady rising and descending 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 bloodstreams travelling down into my hands. But I can feel them; the floods pooling in my palms before quickly overflowing, soaking the bedding.

Feelings of contentment push the pains aside as I prepare myself. My dwelling might be part of one of The Realm Tree's great roots but they're different from those meant to take us to The Amber Sleep. My only hope is that my Spiritbound will forgive me. But he's still only lying there, breathing steadily, and so I believe him to be with me on this final of decisions.

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

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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 ways more than usual; the Winter's Cycle 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 of course always been quietly tolerated. The fact that I can hardly keep up with him is a testament to his eagerness.

And at least I can go for a walk while he chases whatever prey in sight. 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 in another direction than where you're going. And I don't like it when my mind wanders because I already know its destination.

But I can't help it.

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

My mind stumbles into 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 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. Chances are that I avoid her altogether at this point. It's not really chance, though.

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. She had carried on excusing herself with being busy, which was true; the Iron Bark Foresters could be gone for more than one moon cycle at a time, especially right now.

Thinking back, I didn't actually say much. I mostly just stood there nodding, and longing. And almost silently said my goodbyes back to her when they turned around and went on their way. Afterwards, as it turned out, I had done nothing but stand there, watching them hurry away.

I feel a sudden *SNAP*, taking me back to the wet forests. Putting my finger to my unusually long canines, I can taste the blood in my mouth. The iron flavour tells me that my Spiritbound's hunt was successful, a little to my dismay but so things must 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 actually help in removing the taste but at least my wolf will be back soon. Then we can go home to our dwelling in the roots. Walking isn't really helping with my wandering mind anyway.

I start thinking about my childhood friend again, right on cue; 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 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 fallen log, this one a birch. I do quickly find my balance again, but as I look back up, I freeze once more.

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

Now the couple is almost in front of me and somehow still haven't noticed that I'm standing right here. Their giggles are like torture to my ears and the sight of them the same to my eyes. I close them shut as my childhood friend stands up on her toes, wrapping her arms around the neck of 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 stop with their dreadfully tender kissing. Maybe they do know that I'm here.

No, that cannot be right. My mind is yet again in need of something that I continually fail to do, just like everything else right now in my life. It's in need of convincing. It's in need of being told that it simply doesn't make any sense. So, I try to do just that yet again; the scene playing out isn't happening, I half heartedly argue with myself. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

Whispers of death. The three arrows fly swiftly through the cool air of late Winter Cycle. I hardly notice them before they pierce my robe, the heads effortlessly travels all the way through poking my thick, grey cloak on the other side; two arrows to the lungs, one for my stomach. I

drop to my knees as a direct result. I cannot breathe, my stomach is sick and cramping, and my heart hurts. Strange, since no arrow seemed to be directed at it.

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 as well, 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.

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My toes are trying to grab the green grass. I'm pretty sure that I used to like the colour. 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 a day that some might call beautiful in this new Summer's 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 sunlight next to me, belly up and tongue out. I appreciate his goofy attempts at cheering me up but they are just not working. 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 the favourite spot of my childhood friend and I. We could spend hours playing here with our Spiritbounds or simply just lying head to head in the grass looking up at the Oak-Between-Realms's grand, lush crown or maybe at 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. While beautiful, what made the night lights special was seeing them with her, alone, watching as she danced along to the colours. When I last spoke to my childhood friend, she invited us to her wedding at the Revelries of the Winter's Cycle. Now she'll want her husband-to-be to experience the lights instead with her and still be dancing just as happily, maybe even more.

*I want her to be happy*, I think as I 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 almost an entire 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, and yet, it also makes perfect sense. I feel like crying just thinking about it but tears are nowhere to be found. 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 admit that it's sadly the latter, more often than not. I would ignore me as well after being 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 Oak-Between-Realms. It would just be me and him, however unheard of it is.

The large wolf finally sits up and looks at me with 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 add 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 would 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 and the warmth of the Summer's Cycle.

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 weaved together, he on the green grass, she still in her dress of Spring's Cycle which haunts me so.

I hear my childhood friend's giggle and know 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, no matter what I tell myself. I know it, I reason, it isn't happening. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now. *Let me go.*

A lonely tear finds its way as I close my eyes at last and brace for death.