

To Die a Thousand Times

v.1.3.0

by Thomas B. Dair

I'm walking the long way home with my Spiritbound. It's late at night but the mild breeze of this Cycle's Summer makes for a lovely walk. There are no other Fae Folk around so it's just me, my Spiritbound, and the full moon; 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. It of course doesn't favour the full moon that it's fully engaged trying to peek through the splendour of the green leaves adorning the massive crown of the Oak Between Realms. But that fact doesn't dissuade my opinion.

Though tired, I am on my way to see my childhood friend. Ever since she joined the Ironbarks as a Scout those, what I think are too many, moon cycles ago, I haven't seen her much. And I miss her.

She doesn't actually know that I'm on my way. I've heard from our mutual Ironbark friend that she and her Scout partner should have returned from patrol earlier today. I can't wait to see her beautiful surprise when I knock on her root-dwelling's door. My longing heart starts racing by the thought.

But I don't just want to surprise her, though. I have found a gorgeous Sleeping Veil, a rare one glowing with its amber light. I found it while tending the roots and the Shrivelled Sleepers, and I want my childhood friend to have it. I think about telling her how it's almost as beautiful as her, how the mushroom's glow may light up the surroundings but nothing like her smile. I dismiss the idea, it's stupid. *Well, maybe I'll tell her*, I think. *If the timing feels right*.

The dew laden grass makes my feet wet, and I think about how I should have worn my boots. I do enjoy walking around with bare feet, though, especially now as the Cycle presents its summer. My Spiritbound doesn't seem to mind wet paws so why should I? Besides, we're almost at the root where my childhood friend has her dwelling, and the pounding of my heart delivers warmth all the way to my toes.

I hear laughter. It's hers. I can pick those sweet notes out from even the most crammed of groves during a revelry and hearing her laugh spontaneously grows a smile on my face.

But my smile quickly withers away. I also hear someone else's laughter, a man's voice. It forces my pounding heart to skip a beat, maybe two. A sudden worry buries me like soil heavily weighing on a newly planted seed and I find it impossible to move as my dew-wet feet turn to ice.

My Spiritbound knows something is wrong. He whines and lowers his nose to touch my hands, hands fumbling to hide the Sleeping Veil in my brown Tree Attendant's robe so as the glow doesn't betray us. We're going home, he tells me. No good can come of what's to come.

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 I never really acknowledged but was always there, always lingering just beneath the forest floor that I walk on. How could I believe it? It never made any sense, at least not to me.

I hide behind some brambles full of ripening blackberries. I have a clear view of my childhood friend's rounded door from here. My Spiritbound once again pleads me to leave with yet another low whimper but I tell him to be quiet. Maybe 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 stay.

From the berry brambles, I spot my childhood friend. I see her beautiful, blonde hair with decorating feathers. Her back is turned but she's softly lit by the acorn carved lanterns hanging off the side of the large root, one for each of the many dwellings both next to and above. She's wearing that simple dress, the one in the hopeful colours of a Cycle's spring, the one I always loved seeing her in. Outside of her own root dwelling, my childhood friend stands on her toes, throwing her arms around someone hidden in the shadow. The laughter comes to an abrupt halt, 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 want to listen to my Spiritbound, to leave as he so begs. He has always been the wiser of the two of us. Except my own body seems to disagree with me. *What do I do? What can I do?*

Just then my eyes open wide in unison with the creaks of the rounded door. Sounds of footsteps, boots and small hooves walking on wood, then creaks again and a closing *thud*. More *thuds* as the door is barred from the inside. My body thaws and I walk towards the small, round single crossbarred windows sitting next to the root-dwelling's entrance.

My walk towards the dwelling is normal, that's at least what I tell myself. My knees are awfully bent, though, and my head low. But entertaining the notion, the fact that I might be sneaking, means admitting to be something 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 flowerboxes 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 shameful situation I have put myself in.

I lie, 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 eyes. Hiding in the brambles and the deep night, the dandelions are now almost the only parts of him visible.

Talk and more laughter from inside. Both die out and I take it as my cue. Knees shaking, I slowly rise up to the window. Whether I'm scared of being caught in my dubious act or of what I'm about to see, I do not know. But scared I am. *Maybe it's a bit of both?* 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 and folded wings moving up and down are blocking my view so, at the further risk of getting caught, I continue my ascent. I hope that my own moon hair blends in with the scales.

Second thing I see is a new Spiritbound, one I haven't really noticed around before; the thick, earthy bristles of a pig resting like its scaly friend. It looks terribly out of place on the floor of that pretty dwelling so my glance moves on with disdain.

It doesn't take long before my gaze finds what I so dread and yet am so strangely determined to discover: My childhood friend and her nightly visitor are standing ever so close together by the bedside in the lights of candles.

Time slows down. Maybe it's just my breath and my heart that have both halted simultaneously. There are only them inside, them and their pressing of lips, and me out here, with mute darkness all around us. I desperately try to convince myself that what I'm seeing isn't real. That it's all a trick somehow, an illusion. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

I finally find some sense to quickly slide down, away from the sight. I turn around and sit with my back against the bark that makes up one of the dwelling's outer walls. I'm breathing again but the rhythm is erratic and difficult because of the pain. The pain from the knife stabbed straight into my heart, a pain so intense that I once again find myself unable to move, nor speak this time. I scour 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 tears stream down my face in silence when I feel the cold, wet snout on my hands so lifelessly resting upon the wound. My dandelions open again and are met by twin kindness, my face by a rough tongue licking my tears away. The pain is still terribly oppressive but my Spiritbound gets me up on his fuzzy back to carry me home, away from where the sharp blade mutilated my heart.

I stand by the work table with small, long roots of the Oak Between Realms hanging down everywhere from the cave's ceiling. Some are moving out of their way to touch my face, my hair, my shoulders. I brush them aside without much thought, they are just opportunistic and I'm not for them yet. My mind is occupied with nothing and I'm staring right into it, my hands idly working the mortar to make the Sleeping Veil paste that my old mentor asked for. Somewhere, my Spiritbound is growling at shadows again.

I used to find joy and honour in helping people enter the Amber Sleep, contributing to this important part of The Great Cycle, but now I don't pay serious attention to the work or anything else. I just sort of exist, really, and not much more. And I hardly even notice my Spiritbound's, or my old mentor's for that matter, attempts to cheer me up anymore.

It makes me jump when she lands on my work table. How long I have been staring into the nothingness I don't know but the short, loud hooting of my mentor's aging owl is serious and firm. It must have been a while ago if she decided to interrupt her nap. The owl asks if I didn't hear the calls from her Spiritbound or any of the painful wailings of the Soon Sleepers. 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'm acting so strange and so absent. That it must be two moon cycles ago that they last saw me smile. They're worried about me, my mentor and his Spiritbound. I don't really give much of an answer. He seems to accept it. The Soon Sleepers require his attention, and the paste.

The opportunity presents itself and I slip away unnoticed. Except, I don't feel like getting very far away before my body freezes up again like so many other times before.

Through the archway of braided, 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. She's wearing that dress. The pair don't seem to notice me standing 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 so mercilessly has besieged my mind. I shake my head and pinch my arm. It doesn't make any sense for them to be down here. That which my eyes are telling me, 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 forces me away from the gruesome sight at last are the roots that thrust themselves into my gut. Without warning, and without any trouble at all, the opportunistic organs of the Oak Between Realms pierces right through my Tree Attendant's robes offering almost as limited protection as my pale skin. I guess that I should have seen them coming. I've worked in these far-reaching caves long enough to know how dangerous the Oak Between Realms and its roots can be to the inattentive.

My attempts at moving away bring no success. The roots gnarl themselves around inside my abdomen, oblivious, indifferent more likely, to the pain they are causing. So I can do nothing else but stand there, examining them as they bore into deeper agony, widening the wounds of entrance as they enthusiastically continue. A fresh one must be like a feast for them.

A burst of the pain expands my eyes and empties any air left in my lungs. The roots have stopped their advances but the gut-wrenching hurt takes on a different sensation as the tree begins its purpose: leading my Spirit from this realm and into The Sleep.

Maybe it's for the best, I think, watching in stunned silence as the roots drain my wretched life. The hollowness slowly reaches from my belly to my thighs, my chest, my arms, my neck. It hurts immensely, and yet, the pain is no match to what *that night*, that gruesome sight, caused and has continued to cause me ever since.

I accept my fate and await The Amber Sleep without resistance, finding comfort in the fact that I won't be sleeping alone. My Spiritbound hopefully doesn't feel the same anguish as I do, though I can't help but wonder if my mentor could spare some of the paste I had just made, even if it is meant for others. It will help ease the suffering as we slip away.

I awake to the sound of rain and near-naked beech branches drumming on the windows and outer bark of my root dwelling. Except I wasn't actually asleep, so waking up is another lie that I tell myself. I tell it because I *shouldn't* be wide awake 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. I'm scared of the haunting that follows, avoiding my already frail defences.

Lightning comes crashing down outside and illuminates my dwelling in flashes. The thunder comes rolling not a moment after. I'm not proud of the sight revealed by the fleeting light; my dwelling is dirty and food stocks almost nonexistent. At least my beans and lentils have had a long shelf life but even they are running low now. But so is my energy to do something, anything really. In fact, if it wasn't for my Tree Attendancy, and my Spiritbound, I would prefer to never leave this filth.

The flashes of light are over just as soon as they came and I thank both the Amber Father and the Umber Mother for that. The darkness conceals most of what I don't want to see. But not everything.

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

I start singing the hymns again in another desperate attempt to rid my head but I also cannot seem to let go. I sing with an almost silent whisper. I don't want to wake my Spiritbound and I'm fully aware of how terrible I sound, even with effort.

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

Lightning comes crashing again and as it brightens my dwelling I see *them* once more. Standing right there in my kitchen. The giggling rushes to my ears, instantly filling my body with that familiar horror. The old songs don't protect anymore. In fact, they have completely vanished from my mind.

Another lightning, another light in my dwelling; I see them standing, oh, so close again, my childhood friend still in that beautiful dress of a Cycle's Spring. I try to reason with myself; what the continued storm reveals in the darkness isn't true. *Maybe I am asleep?* Maybe it's just a horrific nightmare that is playing out in front of my heart. 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. I tell him 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 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 clay on the floor.

As the hard light enters and exits my dwelling over and over again, I crawl over to pick up one of the broken pieces. The flashes make it difficult to see the details on the clay, but I can feel the weight. I ponder how strange it is that such a small thing 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 plants itself in my mind, quickly taking root before I can stop it. If nothing else, the idea replaces *that scene* which the lightning so mercilessly revealed.

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 suddenly stopped and complete darkness has now conquered 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 strange contentment push the pains aside as I prepare myself. Prepare myself to disappear into the dark nothing that imprisons my gaze. I ponder the strangeness of how one can help so many others into The Amber Sleep and yet not make the journey themselves. My root dwelling might be part of the Oak Between Realms but these giant roots are not the same as those who guide us to where the Amber Father reigns.

I should be afraid, but I'm not. I should be ashamed, but I'm not. My only hope is that my Spiritbound will forgive me. Though he is still only lying here, breathing steadily, so I believe him to be with me on this final of decisions.

I close my eyes and finally fall asleep, a sleep of only darkness but one that is haunted no more.

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

It's been dire months in ways more than usual; the Cycle's 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 might not like hunting as a people but a wolf has certain instincts so it's quietly tolerated. And the fact that I can hardly keep up with him is a testament to his eagerness.

At least I can go for a walk while he chases whatever prey in sight. *Walking is good for the spirit*, as my old mentor always says. I want to believe him, I really do, and both the Amber Father and the Umber Mother know how I desperately need something good in my life.

I scale the decomposing body of a fallen fir and think about the only problem with walking; when you do it alone, you leave your mind to wander away to places you do not know and did not intend. But I do know its destination. And I do not like it when my mind wanders there.

But I can't help it.

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

Then 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 by chance just as she was about to go on reconnaissance. She was 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. Had I 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 between us. She told me how she and her lizard missed me and my wolf. I had to remind myself to not read too much into that, however hard that was. *And, well, she didn't need to know my thoughts*. She had carried on excusing herself with being busy, which was true; the Ironbark Scouts 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. According to my Spiritbound, I had done nothing but stand there afterwards, watching them hurry off.

I feel a sudden *SNAP*, taking me back to the wet forests. Putting fingers to my unusually long canines, I taste the blood in my mouth that isn't there. The metallic flavours tells me that my wolf's hunt was successful, a little to my dismay but so things must be.

I search the forest floor for anything that will take this nasty, almost dry, flavour away. Without luck, I instead pick up some melting snow, removing any dirt, and give that a try. The snow's abilities are found wanting. At least my Spiritbound 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.

Right on cue I start thinking about my childhood friend again; being in the beginning of her patrol, she shouldn't be too far away. I even wonder if she might be nearby. A part of me hopes that she is but I try to make a conscious effort of telling myself no. Besides, her Scout partner would be there alongside her. This inner conflict 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 to move along, my bones freeze yet another time and not because of the chill winds.

It's them. Again. My childhood friend and her Scout partner, her lover, and their Spiritbounds. Walking and gliding between the trees they still haven't seen me. 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. The hopeful dress leaves the ground when my childhood friend stands up on her toes and wraps her arms around the neck of her partner and lover. That's when I close my senses.

When I open my eyes 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, it cannot be true.

My mind begs me to do what I continually fail, just like how I fail everything else in my life; it begs to be convinced. My mind desperately needs to be told that our own eyes are not to be trusted. And so I try, albeit it with no more than half a heart, a tired heart. What I'm looking at isn't real. And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest now, he takes off her dress now-

Hisses of death. The three arrows fly swiftly through the cool air of the Cycle's early Spring. I hardly notice them before they pierce my robes, the arrowheads effortlessly travelling through, poking my thick, dark green cloak, braided of a single leaf from the Oak Between Realms, on the other side: Two arrows to the lungs, one for my stomach. I drop to my knees. I cannot breathe, my stomach is sick and cramping, and my heart hurts. Strange. *Was it not only three arrows?*

I don't have a lot of other thoughts running through my head here in my last moments, not even who might have wanted us dead. The pain I've felt ever since the past Cycle's Summer has been unbearable, so I should be thanking him or her and their accurate arrows. I just wish that my Spiritbound was here, 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.

My toes are trying to grab the green grass and I'm pretty sure that I used to like the colour of the innumerable straws. The suns are warming my bare feet, and a little bit of my legs, sitting here in the shade of a beech by Rootspan Lake. I don't have many thoughts, chin buried in my arms, arms crossed on my knees. The waters are calm in contrast to the many Fae Folk travelling across the giant root, bridging the lake banks before neatly disappearing back into the ground on both sides. From this distance, they resemble ants going to and from their hill. Ants working tirelessly on a day that they might call beautiful in this Cycle's new Summer.

Except I don't see the beauty of the day. I'm not sure that I even know what beauty looks like anymore. Everything might as well be dreary, damp, and cold. I don't care.

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

I wonder why we chose to sit here by the lake in the first place. 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 stretching far and wide. Maybe follow the suns being chased by the moon. Our first kiss. We were so young that we hardly knew what love was.

One time we even saw the dancing lights colour up the dark, glinting sky. That will never happen again. I have no desire to seek out the night lights nor even experience them now. What made them so special was that I saw them with her. Just the four of us and no one else. My childhood friend, my wolf, and her lizard, laughing and dancing alongside the colours of the night. When I last spoke to my childhood friend, she invited us to her wedding at the Revelries of this Cycle's Winter. Now she'll want her husband-to-be by her side and experience the lights with him instead of me. 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 dead 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 we were bringing her 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 I have no luck with tears either. Not like it matters anyway.

I ask my Spiritbound what to do. He answers with a snore and changes his posture only a little bit, 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 more often than not the latter, sadly. I would ignore me as well after being asked the same question over and over again if my help wasn't heeded.

A new idea crosses my mind. Maybe not "new" as it isn't the first time the idea comes to me, though I have never actually said it aloud. I ask my Spiritbound what he thinks of going out into the world, the world beyond the Oak Between Realms. It would just be him and I. I know it to be unheard of for us Faeans to leave our Trees Between Realms, of our own volition at least, but I still pose the question.

The large wolf finally sits up and looks at me with his 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 I can feel the idea will be difficult to uproot already. I don't tell my wolf that but I think he already knows. He usually does.

His answer comes without much 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 him. I don't actually believe it.

How hope would even go about returning to someone like me, I do not know, burying my chin back into my arms and knees. And right then my attention is drawn away from the still waters and the warmth of the Cycle's Summer.

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 are weaved together, him lying on the green grass, she still in her dress with its colours slightly brighter. That dress which haunts me so.

I hear my childhood friend's giggle and know what's coming next. I know it all too well by now and don't even take my eyes away. I am bound to see their kiss no matter what I do, no matter what I tell myself, tell my exhausted heart. I should know that it isn't happening, it isn't real. 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 at last as I close my eyes and brace for death.