



Ballad of the Seven Up Sprite

Brian Koscienski & Chris Pisano

DEADWILLOW WAS A PIXIE-DUST MINING TOWN INDISTINGUISHABLE from any other. Faeries with sunken cheeks and hardened brows ended their day by spending their hard-earned pixie-dust on honeysuckle cider, wild forest nymphs and a tulip petal bed to lie on only to repeat the process the following day. The main street, worn dirt bare, passed through the town like an afterthought, leading from the thick forest to the pixie-dust mines. Taverns and inns, carved deep into the trunks of the trees that lined the street, flourished no more or less than any other tavern or inn in any other town. Then, for one brief, glimmering moment in time, the town became much, much different—he arrived.

La-la-li sat on an acorn chair, her doll in her hands: the body in her left hand, the doll's head in her right. She sat on the porch outside her father's tavern, and, even though cheerful song and laughter spilled out from the windows, she sobbed. Her favorite toy—her best friend—broken. Her heart had made plans to sob all day, but her eyes saw something that made her heart concede. A shadow of enormous proportions glided across the dirt street, and then circled in front of the tavern, in front of La-la-li. But as it circled, it became smaller; with each swirl the shadow halved. Just as La-la-li saw what caused the unprecedented shadow, it settled within the soft cloud of dust it created and looked her in the eye—a large, crimson cardinal.

The other birds tied to the tavern's hitching post chirped, flapped and hopped, agitated by the arrival of a newcomer. Sparrows and starlings, with the occasional chickadee, kicked dirt

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and pebble as they danced defensively. La-la-li watched in stunned silence, her tears refusing to stop. She knew this bird, knew of the stories and tales abound, knew who it belonged to—the Seven Up Sprite, the most wanted faerie in the land.

La-la-li noticed right away the faerie's spurs as he dismounted; so rare for a faerie to walk instead of fly. She assumed why when she saw his wings—gnarled and torn, pock-marked with holes, short and aggressive like a horsefly's rather than full and regal like a dragonfly's, the typical accoutrements of most faeries. Other than the shocking condition of his wings, it was said that this faerie was rather unassuming, neither tall nor short, ate only when hungry, but didn't work unless he had to. La-la-li wondered why people feared him so. His spurs clanked and his long, tattered jacket flowed as he made his way across the porch to the tavern door. The spurs' noises stopped only when he did, to cast a stare at the little faerie girl sitting on an acorn chair, holding a broken doll.

"Can . . . can you fix her?" La-la-li asked, not knowing what else to say.

Tipping his wide brimmed hat, he replied, "M'afraid I can't sew," and pushed open the swinging doors. His spurs once again clanked as he entered the tavern.

The music stopped. The singing and merriment ceased. Bewilderment became the new companion to every soul in the tavern as the Seven Up Sprite sidled up to the bar. Shocked by the sight, many of the faeries forgot how to use their wings to hover and fell to the floor.

Awkward situations would be nothing new to the Sprite, had he the propensity to feel anything other than terminal indifference. Deadwillow was no different from any other town, and this tavern was no different from any other he had stepped in before. He ordered a honeysuckle cider, his request breaking the utter silence. His first few sips echoed through the room, until other patrons gathered their wits and whispered among themselves. Halfway through his drink, conversations grew in volume, now nothing more than idle chatter. By the time he ordered his second cider, the music returned, as did the cavalier atmosphere. Just like every other tavern he had been to before—except for one thing. A woman.

From the corner of his eye, the Seven Up Sprite caught a glimpse of her at the other end of the bar. He did his best to keep from looking at her, because he knew what kind of magic a forest nymph like her possessed; a magic not learned in any book or apprenticeship, but the nature-given magic of effortless beauty. With skin as dark as tree bark and hair as green and thick as summer meadow, he knew she was trouble. To his surprise, though, she was receiving it, not giving it.

During his second cider, the Sprite saw a half-drunk faerie approach the nymph. Being twice her age and cross-eyed, the rancid faerie made proposition after proposition. His ears worked as well as his mouth, slurred and sloppy, because no matter how many times she shunned his advances, he came back for more. By the time the Sprite finished his fourth cider, the dullard across the bar grabbed the nymph by her wrists, ignoring her protests.

"Let go of me!"