

FIELD OF HONOR

A Shadow Fae Story

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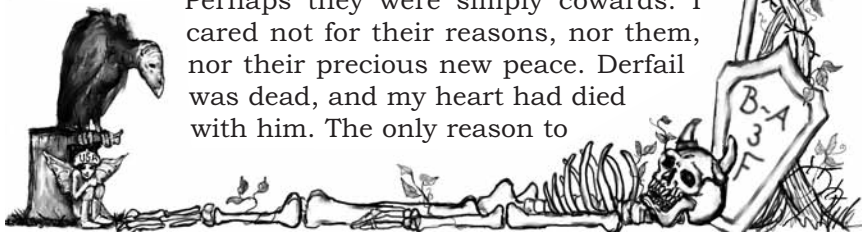
I WOULD NOT MEET HIM ON THE FIELD OF HONOR, OF which the poets sing. I had already lost too much on that field: my way of life, my queen, and my husband. Others had stood against him, sword to sword, magic to magic, and all had failed. Our battle would take place on a darker plain, one where honor is nowhere to be found, and justice turns her face away. It was up to me to win the day with an assassin's blade, or to die in the attempt.

I plotted the death of the Unseelie King as carefully as I could, knowing that there would be but one chance for victory, and many for defeat. The King of All Faerie, they called him now, those sycophants content to lay down their weapons after a thousand years of war. The Stone of Kingship had declaimed him our lord, on that very same battlefield where he had slain my husband with his accursed blade.

For too many of our people, Seelie and Unseelie alike, that was excuse enough to set aside the ancient war and bend their knees to an upstart changeling with human blood in his veins. Excuse enough to forget all who had died, to set aside revenge.

Perhaps they had found something else to live for, some better reason to allow the dead to lie uneasy.

Perhaps they were simply cowards. I cared not for their reasons, nor them, nor their precious new peace. Derfail was dead, and my heart had died with him. The only reason to



continue breathing was to make sure that his killer would follow him to the darker lands.

I had no illusions as to my own survival afterward, and so made no plans for escape, only for entry. The king lived within the Unseelie stronghold of Knockma; no doubt it was more comfortable for one of his ilk, even though the two halves of Faerie had been reunited. There was day and night again, rather than an endless winter moon, or a raging desert under eternal noon. Growing things bloomed once more, where they had before starved for water or for sun, and the scent of jasmine and roses filled the air. Had Derfail survived, perhaps I would have rejoiced at the new life come to our lands, but as it was, it was merely a reminder that he would never again fashion a rose from glamour, or lick my blood from its thorns.

I went in the day, when the upstart would be at his weakest, and I at my most powerful. The season favored me as well, although a tiny voice of doubt whispered that he had stood beneath a summer sky when he had laid Derfail low, and cut down Queen Siubhan.

I slipped beneath the great mound of Knockma, past the green guardians who recognized my right to be there, as fae. Even as my Seelie blood curdled at the earthen walls of the passage, my lip curled in a grim smile, at the folly of a king who opened his palace to all his people. Was he so foolish that he truly believed there was no danger? Did he delude himself into thinking that all loved him, merely because a piece of rock declared him the Faerie King?

Even though the sun outside was high, the great hall was filled with our folk, Seelie and Unseelie alike. There were blue-skinned hags with long, sharp-nailed fingers, and sprites that smelled of burning leaves, and smiling ganconers, with their buckled hats and pipes. There were men with scales, who dripped slime on the marble floor, and ben sidhe in green dresses. Even lowly asrai conversed with cold-glowing will-o-the-wisps, and I wondered that such base creatures were allowed to mingle with the Gentry. Yet another change made by this new king, no doubt; it was said that the conditions in which he had been raised were as low as his new status was high.

One thing was conspicuous by its absence: no human captives moved among the throng. I had never seen the point in such traffic myself, but many of my kin delighted in making slaves of midwives or knights, or in swapping their own babes for mewling human pups. The new king himself had been such a changeling,