



Within The Guardian Bell

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SUZANNE WAS WORRIED. VERY WORRIED. LANCE HAD NEVER FELT SO much anxiety from a fae as what flowed through her now.

How did he know? Even though the pillion pad behind him was empty, Lance could feel her clinging to his right arm. Sparing a fleeting glance from the road, he looked down to where the black muscle shirt left his arm bare. The tattoo image of his lady had shifted as only magic could allow. A link to her soul, tied to his empathic gift, the tat reflected whatever Suzanne was feeling. Right now the skin art hid itself between his arm and the curve of his chest, all four limbs wrapped around his biceps as if it were a lifeline. It was the closest he'd ever seen Suzanne get to being clingy.

She might have been seamlessly healed after their encounter with the *Dubh Fae*, but her spirit bore the scars absent from her body. She worried about him, because the Faerie Court had decided he, a Halfling, was too much threat to let be. They'd hurt her to get to him, and she still wasn't over it.

Neither was he.

It left him raw and sent him raging if he thought on it too long. This was the first time he'd left her side since he and the Wild Hunt Motor Club rode to her rescue a week ago. It couldn't be helped... club business that couldn't be put off, but she wasn't handling the separation well.

Again: neither was he.

That was the reason his fool ass was out here, without gear,
in weather even a SQUID would have more sense than to

ride in. His teeth ground against one another as he revved his '47 Knucklehead. His business done, he now raced back to Delilah's, where Suzanne waited for him, reasonably safe and surrounded by the other members of the club. He had to keep telling himself that. Though mindspeaking was not one of his gifts, Lance thought real hard at her. *I'm coming, babe. I'm coming.*

The power of his engine thrummed through him, making him one with leather and chrome and steel. If he listened real close, he could hear a mad tinkling as Suzanne's latest gift, a tiny pewter guardian bell she'd attached to his swing arm, was buffeted in the wake of his speed. Behind him, the hiss of four wheels on wet pavement blended with the muted rumble of some cager's engine, a reminder he had to keep his mind on the slab. He wasn't riding Front Door right now, with the club strung out behind him, and any biker going solo had to watch his own back.

As if to reinforce his thoughts, a Q-Tip in an equally ancient Buick DeSoto passed too close on his left, sending him swerving toward a rainbow-covered puddle.

"Ah, crap!" Lance swore as his tires hit the slick and lost their grip on the road. The Knucklehead dipped sideways, setting the bell to ring wildly. His stomach clenched hard until he brought the bike vertical once more.

"Get some glasses or give up the license, Grandma!" he yelled after the oblivious old woman.

He fought the skid and won, but it was close. When he got back, he'd be sure to tell Suzanne how well her gift had protected him. Mostly potholes lurked in puddles these days. Helmet or no, hit one of those in this weather and he'd earn himself another set of broken wings. *That settles it*, he thought, *time to get off the road a while.* A quick glance down at his gas gauge confirmed it was time for a fluid exchange, anyway. Lance moved into the Bike Lane, triggering a string of horn blasts from the cagers to either side as he passed them by.



As the biker rode away down the center of the road, the puddle bubbled and seethed. Up from its shallow depth popped an odd, tiny creature, clutching at its ears. "Smear doesn't like the faerie-man. Not at all. Or his bloody little shrill bell. Smear wants to grind his face, crush the bell." Crouched upon the road, he slammed his thick, meaty fists against the asphalt. Microfissures formed: the conception of a pothole.

He was joined by another, and then another, crawling up through the fissures, expanding them, until the puddle was gone. Standing in its place was a troupe of inch-high gremlins, identical in every way: Skin as grey as asphalt, with an oily, rainbow shimmer. Hair long and thick and spiny, like a porcupine mated with a box of nails. A thick white line ran down the center of their faces, like war paint, and along their arms were thick, black squiggles. Like tats or tribal markings, only with the dull gleam of tar snakes. Each finger was like a spike, reminiscent