

The Complete Guide to Fey

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Preface

Dear Reader,

My name is Tolendrin Coe, and this book is my life's work. I began this in my youth, when I fell in love with a dryad named Nemethe, the last of her kind on my bleak world. Knowing her for but a tenth of my life and the smallest fraction of her own has made me the man I am today. It set me upon my quest, when I had previously been content to live a blind life of toil and selfishness, like all the others of my kind.

On my world, a place of smoke and mud, the fey were hated – symbols of an ancient, dangerous way that was to be blotted out in favor of the new and the easily commanded. What value did wood, magic and dreams have against the power of steam, logic and steel? Mankind united in a confederation that spanned the world and set about mastering nature, which only doomed itself. A pogrom was in place since long before I was born to wipe out the fey and to destroy any magics that could not be controlled by mankind. There was a bounty on dead fey, and I grew up serving the local “heroes” at my father's coaching inn as they came from the woods with carts filled with a battered menagerie of corpses. I learned to think little of this grim work – these were alien beings, horrors capable of warping a man's perceptions or of transforming us, enemies of civilization who wanted us dead. We had to slaughter them, or chaos would reign. Still, I knew the world was losing something when as the years passed, the carts grew emptier and eventually stopped coming.

I was already a man of thirty, living alone in a decrepit inn, when I met her. I remember it clearly. She came to me one night, during a month of stinking rain, about five years after the last of the forest died. Most of the town had moved on, but I and five others had stayed, growing potatoes and eating rats more often than livestock. I saw the distant torch-flames and heard the bellows of the hunters before I saw her stumbling along with an arrow in her side. She was gray with mud, half naked, with a cowl about her head. I ran out to meet her after she collapsed in the muck and carried her to my room at the inn. I pulled out the arrow and barely noticed that it was capped in iron. I also found a weak little seedling, with roots bound in cloth. She winced in her slumber as I washed the grime away from the wound with vinegar and applied a white-hot fire poker to it. I drew a bath for her and placed her within. Though she was unconscious, as the mud fell away from her flesh, I was rapt. Even before I saw the leaves that grew in her hair, I knew that she was magical. When she was clean, I wrapped her in a bedcloth, placed her on my bed and sat on the floor watching her. When the men arrived at my door, I told them that I would gladly put them up but that I had not seen “The Demon” they spoke of. It was fortunate that they were drunk on ale and greed, because they declined my offer of hospitality and moved on. I remember standing there with the door open as they got into their steaming iron coach and rolled away. For the first time in my life, I saw their ugliness. And it

scared me.

Over the next week, I nursed her back to health. At first I was terrified, because she could not keep down an ounce of the meat broth I prepared for her, but to my surprise, she fared better with hardened cider. Eventually she awoke, and I spilled forth a confession of love for her. It must have been strange to hear, but she merely thanked me in the airiest, yet emotion-laden voice I had ever heard. My fate was sealed then.

We grew close over the months. Nemethe told me of the place that she had been heading for, a special place in the west on an island invisible to man. On it was a burrow, she said, or a doorway. She told me that it led away from this world and into the realms of her kind. She regaled me with tales of these other worlds, some with men like myself, places where the fey were not hunted and even places where they were respected as gods. I was fascinated. I had never dreamed that mankind lived beyond my world or that the realms of the fey could be more than a hell to one such as myself. In fact until that point, I doubted their existence at all. I was fascinated but afraid.

She urged me to come with her, but I told her that I could not. She pleaded with me and said she could help me see the world as it was, but still, I refused. I loved my home, and I owed it to my father's memory to keep the inn. I can't believe it now, but I was willing to risk losing her to keep the inn. I was astounded when she told me that she would stay with me and move on after I passed. I realized then that she returned my love. It was also the one and only time she acknowledged my mortality.

The years began to roll by: five, ten, then fifteen years. The time, and the birth of three girls every bit like their mother, had left her unchanged, save for a tiny scar at her side. The time had not been so kind to me. Already, my hair had begun to gray, and creases had begun around my mouth and under my eyes. At least they were from smiling.

Nemethe kept her promise to show me the world as it was or as it could be. I remembered a fleeting childhood dream of becoming a poet and storyteller and composed reams of verse in her and our daughters' honor. At first clumsy, I gradually learned to use the simple beauty that she had given me eyes to see, and became proficient, though I only shared my work with my family. I was complete.

With her arrival, and the planting of her seedling behind my inn, the soil had grown fertile again in but a year. Our little village grew once more into a town, though a small wood separated my inn from the rest of it by this time. I found work as a blacksmith, a trade I had picked up in my youth. Nemethe and the children never came to visit the shop, for the iron I worked pained them and I had to be certain to wash furiously before returning home, lest my touch injure them. I became wealthy as I tried to give her and the children what I imagined a human family would want. I worked long into the night and came home



exhausted, but happy. The family would often be out in the grove behind the inn when I arrived, and I used to fall asleep smiling under the stars as they frolicked in the night or went into the forest. They were loving but somehow distant. Despite my love for my daughters and their mother, I knew that I was alone in some way. Or perhaps it was that *they* were – my love merely allowed me to feel their own pain; I cannot be sure, even now.

We used to play games. I used to run myself ragged to play with the girls, late into the night. We would all wander the wood, and they would bring me fruits and nuts, and even if I was not hungry, I'd eat. All that they knew was that their father was a mortal and that he needed to eat. I remember my shock when my eldest daughter, then a toddler, first crawled into the side of a tree and disappeared. I was terrified, but Nemethe laughed and reached in to retrieve her. As they grew, I would struggle to keep up as they ran into one tree and jumped out from another, throughout what the children began to call The Hopewood... We used to play games.

We tried to keep our life hidden from the rest of the village, but everyone knew that something strange was afoot. The women – and my daughters were already women, even a mere 10 years after they were born – would wear cloaks and veils whenever they went out by day. They did not speak in public, but even still the boys and men lusted after them ... until it became too much trouble and their mother and I agreed that they should stay on our grounds during the day. But it was already too late.

While famine decimated the rest of the world, our little pocket of green was flourishing. Daily, there came refugees from less fortunate areas of the confederation. With the renewed growth of our forests, some of these newcomers saw the chance to strike it rich. Woodcutters became a plague, almost before I could notice. I was a fool, and before this, had failed to see the danger in prosperity. My wife and daughters were victims; they could not betray their own natures. Had I been smart, I would have gathered them up and left, but I was too happy in our home.

Word spread, and the confederation descended upon our growing wood, chopping and devouring. Soon we could not go out at night, and I abandoned my smithy to stay with my family. Eventually our grove was claimed by the military, and they began to chop down our trees. I pleaded with the soldiers, but they laughed at me. Nemethe and the girls came out and tried to charm them, but they had been hardened against mercy by years of slaughter. As soon as they realized what was before them, they attacked. The trees were saved, but at such a terrible cost. I fought with the soldiers but was nearly killed with a single blow from a heavy axe. Half conscious, I saw the girls fall one by one as I tried to scream. As the axe fell towards Nemethe, I lost consciousness. The soldiers must have gotten their bounty. I wish I could say that I hope justice is served somehow, but the pain leaves me too weary for anger most of the time.

When I awoke some time later, it was raining. I staggered into the house, but could find no sign of my family. In anguish, I fell on the floor and hardly moved for a week. At some point a neighbor found me, and I was reluctantly nursed back to health. For the next few years I was a hermit, as my world became bleak



once again. I stayed up long into the night and stared out the window into what had once been The Hopewood, now little more than a few stands of rotting timber. I would lie back tearfully and have waking dreams of the past. Every night, as I fell into fitful sleep, I could almost hear a voice whispering “Remember them...”



As he grows old, a man only grows more tired. His measure is found in what it is he tires of. I grew tired of being tired of life. I knew that there was something better than what my kind had made for this world, as I had known it first hand. I had to know the joy of life again, if only to honor the memories of my family. I decided to set out to find the doorway that Nemethe had been seeking. I was beyond fear for my life or love for the world of men which had destroyed me. I no longer cared about my oath to my father, or the fate of the world that had given birth to me. I left it all.

I wandered westward, through the plague-ridden highlands and vales, through sodden swamps, beyond the cities of man’s great legacy, which spewed their bile into the waters and vomited ash into the skies. As I traveled, I left my moribund world behind in my heart. Eventually, I came to the sea-calm and dead. I procured a tiny fishing boat from the dock of a dead shanty town, and I set out over the ghastly, oily waters. I had never sailed before in my life, but I had no fear – only desire and rage. I was an old man, aged by grief and time, but as I rowed on the strange current, I felt my burden lighten, despite the gray that surrounded me above and below.

It seems that the world had grown spiteful in its death throes, and whatever ancient, deposed sea god ruled this stretch of slime decided that it would rather destroy me than allow me to reach my goal. A storm rose up and battered my little skiff. I had not known enough to bring a bucket to bail with, and my boat was quickly lost. I was at sea, and I was alone.

I must state it again – I felt no fear, only regret that I might not see the glory of the realms of my love and my daughters. As wave after wave teased the life from me and threw me high into the air or plunged me deep under the brine, I felt my anger boiling up. I began to argue with the storm, every time I could gulp some air. I shouted against the winds and against the gods who had made a world so flawed. Every blasphemy I knew, I cast forth. I didn’t care what I said, as long as something cut deep enough to get my tormentor’s attention.

Soon the winds slowed enough that I could hear myself, and I began to plead with the sea. I asked it if it had ever known true love and what it would do to honor it. I asked that I be allowed to keep the legacy of my wife and children and to tell the story of the world so that it might be remembered after it had died ... I spoke from my heart with truth and passion. I recited some of the poetry I had written for Nemethe. Finally, the sea seemed to

understand, because the waters calmed, the air chilled and a fog rose. I floated for hours or days before I sank under the water. My feet touched land only a few feet below the surface.

I almost gasped water, as I pushed off the bottom with renewed strength. When I surfaced, I saw before me a forested island and the breaking dawn. The waters around me were blue like the brightest dye, and their surface sparkled like motes of fire. The air was warm, and I saw that this island was surrounded by a ring of fog which kept a respectful distance. I crawled forth onto the sandy beach and I slept, in peace.



Bright light passed through my eyelids and brought me to awareness. I saw a being – a woman – kneeling over me, as beautiful as Nemethe or my daughters. She was pouring something fresh down my throat, like water, but clearer, more refreshing. I was delirious. All I said was “Nemethe.” “Nemethe,” over and over again.

I came to my senses the next night, under a full moon. I saw soft, colored lights wandering over the treetops, almost beckoning, but my warder was nowhere to be seen. The island was bathed in blue moonlight, and there were no signs of civilization. I mused in amazement that I could sit on this beach for the rest of my days, so unaccustomed to the glory of fairy places was I. But I remembered my purpose and stood. Taking one last look around, I marched into the forest with as much bravado as I possessed, fearing now for the first time. I feared that I would be found wanting and that my mortal blood forbade me from passing though this doorway Nemethe had told me of. I feared that our story would never be told.

As I wandered in that fairy wood, I found myself transfixed at times by memories. Everything I came across brought them back to me: toadstools like the ones that filled my stables while she was with me, the moss that covered every rock on the path, and especially the fresh, earthy smell of loam that filled this place more intimately than any perfume. I also had the sense that I was being watched, like I often did as my daughters playfully stalked me by “walking the trees.” I wept as I traveled, silently listening to the sound of oak leaves rustling in the breeze and the soft padding of my steps upon the moss.

I came to a place where my path was blocked by a pile of mossy boulders, engraved with strange, interwoven patterns. I climbed it without pause. As I crested its top, I saw a clearing ahead, with a circle of tall stones bridged by long blocks of the same. In the center was a ring of spotted toadstools, waving in concert to a melody I could not hear.

A woman appeared at the far edge of the circle, wreathed in glorious light, so that I could not see her face at first. Still, I recognized her as the one who had ministered to me when I came ashore. She stepped into the stone circle and walked to the center of the toadstool ring.



She looked at one of the undulating toadstools that surrounded her. To my astonishment it hopped across the circle to rest before her. The others spread out to fill the hole it had left. Before my eyes, the lone toadstool transformed into a colorful, spotted goblet, filled with liquid. Gracefully, the woman's eyes rose to meet mine.

"Tolendrin Coe, I am called Mylistriel, last Queen of the fey on this world. I saw your face in reverie, and I have awaited your arrival." Her voice held deep sadness.

"I am and honored that you would stay behind on my account," I said.

She nodded. "You are not of the Blood; this place was never meant for you," she said.

"I know," I said.

"I am meant to ask you a riddle, to prove your worth," she said.

"Alas, I have no mind for riddles," I said.

"Many of your kind do not," she said. "So tell me, what is it that gives you the right to pass?"

"It is nothing more than true love," I replied.

"Indeed, nothing more than that. I knew her as well, as I know all of my subjects," she said. "Drink of this cup. It is the wine of dreams. If you are worthy, it shall open your way, but if you are not, it shall become deadly poison in your throat." She paused. "But know that whatever your lot in this may be, you are an exceptional mortal. It is but the dearest few among your kind who can cast their world aside in order to see ours." Silence, once again. "Now child, drink – if you will."

Destiny truly does conspire, sometimes – I learned that first from Nemethe. My fate was out of my hands, and all that remained to me was to discover it. I stepped forward and knelt. I reached for the goblet, while the Queen's gaze bore into me. With shaking, arthritic hands, I lifted the cup and brought it to my lips. I tilted it ... and drank.

The light faded, and in shock I looked upward. Before me stood the Queen, bereft of her corona and smiling gently. The bushes around me rustled, and we were surrounded by a timid, gentle host of creatures stranger than any I've ever seen. Here, there was a round little man in a gentleman's hat and the hindquarters of a boar, there a lithe, womanly form pranced towards us while pixies whirled about her head. A small, quilled, ball somersaulted forward and uncurled to reveal a wee little man, and a faun sprang down from a tree limb. All about us within the circle were fey, of every size and description.

"I suppose I have passed the test, then? The drink has not turned to poison," I said. Vigor I had not known in years was spreading through my limbs, and I stood without an ache.

"Aye. However, the test was not in the drink, but in the drinking," she said. "We have waited a long time for your arrival." And with this she beckoned.

I stepped towards her, and she turned her back on me and waved her hand over the ground in a long arc. The moss of the clearing shimmered and the standing pillars of stone glowed with a soft blue light. It trailed off the faces of the stones in curling tendrils, which reached for one another and touched. Tiny

motes of color formed and died in the air, increasing in number until I could see nothing else. Soon these moved to the spaces between the stones and coalesced into walls of light. These walls turned misty and faded away, leaving a different, breathtaking vista between each triad of stones. It felt like dying; all I knew was peace.

"These are some of the realms that are open to you, Tolendrin Coe," Mylistriel said. "You are free to choose, but if you travel with me to the place of my creation, I shall teach you many, many things."

"I would like that. Can you tell me of Nemethe?" I asked.

Already the fey around us were parting ways – bounding, flitting, or stepping through portals in small groups. Each stopped briefly to acknowledge their Queen in their own way, and she nodded to each in turn.

"I should like that very much, if you would do me a similar kindness. I never met your daughters, but I knew them in my heart."

We stood in silence for a long while as we watched her subjects spread out across myriad worlds.

"I am the last of my people on this world. When I leave, the world will fall into an age of darkness," she said.

"It already has, my lady. Leave them to it," I said.

She nodded reluctantly. "That is the way it must be." She stepped forward, towards a portal no other fey had used, one that opened to a misty, sunlit forest, filled with ancient, stately trees. She turned to me and smiled. "Perhaps we will take the long way around." We stepped through together, and I began my second lifetime, a journey through the realms of Nightmare and Dream.



Epilogue

This book is the fruit of my journeys among the realms of the fey and across the multitude of worlds I've seen. The conversations I had with Nemethe and Mylistriel, the observations I made of my children, and the secret wonders I've seen have all contributed to this, my final work. I am an old man now, and despite the gift of longevity I've been given, it is the way of all mortals to pass into dust. I'm due, but I have time for one more journey... one more dream. Come, dear reader, dream with me.

Tolendrin Coe, 3rd Springtide, Year of Stardust
For Nemethe and the girls ... I remember.

