

Chapter 7

War at Ten

Mark walked into his room with Sky riding on his shoulder. Both were laughing from their latest foray into Fey culture. The book was tucked under his arm, with the pages for the Fey language clearly marked with one of his favorite bookmarks. While he hid the book under his bed, Sky went to the window to watch the gathering dusk. The good humor withered like vines in autumn.

“My friends will be here soon.” She ventured.

Mark grunted non-committedly. He knew the time had come for him to make his move, and he dreaded it. His questing fingers found the clothing and gun box. Inside he turned cold. He had a pretty good idea what was going to happen next.

“Please Mark. I have to go.” Sky pleaded. Her voice cut him like a knife.

“No, you don’t.” It was now or never. He steeled himself for what he was going to do.

Sky gasped. “How can you say that?! I thought we were friends! Family! My people and friends are dying out there, and you want me to stay here and babysit? Mary means a lot to me too, you know. But these are my friends! I have to help them... What are you doing?” She asked when she noticed he was still on the floor. He thought she must have finally caught sight of the clothes and box he was pulling into sight.

Mark placed everything on the bed and opened the lid of the box. The clothes were just his jacket and rain pants (he had dressed in the black jeans and shirt after his morning shower). No one had commented. *That is because no one would think that I would be stupid enough to do what I’m doing*, he chuckled to himself. Inside the case the gun lay revealed, gleaming with a cold purpose. Mark lifted the Thompson automatic rifle from the box began pouring the BB’s into the magazine

He became aware of Sky hovering next to him, looking down at the items on the bed, then looking at him, then looking back down.

“Mark, what are you doing?” She asked again a bit more firmly. She sounded like his mother.

“I’m so sorry Sky.” Mark told her, his voice cracking. Her eyes widened in sudden understanding. She clapped her hands to her ears, but it was too late.

“You will listen.” Her hands came down, her face wreathed in glistening tears. “No, no.” She kept moaning, but Mark relentlessly continued.

“You won’t say a word of this to Mary, you will stay with her. You will tell me where the Glade is.” His orders sounded like rough blocks of granite, even to his ears. Sky choked out the location of the Glade, just a clearing away from the one he had caught her in. Listening to the specifics, Mark grabbed the guns batteries from the wall charger plus some extra ones for the flashlight. Sliding them into the coat pocket, he also placed the roll of duct tape and extra boxes of BBs into his other pocket.

Ready, he slid open the window and slithered out. The moon hid behind a thin blanket of clouds, casting very little light in the night. It would conceal him wonderfully, but he also was aware that it would do the same for his enemies just as well. What he would attempt this evening would be dangerous, maybe too dangerous. But he had to try, and he felt confident he could handle a few spiders regardless of their size. *They’re just bugs. I’ll crush them.* He boasted to himself.

“Sky,” he turned to her and spoke in a gentler tone. She looked at him through puffy eyes. “You couldn’t have helped them much, you have to know that. I can, and I will at least make up for my mistake to you.” He breathed in and out, trying to quell his rising fears. “Stay with Mary.” He admonished. “You are a huge help to her. Help her get better, and take care of yourself, and you are part of my family.” He finished with a whisper. Leaving her there, he jogged towards the forest, his house vanishing in the darkness.

He waited until he got to the edge of the woods before turning on his light. There seemed to be a strange feeling over the trees and in the air, like it should be biting cold with the snow piled high instead of a supposedly hot August night. No needle or leaf rustled as he walked, but everywhere it seemed he could hear a rough clicking noise, much like two cheap toys smacking into one another in some huge child hands.

Mark walked with the rifle unslung, the beam of intense light stabbing into the dark. The safety was off and his finger lay on the trigger. He could feel the slight vibration and hear the soft hum of the compressor keeping the rifle under pressure and ready to fire. *Is this what it was like for you, grandpa?* He asked the night silently. To him, it seemed almost like he was walking in his grandfather's footsteps, that long lonely week decades ago.

A flash of movement next to the path caught his eye and froze his breath. A tremendous spider, large as a basketball (minus its legs) was walking along the path, pulling a trio of bundles behind it. They rolled and jostled, striking rocks and other things on the path.

Almost without thought, Mark clenched his hand and sent the stream of BBs at the hideous creature. With a terrible shriek of rage and pain the spider dropped the rope holding the cocoons and turned to face him.

Mark kept the trigger down, aiming at the creature's face as it charged in a flowing, jerky gate that was queasy to watch. It chattered angrily, its mouthparts moving and the huge hairy legs were reaching for him. The tiny balls of lead bounced off its armored body, but the redly glowing eyes vanished into shrapnel of goo and gore. The arachnid screeched and fell with its legs curling over it as it slid to a stop not 3 feet from him, dead.

Mark tried to control his gorge. The way the thing had moved, the sense of malice emanating from those eyes had unnerved him more than he would admit. He sent a silent apology to sky, these things were huge and terrifying. He thought about going back, but rejected the notion. *Who would believe me?* He reasoned. By the time he had shown Sky to his parents had gotten them to believe that there was any danger, the village could have been overrun. No, he had to go on.

Walking to the three bundles, he felt a huge wave of relief. They were wriggling slightly, showing that their prisoners were still alive. He was disconcerted to realize however their bonds were skintight, showing the full definition of three people. It looked painfully obvious that one was female, and the other two were very male. There were strange shapes in the backs of the cocoons, and he realized they were the wings smashed against the bodies. He hoped they weren't too badly damaged.

How do I cut the cords off of them without hurting them? He wondered. He reached down and picked up the female one, when he touched her, the bundled contorted wildly as the fairy inside thrashed her body in a desperate effort to escape.

“Hush, hush. I’m a friend.” He whispered to her. He picked up the other two as they had ceased moving. Pulling out his pocket knife, Mark carefully and lightly sawed at the thinner threads that were interwoven with the heavier cord.

It turned out to be slow tedious work. Every thread resisted the blade of his knife like a strong cable, but they eventually parted and he was able to slide the larger ones off the bodies of the three prisoners until they stood in his hands, free from their bonds.

The fairies were in sorry shape. Webbing stuck to their hair and clothing, their wings were slightly crumpled and weathered. It looked painful, but Mark realized there wasn’t any time to check on them to see if any further damage had been done or even to see if they could fly again. He could feel time working against him. He needed to get to the village and make sure the rest of Sky’s friends were all right.

“I’m terribly sorry about this.” He said apologetically to the three fairies. Sticking them into his coat pocket, he unslung his rifle and pushed on. He kept the path on his right until he reached the clearing that he had captured Sky in. Crossing the broad Meadow, he entered the thick ring of trees on its far northwestern corner.

Under the shadow of those trees, Mark became aware of the sounds of battle echoing faintly through the trunks. Soft screams as if from far away, the strange clacking noise that he realized must be more spiders (he gripped his rifle tighter then patted the pocket reassuringly that held his spare ammunition) and something else. A voice, dry as a desert, cold as the depths of winter, as dark as a cavern.

The Dark One, Mark thought. It must be. Well, I’ll drive him off. We’ll see how much he likes my rifle!

Mark felt a mighty hero now. He had killed one spider, and it gave him a tremendous boost in his confidence. *And ego*, he laughed to himself, imagining his sister’s gentle teasing. It made him smile a moment, before the closeness of the trees pressed down on him again.

Mark heard a ghostly cello playing, so soft and faint that he thought he imagined it. The note came again and he realized it had come from his pocket. Looking down he saw the small fairy looking up at him, her features were pained, but she seemed to be asking him a question.

"I don't know." He whispered back, guessing at what she'd said. "I'm here to get Sky's friends out of danger, and stop this Dark One, if I can."

The fairy looked up at him disbelievingly, and Mark felt defensive. "Hey, this is a Thompson Machine gun that fires nearly a thousand BB's a minute. That's definitely going to make him think twice." He brandished the rifle.

She gave him a doubting look, saying something else, but Mark shrugged at her and kept going. He couldn't understand her as he could with Sky, yet, though he believed he had made the word "danger" out in the last attempt. *I really need to get Sky to help us understand Fey Speech better.* Mark filed the thought away for later, if there was going to be a later.

The trees started thinning ahead, and Mark knew he had arrived at the clearing. He dropped to a crouch and eased carefully and quietly behind a large fir that dominated the other smaller trunks near the clearing. Pressing back against it, he eased his head around to see.

There was a large clearing, surrounded on all sides by stands of young fir and maple, and in the middle of the little glade there grew a tall willow on an island surrounded by a little creek that ran around it and made its way to the other side. Thick rings of mushrooms surrounded the willow and the clearing, a larger one on the outside and a smaller one ringing just outside the water.

Outside the inner ring, massive lean-bodied spiders, even larger than the one he had killed, were battering uselessly at an invisible shield while around the glad fat-bodied ones were spinning webs to creat a silken enclosure to ensnare any that got past their brothers. Above all of them, long slender-bodied spiders hung upside down from their pale threads, great nets stretched between their front feet, waiting to drop on an unlucky fairy and bundle it up nice and tight. Just behind the mushrooms small lights danced to and fro, obviously checking for weaknesses in the shield. Nearby grew strange tall plants with broad, hinged leaves that Mark recognized as a type of Venus Flytrap. To his horror, he noticed that several of them bulged unsightly with bodies that twisted and fought to escape, small fragments of wings fluttering down. He watched as an empty one oriented on a light that had separated

from the others. It glowed eerily in many bright colors, and the light stopped its wild erratic movement, becoming slow and steady as it moved in a dazed manner outside the shield. When it had gotten close enough to the plant, strong green cords emerged from its throat to wrap around arms and legs to bind the unlucky fey tightly, pulling the fairy in and closing its jaws in horrifying slowness, the light disappearing as it did so. Leaving the poor horror-stricken fairy to struggle uselessly against its bonds. Elsewhere along the ring, white cocoons with other fairies were laid out in a row, waiting for collection at the feet of a dark figure in a black cloak and hood.

That's got to be him, but if I shoot him first, will the spiders come after me, or will he lose control of them? Mark wasn't sure, but he knew he had to move fast. Placing the stock to his shoulder, he sighted down the barrel. The flashlight taped to the end threw off his aim a little, but Mark compensated for it before he squeezed the trigger.

There came a loud hiss of air and a slight motion of the rifle as it sent the BB's downfield to the figure. Mark could hear the *plink!* of his rounds hitting the cloaked figure. *The bugger's wearing armor!* Mark realized.

The cowed face turned towards him. Mark flicked the light so it shone directly into the cowl. He caught a glimpse of a heavily scarred, thick browed face with grey skin before the creature threw up a gauntleted hand to block the light, thick steel armor seeming to absorb the light instead of reflect it properly.

There came a terrible shriek of pain, and the spiders turned at the cry. Seeing the light, they charged at Mark all at once, leaping down from the trees and running towards him, mandibles waving and snapping in their strange eerie voices. He pulled the trigger, spraying the area. He had the presence of mind to keep the rifle aimed at the spider's eyes. The light made them rear up, stumbling to a stop and causing the ones behind to run into them. Out of the thirty or so that charged, maybe a dozen rolled over dead. The rest either went berserk as eyes disappeared or retreated under the onslaught. They fell back only to the point where the stinging balls no longer got at their eyes, and the light no longer held any terror for them. Mark counted them and realized he had but eight to handle, the rest having vanished into the forest to lick their wounds. Yet they had accomplished their task.

The charge bought time for the figure to recover. Now he glided forward, pale sword glittering in the night. Mark quickly shone the light into his face again, making him scream and fall back a little. But the spiders began advancing again, with the weapon silent.

Mark felt sweat began beading on his face. He could stop either the spiders or the Dark One but not both. Also, he had launched a lot of BB's downrange in that last charge. He had to be very low, and he desperately wanted to reload the magazine and change the battery out. The battle was going to be disastrous if he didn't think of something quick.

With his left hand he reached into his pocket for the BB's. He felt a bit of movement there but didn't stop to look as he lifted the box up. Still keeping the light level and bright, he turned the rifle sideways to expose the hopper. As the box crossed in front of his vision, he started to see the woman on the box. He nearly groaned in despair. The box was closed! He didn't have enough hands to open it!

"I don't know if you can understand me, but I need your help." Mark told the fairy. "I need you to open the box for me so I can pour in more ammo. If you don't, we're both dead."

The fairy reached over and began opening the carton. Prying at the fold-out, she managed to pull it apart. Now open, she hopped onto the rifle and ran up his arm to his shoulder as he proceeded to fill the magazine. Then, leaving the box open, he shoved it into his pocket, hoping he didn't crush one of the other fey. Flipping the trap shut with his thumb, he righted the rifle and switched the battery back on.

The spiders were nearly on him when his rifle drooped and spat a stream of silver projectiles into their hideous faces. They dropped like stones, and Mark had the light shining back on the Dark One before the latter could close the gap.

The creature retreated to the edge of the meadow as Mark advanced. He stopped at the Fairy Ring and placed the duo in his pocket on the ground. The third stayed on his shoulder.

The man spat a string of syllables, and Mark realized he was talking. His speech sounded menacing, hissing like a snake that was about to strike. What was more, he *understood* it!

"Who are you, who comes to the aid of these lesser beings?"

Mark licked suddenly dry lips, but did not answer. He didn't want to give his family away and put them in danger.

"Come, answer me." He sounded annoyed. "Or are you a mute?"

"It doesn't matter who I am." Mark snapped. He had no idea what a "mute" was, but suspected an insult. "Go away, and I'll let you leave." He added bravely.

Laughter came spitting and cawing from the figure. "Why should I, I ask? You have but one beam of light. You cannot kill me."

"But I can hurt you." Mark retorted. He felt a thrill of victory at his opponent's growl. "So I say again, go away and leave the fairies alone!"

The other changed tack. "Why do you care about such creatures?" A sly note entered the voice. "Do you want them all for yourself, perhaps? I know you have one slave already. You invoked my power, you could not hide that from me, at least. I assure you there's plenty here for the both of us and to spare. You can have any you like! Why not that one riding on your shoulder, hmm? A matched set of friends, perhaps? I can give you her true name, you know."

"No I don't, and it was an accident. I was trying to learn her language at the time, and you tricked me." Mark accused. "I will find a way to free Sky, and I will stop you from hurting anyone else."

"Ha!" The laugh came loud and deep, the sound of boulders rumbling down the mountainside heralding a deadly avalanche. "You think it is a simple thing that you have done? To be broken like a piece of string at your leisure? It is irrevocable, child. Her only escape from you is her death."

"No! You're lying!"

"Am I? You know her True Name, Son of Adam. I tell you there is no way for her to be free from you know. I knew about that aspect when I sent the spell to you in that book."

"You sent me the spell? Why?" Mark asked, startled.

"It is simple, really. The Fey's magic protected them from me, and kept them hidden from my sight. Any trap I lay for them would prove useless, as they would immediately sense it. The plants were rather

ingenious on my part, as they could not sense them until it was too late, but I had finished my experiments on those long after I sent the spell to you. The spell you uttered took control of...Sky...and gave me unrestricted access to her mind for a short time. I could have had more, but you won her love and loyalty, which made my blandishments useless on her...but I got enough. Enough to know where her precious Glade was and prepare my strike.” The pride was evident in his voice.

Mark felt like throwing up. Just the thought of this monster touching poor Sky made him sick. He wanted to hurt this thing very badly, yet he retained control of himself. *Mom would be proud*, he thought.

“There, there.” The figure mocked. “I’m sure your friends will forgive you. They will have no choice, under our power. With such servants at our service, and hosts of others we will collect, we will have absolute power over this world. No one could tell us no, or what to do. Our power...”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Mark screamed. “Shut up! Shut up! I will never join you, and you won’t get any of these fairies!”

“We shall see.” The figure dropped his friendly manner, drawing his sword, and advancing. Behind him came a fresh host of spiders from the forest, along with strange, twisted creatures that ran along the forest floor. *Goblins, I’d bet*. What twisted his heart the worst though, was the twinkling lights of fairies behind the horde, weeping or going with bowed head and broken spirit to the plants and cocoons to collect the prisoners and haul them away.

“Get him.” The whispered order seemed to freeze Mark’s blood in one moment, but the charging horde kindled it ablaze the next. Heedless of his own safety, Mark charged the oncoming ranks alone, the gun in his hands spraying the oncoming creatures. Spiders slipped and fell, shrieking in high quavering voices that reached nearly painful proportions before falling off. The goblins also danced and screamed in pain as the balls stung their fleshy hides or the light passed over their overly sensitive eyes. The Dark One realized that his hordes were failing, and called the fairies to halt their efforts and stand in front of his minions.

Mark had gotten too many of them, however. And his rifle went dry anyway, but he thrust the light right at the Dark One’s face. He stumbled and screamed! Mark bore down on him, bellowing his own warcry, like some demented soldier of a forgotten age.

Mark felt his foot catch on a root, and he nearly tripped. By the time he recovered he found himself nearly on his foe. There he stood, sword upraised and coming down to split him in two. Mark raised his rifle to block the blow, his forward momentum sending him sliding through the mud, right to his feet. The sword came down!

Crack! It hit the barrel of his little rifle, snapping it nearly in two. The tip of the sword grazed his chest, sending hot lines of fire down the wound. Mark felt the jolt in his arms and body. He blinked at the unexpected onslaught. When he opened them, he found himself sprawled on the ground, looking up at the sword tip aimed straight at his heart.

I've failed them, he realized. Then he saw a ghostly figure standing behind the thing, in a faded uniform and a aged and wrinkled face that shone with pride. *I'm coming grandpa.* He promised. He tensed.

A flash of light came from Mark's shoulder and smote the figure. It was the fairy! Somehow, she'd managed to hang on during the charge and fall, and now was trying to help him! Mark scrabbled backwards, trying to regain his feet. But it hadn't been enough. The sword missed his heart but punched through his upper abdomen, pinning him to the ground. Mark had never felt pain so intense in his life. It felt as if a thousand live wires had been jammed into him all at once. He screamed.

The figure yanked the sword out of him, batting at the fairy with the tip of his blade, striking her at the flat and sending her tumbling. Mark's hand, seemingly of its own accord, caught her and gathered her in protectively as his other held the gushing wound closed. He'd save at least one tonight! His breath came in heaving gasps, the wound chilled and burned all at once. He looked up for the final time as the figure drew back his sword for the blow.

A solid bar of light, more intense than any Mark had ever seen, struck the Dark One in his entire glory. Smoke rose from the cloak and a terrible screech of fright and agony sent shivers through his tortured body. His head fell back to see what had happened, and there he saw the most wonderful sight he could have imagined.

Mary sat in her electric chair (the pink one her parents had gotten to help entice her to get out of bed), wearing a robe done up with a belt of pink flame. Her face was twisted into a silent shriek of fury that Mark could not hear over the pounding in his ears, and in her hands she held their father's old

spotlight. On her lap next to the light lay a brilliant star, sending additional juice into the beam, as well as a strange magic that lightened the dark and made it seem not as oppressive anymore.

Sky. Thought Mark muzzily. He wondered why, if they had such light, they seemed to be growing dim. Or why the forest seemed so pleasant after such horrors he had seen. Perhaps he could find out after he woke up from his nap. Mark closed his eyes and slipped away