

A Story of Tak

“Grodebrin damn it!” I exclaimed, groping, grabbing and pulling at whichever forest creature had lodged itself with a painful grip upon my shoulder. The thing emitted an intelligible series of yelps that could have been taken for a fierce battle cry, had they not been so ridiculously high-pitched. I managed to properly grip it, and hurled it onto the ground. It rolled over a few times, and straightened itself out, meeping with notable indignation. It was a wood-tikker. His ilk is harmless at most, but I had no patience for such graceless intrusions.

"You infantile beast!" I growled at it, massaging my sore shoulder, noting with relief there was no damage to skin or cloth. The tikker, no taller than a lady's palm, had the appearance of a little man-thing, made of haphazardly cobbled-together twigs. It was reed-thin and gangly.

“Whatever do you want with me, you ridiculous bunch of sticks?”

“O, please, o please let me come with you, wonderful traveller from afar! From afar!”

It was a strange request from such a child of the forest. Though I have heard tales of court jesters keeping them as pets, Tickers typically dwell among the branches, avoiding men-folk. They have a rather juvenile disposition, and are known to delight in flinging acorns at dismayed passers-by, occasionally falling off their hiding places in fits of giggles. They possess feeble magic, and are as harmful as field mice. Yet, a field mouse can gnaw a pretty hole in one's grain sack.

“Come with me? Where to? What for? What business have you got traveling with me?”

“You know, you know, to see the world! You seem like a man who travels and roams, you do, you do.”

There was truth enough to that.

“Ha! What use are you to me, little fella?”

“Not much, not much. But I am small, you see, I bring no burden to bear, and at night, I shine a nice light, a nice nice light!” he said, and by way of demonstration, turned around and leaned down, displaying a rear-end that beamed and shone in a color I cannot quite describe, a hue both a blue and a green, yet nothing in between.

It had been a while since I had a travel companion, and my conversations with myself were getting too elaborate and quite pretentious for my liking. A more agreeable company had its appeal. I invited the creature, whose name was Drambolin, or so he said, twice, to gently sit upon my shoulder, and travel with me, for a spell.

He was, of course, afraid of flames. When I camped for the night, making a lovely cook’s fire, he disappeared up the nearest tree. Over supper preparations, I noted him poking his head out, and slowly, cautiously, coming down to sit next to me, big eyes glowing with the burning reds and yellows, his rear light softly dimming on and off, as if in rhythm to a melody I could not hear.

“What is it that you eat, little fella?”

“Twigs and leaves, twigs and leaves!” he exclaimed, yet made no move to gather any. There was no shortage of such fare around, for a late night treat.

Cooking is my second favorite activity, and I make a fine meal. A careful amalgam of what I bought, picked, caught, perhaps pilfered...I begin with sensible, familiar themes, and soon meander, ending with nothing that has ever quite like that been made, or ever will be. The result is always nourishing, often excellent, and never boring.

With supper gone, I took out my lyre. I gave it a bit of a pluck and some cleaning, oiled the strings, and generally inquired to ensure all was well and good with it.

“Will you play, will you play?” Drambolin asked with excitement.

“Sure I will, sticks. Tomorrow we’ll have an audience, better be in top shape.”

He was quite musical, that one. He knew all the words and tunes of the great love ballads and joined me with his sweet and squeaky voice, his rear-end participating with vigor to make a dance of light.

Much to my delight, he enjoyed my very own songs. I do not profess to be as masterful as The George, weave tales as wide and wise as Kardin, or split open the most stoic of hearts, like the ballads of Maiden Lara of the Isles. But, my songs and stories, my couplets and rhymlets, well, they are uniquely mine. Simmered atop the fire of my own wild dreams. They are a wonder, wit, and on occasion, wisdom. Folks say they're clever enough, and pay with what they may. A coin, a hearty clap on the shoulder, turnips and parsnips, or a bunk for the night at the warmer end of the barn.

Such song playing is my favorite activity.

The next morning, I opened my eyes noting one Drambolin snoring lightly next to my head, one headache of the type reserved for days that follow nights of drinking, and not a shred of a dream. That was odd enough. I had not touched my drink the night before, and I more often than not recall at least the slinking shadow of that last dream of dawn. I shrugged, yawned, stretched and sighed, then got myself ready for the day ahead. A day for merry- and money-making.

With a tikker on my shoulder, in the early afternoon, I arrived in the town of Cedarmoat. There are stranger things folks of these parts have seen, compared to a shoulder fae-companion. Those who thought it odd, said nothing. I quickly confirmed my usual arrangement with Jeromala, the innkeeper. Board, food, and three quarters of whatever I collect, playing to her patronage later in the evening.

After a steamy bowl of soup, and a fresh roll of her famous bread, stuffed with seeds and dried berries, after a stroll around the town square with the lyre on my back, a sure sign to let folks know there's entertainment to be had tonight, after a visit to the tinker's shop, a

new button for sewing, new salt for the spice pouch, and hard cheese for the forest nights, after a new smile from the tinker girl, who assured me she will come to listen at the seven of the clock, after all of that and perhaps a little more, I returned to the inn.

When performing on stage, I always begin by finely touching the lyre's pegs, just for appearances, for the damned thing is always in tune, an enchantment, a gift, a favor, from a lady of the night, once upon a night. A fine lady whose nether parts and secret lips I kissed, and with my clever tongue told wonderful, near-silent tales while she moaned in demonstration of her appreciation.

I then look around, wait for the crowd to find their own silence, and search for the one. The one with the glint in their eyes. Perhaps a jolly youngster, whose foot is sure to tap on its own accord, or the old gammer, with a wide bosom and a wizened smile of years gone by, or a wiry, weary farm-boy, with a lonely look, and a lust not for gals...

I search for the one with the crave, whose heart yearns the loudest. Once found, for there is always at least one, I take a deep breath and let the magic sway me in song and rhyme made by my very best dreams, summoned from their fickle and forgetful resting place. I never know what will come to me, through me, and out of me, in the enchantment of the moment. I simply stir my dish of tune and words, made special for the evening crowd, and we all taste it together. It is always nourishing, often excellent, and never boring.

As I made my way across the room, Drambolin hopped down from my shoulder, and climbed up one of the large wooden beams, taking a seat at the joinery, which afforded him a view reserved only for the very tall or very small. I was reassured by the buzzing of the large room. Stomping my feet a tad louder than strictly necessary as I walked up the stage, I took my seat upon the single stool placed on the small elevated platform. I touched the pegs, stretched, and looked around. I found a girl of dreamy eyes, and a longing heart for some boy

who didn't come that night. I strummed once, the crowd fell silent, I closed my eyes, took a long happy breath and...

Nothing.

No story, no song, no rhyme and no reason.

Nothing came out.

With slight panic, and a tense smile, I looked around again. Perhaps it was not the girl, but the small lad seated at the front row, barely a teen, already ravaged by face-dots, already mocked by the girls...?

I gave a fake little twist to the peg, a stretch, a quick strum of a minor chord for courage, I closed my eyes and...

Nothing.

Tropes such as this always come in threes, but I dared not find out what will happen if I thrice try my luck. Change of plans. I turned to my shepherd's pie of a story and song. Who doesn't like a shepherd's pie? A favorite, a crowd pleaser, for there is never a dull moment in Kardin's long Valiant Tale of the Valiant Knight of the Valiant East Val. I personally find it a touch tedious, but upon the first couplets the crowd cheered and clapped, and some might have even hooted. What do they know of new and daring stories? They were happy as magpies, to hear that old tale, and I played it well. Singing the songs, acting the roles, garnering the laughs, and sometimes, the tears.

I was not quite there myself. I had gone lost in my own thoughts, for I did not like what had happened one bit. Since the very first time I dared play my own heart-dreams to a crowd, I have never before found myself with no story to tell, no song to sing, no line to rhyme.

The tale, long enough to last a full show, ended with whistles, and certainly some hoots. The lovely lady of the inn passed the dimpled bronze bowl around, and I heard much

of the coin's jingle, and even the rustle of thick paper. It was, by all accounts, a tremendous sort of night. That lass from the afternoon tinkering offered to come with me to my room, and well, that is the type of story I do not tell.

It was a while before she left, closing the door behind her with a smile and a sigh. I myself, smiling, forgetting the earlier debacle, happily surrendered to sleep. Drambolin sat on the windowsill, and shed his strange light.

Morning came, I counted my money. Portioning out what belonged to the innkeeper, I was left with more than twice my usual lot from a town of such size and cultural aptitude. I packed my few belongings, went down the wooden staircase to the main floor, and exchanged with Jeromela much of this new coin collection for a few precious money-notes.

With such sudden riches, I made a quick stop to purchase elderflower extract and ashtree milled soap. Well-earned luxuries, I thought. The bulk of the money went into a secret pouch, whose location upon my person I will not share, and which, by spell, cannot be found. It was all meant for the day I choose to settle down. A house, a wood-stove, a garden, a bird-feeder, and a pricey Galvenian lyre.

The next town, Arrowsight, was three days and three nights away, and I spent them in jovial chatter with Drambolin. In the evenings, I played only scales and finger benders, as well as known tunes of his choosing. I missed my own stories, but a fear had snuck into my heart. I resolved to not even try, as if to gather several nights worth of dreaming rather than using them willy-nilly to entertain myself and the wee man-tree. I thought perhaps, as with a lover, it is wise to cultivate longing and yearning through abstinence, so that when we reunite, when I next sing for a crowd, my potency will be fortified.

My branchy companion was faring well. His limbs seemed less fragile than before. His little belly had expanded and extended. Atop its head was a fresh sprout of decorative leaves, resembling a hat, or was it hair?

I have not once seen him eat, and was getting quite curious with regard to that. On the night before heading into Arrowsight, I sat down to have my own meal while broaching the topic of the meal he wasn't having.

“Little fella, what is it that you eat? I have seen you eat neither twig nor leaf, yet your figure is becoming quite becoming.”

“Ah yes, ah yes,” he replied, head down, glancing at me sideways, surly with some guilt. “I did not wish to trouble, no wish to trouble, but truth be told, I have allowed myself into your crinkle-nuts and black rye supplies. For it is nuts and grain that I eat, nuts and grain. But you see, you see, few grains and nuts are a lot for a little tree-bud such as me. You don't mind, do you, friend? o, do you, friend?”

If little of what's mine was all the lad needed, that was fine. Yet, I did not appreciate the sneaking around and tell-telling of lies, and told him so. He looked sheepishly at his feet, and with his timber toes made nervous little markings upon the forest soil.

I'm a light-hearted fella, and can't keep a grudge for long. I soon found myself laughing, for he was such a sweet little creature, and soon he giggled as well. I played for him some songs he liked to sing. After, he curled up next to me, rear light dimming for the night, and we slept.

My uneasy sleep and morning headaches persisted. Perhaps it was the change in the weather in these more northbound parts. Or the cheese I had bought in Cedarmoot. It was decent enough, but I did have to pluck at least one maggot aside...

In the afternoon, we arrived at Arrowsight. Merku, the innkeeper, is a grumpy and meager man, and there is little love lost between us. In recent tours, to his great dismay, I had set camp in the town square, and paid the local urchins to bring wood and build a bonfire, like those of seven sabbaths, and other eves of merriment. I'd then play for the crowd that gathered. A crowd, incidentally, that was not sitting and drinking at Merku's Tavern.

The local metalsmith, Willar, was a friend of sorts, and with each visit we were getting friendlier. We shared a quick supper, for which, despite his gruff refusals, I did insist I paid. He lent me a small stool, and a large dimpled bronze bowl to collect what folks may spare.

Evening came. The bonfire was crackling, and the old wives cackling. I sat on the stool, twisted a peg, or pretended to, stretched like the yawning foxel, looked around, found the right twinkle in the right set of eyes, struck a chord, closed my eyes, took a firm deep breath and...

Nothing.

Who doesn't love a shepherd's pie, first too hot and soon too cold. It was going to be another one of those. I sighed and surrendered myself, not into an epic ballad but rather a succession of crowd pleasers from all corners of the dukedom. The crowd was delighted, and the coin was once more much more than one could expect.

I slept in Willar's workshed, a bad sleep, with a worried heart. Willar came to check on me more than once and that gave me some small comfort.

Leaving town with an aching head, and a heavy step, despite the heavier purse, I did not speak much with twiggy that day. He tried to cajole me into talking, into singing, but I did not partake. Quite the gloomy companion, I was. Marooned in damp thoughts, I found a foreboding that I finally named. Hunger.

"O Friend, o friend," the man-tree said, as night fell and I put down my shoulder pack, planning no fire, no singing, just an end to the day. "I have seen you happy, and sad, and today was a thing I have not yet seen. Please, o please tell Darmbolin, what's this? What's this?"

"I do not remember my stories that I sing. They are made different each and every time. I know the way the spices work together, how roots and grains, and fresh cuts, when

simmered, or braised make a surprising delight. That is what I do. That is what I am. The rhymes I share, every night a different tale, the crowds like them. They pay, I sing. But mostly, it is meant for me.

“Yes, I am a minstrel and a bard. At a king’s daughter’s wedding I will sing The George’s Ode to a Beauty Unending. For an untimely funeral procession I will strum from The Maiden, and invite a local lass for a duet of Then She Was Gone. Yet by and large, I make my songs as I go along. That is all there is to my craft, and that all is a lot. I miss my lot.”

My companion was no longer a scraggly thing of twigs and branches. He was roundish, bulgish, near fat. He seemed more like an assortment of roots, not twigs.

This was no grain nor nuts’ doing. The question came to me again.

“Tell me friend Drambolin, speak true this time. What is it that you eat?”

Since this is a tale, I kenned very well that the third time’s the charm, the bauble, the magic. A knowing descended upon me. I sighed, for the truth, more often than not, is a sad thing. That is why fairy fables make for such pleasant distractions...

Long thumbs twisted and circled round each other. Long toes groped into the mud, as if mindlessly wishing to be buried in the moist earth. He did not raise his eyes to me. His rear light did not shine.

“It was you all along, wasn’t it? It’s neither twigs and leaves nor nuts and grain. It is a dream of song and story you eat, is it not?”

“Yes...Yes it is, dear friend, dear friend,” Drambolin said, with much sorrow. “Never have I ever had dreams so delicious as yours, sweet sweet Tak.

“My lot has been the dumb and mute dreams of bear and elk. These are tough tendons of dreams. At times, I go into the towns...but the dreams are heavy with greed, or fear, or sadness or all put together.

“The farmer dreams of bushels more of wheat this year, the wife of less beatings. The babe knows not that she can dream of being less cold. The blacksmith dreams of a bigger anvil, the inn master of larger coinsacks, and also, of the fine behinds of the girl who serves the drink, and bats a lash, and never lets him lay but a finger. His own lady, not nearly as fine of the behind, she dreams of less laundry hauls, and unpleasant guests. The maiden at the bar dreams of the knight, the knight dreams of glory and war, and those who return from war dream dark dreams of elbow torn from arm, a single eye staring at the sky until the crow comes peck it, too.”

The little man-thing shuddered. Then continued. “But you, oh you, and your fairies, and dappled ponies, apples red and crisp, centaurs lounging in the sun, in the forest shadow or under star-strewn skies, wolves howling as the flame flies dance around them, waterfalls that sing a forgotten song of rivers long gone, trees that last a thousand years or more, just queens of vast lands, jolly kings who laugh with their men. Oh those were the best meals of my life.

“I am no thief, Tak friend, no thief, I paid you back, I did, I did. With my spelly ways I made sure you had more than ‘nuff of coin and paper, pleasant nights of sassy ladies and strong lads...for I can charm the townsfolk to come, to hear, to see that true spark of you through their weary narrowed eyes...”

“Yet, Twig o’ Root,” I answered, “if you stay with me you will take away from me all that is dear to me, all that is me...” and with that I firmly picked him up with my right arm, and with my left, upon the place his toes were digging in, digging in, telling me the answer, I dug into the soft wet ground, and there I planted him and tucked the ground around him, letting but his leafy head peek out.

“Do not, friend! Do not! O, to be put in one place! Where I cannot find the dreams of others? How cruel, how cruel! Friend Tak, please, friend Tak!”

He cried and cursed and called me by a thousand names. But I knew else he would not leave me be, and at night sneak and suck the dreams from my starving self. There will be no song, no rhyme, just a head full of empty ache for Tak.

There, on that very night, I left him be, the Drambolin.

I am not a thoroughly bad fella, not even close. I come to visit him, once a year.

He is a bigger, finer tree each time. He tells me of the meals he's had, from all who laid down to rest beneath his inviting branches, under shed he gives from sun and rain, to woman, man and beast. Most are tasteless and hard to swallow, but not all.

I sing to him all manner of songs, and he adds his voice that has grown deep, and still is sweet. We sing the old and beaten ballads of The George and Kardin and the Maiden Lara, and I gift him some of my own songs. Then, I rest my head among his roots, that glow in what is not quite green, not quite blue.

Just for one night. When in the morning we part, head all empty and aching, I know more dreams will come, more song, more rhyme. Goodbye, tree-friend, until the next time.