

Denouement E.1

The waiting was the hardest part.

The waiting had always been the hardest part.

Before, it had been made easier with certainty — certainty of direction, certainty of purpose, certainty of destination. The Glaistig Uaine who had let herself be locked away in the quaint little gaol they called the Birdcage had known with an unshakeable certainty who she was, why she was there, what her role in the grand scheme of things was, and exactly how high she was on the proverbial food chain.

She was the Queen of the Faeries, and she knew it. The time would come when all the rest would understand it — truly, unequivocally, and completely understand it — as well, with all of the implications it entailed.

Even so ignorant as they all were, thinking her mad and deluded, none had dared gainsay her. Oh, they had played games, as was their wont, and they had thought themselves clever enough to deceive her, on occasion, but she had never considered them worth the effort of smiting. They would all join her chorus, in the end. They would all become a part of her court of ghosts. There was no need to rouse the rabble unnecessarily, not unless they inflicted a truly unforgivable insult.

It had all given her a sense that she was above them. That she alone understood the true nature of things. And that, in turn, had informed her certainty, and so the waiting hadn't been enjoyable, never had it been enjoyable, but it had been bearable, something to be weathered. She had been content with it. What was a few years, a decade or two, a century, on a span of generations, on the truly cosmological scale the faerie operated on? The revolutions of their little mudball around a singular ordinary star that so many worshipped and fretted over were so very petty to the divinities that worked through millennia at a time.

And then Queen Administrator had come along and chucked it all out the window.

Not that Glaistig Uaine hadn't known that something was wrong for quite a while. The signs had been obvious and glaring, and the absence of Scion's queen and partner had been keenly felt all the while by more than just him, but even with one court bedraggled and in disarray, there were contingencies in play to see them all through. Even if the chances were low and the odds stacked against them, there were still hopes and possible paths towards a desirable future.

Glaistig Uaine's role might have been quite different to how it should have been if everything had gone as proper, but she *did* still have a role, and she knew it well enough that her certainty hadn't ever been truly shaken.

They could call her crazy, if they liked. They could whisper behind her back about how delusional she was, about how her powers had twisted something around in her head and she wasn't all that right anymore. They could point and snicker out of earshot to their hearts' content, because it was all as words on the wind, and mere words were so very cheap as to be worthless. As long as they kept their jives and their sneers out of her sight, she cared little for the thoughts and opinions of stagehands and props.

She was Glaistig Uaine, the Faerie Queen. Hers was the dominion of the dead, the keeper of those who had passed and whose shadows were all that remained. Her role in the grand scheme was assured.

Until it wasn't.

Queen Administrator had come along, and in the span of a single conversation, had upended so many years of certainty.

It should not have been so. The fragments of thought and emotion she had witnessed, the stark memory that had been donated to her, they were no more than that. Whimsy made manifest. Shadow and vapor bending light into familiar and unfamiliar shapes. Flickers upon a cave wall, to use that famous thinker's imagery.

What did it matter what another version of herself might have done, but for a nail? What did it matter how things might have gone, if only a few things had been tweaked beyond her control? What worth were distant possibilities, rendered impossible? Wishing it were so could not have brought the other court back into order nor resuscitated its queen, and therefore too should those far flung images of distant times be of no more worth than the words spent to wish them into being.

And yet...

And yet, and yet, and *yet*, the memory of that moment would not leave her. Had it been weeks? Months? Mere days? Time moved so very strangely in this sequestered gaol, and so it wasn't possible to say with certainty. It felt like forever. Years, decades. The thought niggled and wormed its way, and like a hydra, every time she thought it slain, it sprouted new heads for her to combat, ever multiplying, ever consuming her mind.

In her lonely cell, Glaistig Uaine worried at her bottom lip, staring into the murky brown of her cup of tea. It had long since grown cold, but she could not bring herself to throw it out or destroy it. Not merely because it was a gift from Queen Administrator, and would therefore offend her sensibilities to simply obliterate it, but because it possessed some strange hold on her, and merely this hold stayed her hand whenever frustration mounted and she was tempted to remove any trace of it from her sight.

It should have been an easy choice. She kept returning to that thought. There should have been no other choice. She was Glaistig Uaine, the Green Lady, the Queen of the Faeries. Her ultimate loyalty was owed to Scion and Scion alone, and all other else was kindness and courtesy paid towards those worthy of her respect. Her peers. Her equals of prominence and position.

But the choice between Scion and her peers should still have been so simple as to be brainless. Bereft of thought. Scion was the only one to whom she deferred, the only one to have true claim to her loyalty. A choice between him and Queen Administrator, between him and all the other Faeries, between him and the stagehands and props, it shouldn't have required any thought at all. Scion was the obvious choice, the *only* choice.

And yet...

And yet, Glaistig Uaine had indeed chosen the lessers. She had indeed abandoned Scion. She had indeed turned her back on her duty and responsibility as Queen of the Faeries, her responsibility to her court and to her subjects.

Her reason for existing.

Why?

Why, why, *why*?

She could not fathom it. She could not imagine what must have filled her counterpart's head to make her choose such a thing, something so anathema to everything she had long accepted as *fact*.

Or maybe the reason why she could not imagine it was precisely because she knew what it was from the beginning and could not accept it.

Because accepting it meant rejecting the very premise behind her own existence, the certainty that had filled her and sustained her ever since she had first awakened and her faerie had first bloomed in her mind.

Who would she be, if she didn't have that?

The moment whirred again in her thoughts. The precious seconds where that other version of herself slipped Queen Administrator's authority and shifted her control to one of her court, one of the phantoms that attended her, looked over at the Queen Administrator who would now never be, and instead of smiting her, as she had threatened to do at the start of the battle, instead of sabotaging her, as she should have done, and instead of interfering at the end to aid Scion in his moment of need, as was her responsibility as the Queen of the Faeries, she hesitated, hung her head, and allowed regicide, patricide, and deicide to be committed in front of her.

You fool, she wanted to tell that other girl, dressed in black and green. *You complete and utter fool*.

And she could almost imagine that girl turning towards her, scowling, and snarling back, *You would have done the same thing, if you were me!*

"Because I *am* you," Glaistig Uaine muttered, but it rang wrong in the air. Like a half-truth, because she could not recognize that girl as being *her*, and yet could not deny that they were the same in all but one most important way.

She felt as though on the edge of some great cliff, the cusp of some terrible mountain, and all it would take was a single, strong shove or one uncautious step to send her tumbling uncontrollably over, to be dashed on the jagged rocks below. The instant she allowed herself to *admit* what it was that had stayed her other self's hand, the thing that had caused that other self to surrender and allow Scion's death, she would trip and fall, and that would be the end of things.

What would be left, after that? She could not say. What would come out the other side? She could not say. Surely something so horrific would destroy her utterly, and so whatever it was, it would not be Glaistig Uaine in any way. It would not be the Faerie Queen, not even by its meanest of fractions.

She could not say, if one were to ask, that such a thing on its own would be so terrible, but it seemed in her mind as though it must be.

And would she face it, regardless of her own wishes, the instant she learned of the outcome of their final battle? She could not say. She would have to find out when the time came. Until then, she could only stew in the uncertainty, and wait for that time to come.

How terrible the wait had become.

A pane of light described itself midair in the middle of her room, and Glaistig Uaine briefly closed her eyes and let out a short, shuddering breath as a tremor ran through her and a terrible certainty settled in her stomach like a solid mass of lead. When Queen Administrator stepped through, Glaistig Uaine's face was set in a mask of calm, but it was only an illusion to hide the turmoil that boiled deep inside of her like a seething cauldron.

There was no sign of haste or desperation in Queen Administrator's gait. No tension in her body, but for the loose preparation for a coming fight that all who stood before the Faerie Queen bore in the face of her might and wrath.

There could only be one conclusion drawn from this.

"Administrator," Glaistig Uaine greeted as evenly as her voice would allow. Any uncertainty would be hidden by the chorus of her shadows.

"Glaistig Uaine," Administrator returned. And then, without preamble, she announced, "Scion is dead."

The last tether tying Glaistig Uaine to her chosen anchor slipped loose, and she was suddenly unmoored. The world spun around her in a kaleidoscope of nauseating color, and the only thing that kept her grounded in that moment and that place was the vividly real woman across from her.

"So. It is done, then."

"Yes."

Should she fight? Should she scream? Should she muster the entirety of her considerable power and throw herself at the woman opposite her? It could not be said with absolute certainty who the victor of that battle would be, and in truth, it was likely that they would bring the entirety of the gaol down around them. If they didn't both die in the doing, then at least Glaistig Uaine would perish herself as Administrator retreated from the destruction, battered but alive.

Did she desire base revenge? Was she so far gone now that she would accept her own death, if only it meant bloodying the nose of Scion's killer? Had she so little now that she could throw everything else away in the pursuit of petty vengeance?

And if, instead, she could not find it in her to summon the desire for revenge, what then did that say — about her, about her loyalty to Scion and the great plan? If she truly were his greatest ally, should she not avenge him? Was it not the proper thing to at least attempt to seek recompense for his death?

Her hands trembled, and she sucked in a deep breath through her nose in an attempt to steady herself. It did little to help.

What would she have done, if Queen Administrator had begged her assistance in the final battle rather than asking for her neutrality? What would she have done, had she been placed in the same sort of situation as her erstwhile counterpart? Would she have stayed her hand and allowed Scion to die, as he had in that time that now never was, or would she have come to his defense and smote his enemies, joining ever more voices to her chorus of the dead as the others fought desperately to overcome the two most powerful forces in the world?

That she could not say was the most terrible admission in the world.

“Do you mean to taunt me with his death?” Glaistig Uaine asked lowly, dangerously.

Even she could not have said whether she would carry out the threat implied in her voice.

“No,” Administrator said without deception. “I guess you could call this...courtesy.”

“Or perhaps a test?” asked the Faerie Queen. “To see if I would strike out at you in vengeance or meekly accept my ally’s death?”

“Would you blame me if it was?”

Oh, but did she *want* to — except it was not that neat or that clean. Even with her mind awhirl, Glaistig Uaine was not blind to Administrator’s tone or cadence, the way she spoke and the language of her body. Perhaps this was indeed a test, but it was not intended as a test of determining the necessity of execution, to ensure the last of her enemy was stamped out. No, Administrator was testing something else altogether, although what it was, Glaistig Uaine could not have said.

It seemed to her that there was a lot that she could not have spoken of, just then, for lack of knowledge, even though much of it should have been to her as fact.

“I suppose it depends on the nature of the test.” She set down her cup of tea. “And what the price might be for my failure.”

Administrator’s head tilted a little. “And what makes you think you can fail at all, or even that you can pass?”

“If you mean to play games with me, I warn you,” said Glaistig Uaine, “my patience is thin, today.”

One side of Administrator’s mouth pulled, not a smile but not a frown. “Did you ever come to an answer?”

Everything froze. For an instant, Glaistig Uaine was tempted to lash out, to strike Administrator with every ounce of power that she was capable of wielding. The urge surged inside of her to reduce the woman to a charred smear on the floor and deny her even the courtesy of joining the dead that answered to the Faerie Queen.

She wanted the woman in front of her to *hurt*, and more than that, she wanted to erase her from existence, to destroy her utterly.

The moment and the impulse passed, gone as quickly as they had come upon her.

“Was that your intent?” she demanded instead. “To instill enough doubt and sow the seeds of my disloyalty, so that you would not have to worry that I would be at your back while you fought Scion?”

“You knew that from the beginning,” Administrator rebuked. “You can’t tell me now that you’re surprised the entire reason I visited last time was to keep you from joining up with him.”

No. No, she was not. But there was indeed a world of difference between strategic negotiation and deliberate sabotage, and only one of them respected the person you were attempting to manipulate.

Wasn’t there?

So much doubt, so much doubt. How had something so simple and so blatant in its machinations affected her so deeply that she was now certain of so little?

She scowled. “You manipulate me, even now.”

“I suppose I do,” Administrator admitted mildly. “Although not, I think, for the reason you believe I am.”

“Oh? You purport to be doing it ‘for my own good,’ as it were?”

“What was your anchor?” Administrator asked suddenly.

Glaistig Uaine stilled. Something inside of her twisted.

“What?”

“Once upon a time, you told Khepri that she needed an anchor, something to hold onto, because it would either be the last thing she had left or the final comfort before her death. You spoke with such certainty because you were speaking from experience. So. What was your anchor?”

Glaistig Uaine was silent. Administrator just smiled.

“It’s fine if you don’t say it. I think I already know. What now, with that anchor gone?”

Her lips drew tight. “Do you mean to goad me into attacking you?” she asked lowly.

“If suicide is all you have left, I guess I can’t begrudge you that,” Administrator said. With nearly anyone else, the insult implied in that statement would have been worthy of reprimand in and of itself. “Or do you intend on staying here and rotting away for the next century or two, having tea parties and holding court?”

“Be careful,” Glaistig Uaine warned dangerously, “I won’t suffer insult lightly. Even from you.”

“What else do you have, now that Scion is dead?”

Something gave with an almost audible snap, and Glaistig Uaine leapt up from her seat, her shadows swirling and drawing closer — but she hadn't even made it all the way to her feet before Administrator was just suddenly *there*, pushing her back down and forcing her back to her seat. Her hand was pressed with shocking gentleness on Glaistig Uaine's chest — right over her heart.

With another, perhaps the implication wouldn't have been so obvious. With Administrator, the threat was clear as a midsummer's day.

"Is this really all there is to you?" Administrator asked quietly and with weight. "Do you really have so little left that even asking it is enough to hurt that badly?"

She stepped back. The pressure of her palm still pressed at Glaistig Uaine's skin like a burn.

"You play games with me," she accused harshly. The chorus of her shadows added an extra layer. Again, it masked the waver in her voice. "If my death is not your design, then what is it you desire from me? Do you mean to simply stand there and taunt me with all that I have lost? Do you derive some pleasure from my pain?"

Administrator regarded her evenly. "No. I'm here because I think you can come back from this. No, I *know* it. There is more to you than the Faerie Queen. There is more to you than Glaistig Uaine. There is more to your life than Scion, Ciara."

Glaistig Uaine's hands trembled, and she disguised this by folding them in her lap as her shadows drew in closer as though to protect her. The phantom sensation of the weight against her chest made her less certain they would even be capable of it, if it came down to it.

"No one has called me by that name for quite a long time," she said instead.

"It's one of many you hold," Administrator said cryptically. "It's one of many you *could* hold, if you made the choice to."

Something clicked. A tremor shook through Glaistig Uaine's chest.

"I am one of the legions of the honored dead you might summon at will. One of the masks you can wear, bolstered by song and story."

"Valkyrie, they called her," Administrator said by way of confirmation. "Valkyrie, they called *you*. A fitting name, but one you had to grow into."

"Valkyrie."

The chooser of fallen warriors, the shieldmaidens who plucked the valorous dead and ferried them off to Valhalla.

She could see the connections, could see how the powers and role of her faerie would fit a name such as that. Psychopomp, heralds of the afterlife. Yes, the connections were fairly obvious.

But what it *meant*...

“She gave up on Scion.”

No, she already knew that, had seen it for herself. Those final moments, where the Glaistig Uaine of another world had allowed Scion to die and done nothing to stop it, had *given up* at the final moment, when it was most important that she remain firm.

Instead...

“She gave up on herself.”

“I’d argue that just the opposite,” said Administrator, “that she finally learned to be more than the limits she’d imposed on herself for so many years.”

Glaistig Uaine’s eyes flashed, and her shadows swelled, hackles raising. The chorus was discordant and heavy as she spoke: “Do I seem limited to you, Administrator?”

“Would you like to meet her?”

It derailed her momentum. “What?”

“Would you like to meet her?” Administrator repeated. “Valkyrie, that is. Would it help, to know that the world hasn’t ended just because Scion is gone? That there *is* something still left for you, even though you’ve lost everything you’ve been clinging to for so long?”

“I...”

Yes, Glaistig Uaine wanted to say. Yes, she wanted to meet this other version of herself, so that she might demand answers, so that she might snarl and rage at the girl who had *given up*, so that she could at last know for sure and didn’t have to stew in her own uncertainty. She wanted to know why that girl had left Scion to die, why she’d surrendered and failed at the final moment.

And yet...

“No,” she said at length. “The words of someone so far removed from me are of little worth. One who abandoned Scion in his hour of need has nothing of value to offer me.”

And yet she was also terrified of what this Valkyrie might say, what she might reveal. To have confirmation, to know without the slightest doubt, why it was she had let Scion be killed, it was simultaneously her greatest desire and greatest fear.

Because what it might say about her...

What would happen when the truth was unavoidable?

That was what terrified her the most.

Administrator frowned. “That’s it, then? You’re just going to stay here for the rest of your life, wallowing until there’s nothing left of you? I thought you were stronger than that.”

Glaistig Uaine's eyes flashed again, and her shadows drew in tighter. "I warned you," she said, her chorus echoing the words, "I will not suffer lightly your insults, Administrator. Tread carefully."

"Look at where you are," Administrator said, ignoring the warning. She gestured at the room around them. "You're in a tiny cell, locked away from the world, with nothing to look forward to and nothing left to wait for. Is this how you intend to spend the rest of your life? A caged bird, too afraid to venture out, even when your door is left unlocked?"

"As opposed to going with you, to be one of your costumed crusaders?" Glaistig Uaine snapped back. "Do you mean to say I should become one of your pets, following at your heels and begging at your table for scraps?"

"I'm not saying you have to be anything," Administrator said. "I'm saying you have the chance to be more than just *this!*" She waved her hand at the cell again, encompassing the entirety of it. "You're more than just the keeper of the dead. You just have to *choose* to be."

"And I suppose you intend to show me how, Administrator?" Glaistig Uaine sneered.

"No." Administrator held out her hand in offering. "But I know someone who can. Someone who can help you figure it all out and put the pieces together in a way that makes sense, even when everything has fallen apart and broken beyond repair. You just have to be the one to take that first step."

Glaistig Uaine stared at the proffered hand. *I can't trust you*, she wanted to scream. *I can't trust you at all. You're the one who did this to me!*

The image returned, unbidden. A girl in a dress of black and green with long, blonde hair. Her hands had fallen, her head was hung, her shoulders drooped. She stood by as the one person who should have held her loyalty beyond all else was killed, and she did nothing to stop it.

Why? What had possessed that girl to give up? Why?

I already know the answer.

Because she had doubted. Because for the first time since she awakened her faerie, that girl had well and truly doubted, not just herself and her own nature, but the previously unshakeable faith she'd held in her god, her king, her father. And because she had doubted, she had lost everything — just as this Glaistig Uaine had, because seeing her other self's doubt had led her to doubt herself as well.

What do I do now? Now that I have nothing left?

She didn't know. And that was perhaps just as terrible as the knowing.

The only thing she could be certain of, here and now, was that this woman in front of her was the source of her problem. Administrator was the one who had introduced this doubt, both to her and to her alternate self from an erstwhile possibility. Administrator was the one to blame.

Should not Administrator then be the one to die?

Glaistig Uaine reached out, slowly, hesitantly. She looked up into the other girl's face, which could have been carved from stone. The shadows currently flanking her could deal the fatal blow before there was time to react — and even if she failed, the return blow would surely be just as fatal, and then Glaistig Uaine would have nothing at all to worry about.

And so Glaistig Uaine reached for that outstretched hand...and she took it with her own.