

## The Faerie Chest

By

Anne Luyten

There were things that moved in the woods surrounding the farmstead; things that trudged and danced between the shadows of the trees, filling the air with croaking harmonies and manic laughter. No birdsongs or rustling wind was ever heard, only frenzied hymns that tore through the treetops. They made Hiram's blood run cold. At the beginning, he would stand on the porch staring in the direction of the treeline, just listening to the deep, rasping chorus. It captivated him and he was terrified.

That was how it had found him. It had slipped through the broken fence, skulking across the field on all fours, body hidden beneath a mass of muddy hair and for a moment Hiram thought it might be some kind of dog. Turning on that porch lamp must have been the stupidest thing he'd ever done. It stepped into the light and Hiram felt his heart skip a beat.

Great claws jutted out from paws that dug into the mud as it approached. Its fur was stained dark with dirt and caked with deep, glistening patches of red. Admittedly though, that was not the part which made Hiram lose his breath.

It was the handsome face that stared up at him, a pleasant smile hiding behind knotted curls with eyes that Hiram had only ever seen on goats.

It had told him a name; whether that name was it's or not, Hiram hadn't even wondered but it called itself The Mountebank and flashed a smile like it was sharing a particularly clever joke.

He blessed whatever powers had kept him silent that night as the creature asked so amiably for his own name in return. He was terrified and that fear had kept his jaw tightly locked.

Its smile widened, lips shining with silver, and told him perhaps it would return another time.

It had of course, this time wearing some approximation of the human form, the same long, filthy hair falling in waves down to the ground. What stared at him from between those locks, however, was not the pleasant face it had previously worn but the head of a monstrous bear with those same bizarre goat-like eyes sparkling manically.

It spoke in a soft, croaking voice and asked casually how long he had been living on the ranch. Perhaps Hiram was desperate to bring some normality to the situation, but he found himself answering.

*In the spring*, he had said, *he had bought the place in the spring* and, in an attempt to put himself at ease, laughed awkwardly about its low price point.

"Can barely get a wink of sleep, what with all the hollering y'all are doing in those woods recently."

It cocked its head to the side in an exaggerated façade of confusion and though its muzzle did not allow it to smile, Hiram could see the great canines peeking out from its stretching jaw, shimmering like mother-of-pearl.

"Hollering?" it asked.

"Well yeah," Hiram's fingers wound themselves into the hem of his shirt, "All the laughing and singing, it's mighty pretty, don't misunderstand me. Just...takes some time to nod off with that in your backyard, if you know what I mean."

"Aha, you speak of the revelry! Hundreds travel to these woods to celebrate. Oh, you must join us before it ends."

"Celebrate, huh? What - what're y'all celebrating?"

"New growth;" it answered, taking a step forward, "the days that last for months and months, the lurid migrations and frightful marches, the masques, the hunts. There is much to make us merry. You should come, you *must* come."

All at once, Hiram felt trapped, unable to move under its gaze.

"Yeah sure," he had said, "just..."

His hands worried at the fabric of his shirt, tugging at it discretely, trying to find his breath again. His eyes darted towards the treeline, to the porch floor, anywhere but to those eyes which stared with unrelenting glee. He wanted this thing off his property. He wanted it gone.

"Just tell me when and I'll come by."

He had been trying to be polite, to make it leave; he had been trying to satisfy it. He had been *lying*.

The next night there was a knock at the door. Its form was hidden this time beneath a robe, regally embroidered in gold and grey, and a hood which shadowed its face. It held out a hand, a human hand which, at any other time might have filled Hiram with some kind of relief, had it not been for the way the blood dripped from its fingers.

"*When.*"

He spent four months in those woods, dancing blindly, zealously, and stealing kisses beneath the boughs of gilded trees. His fear was hazy though, an afterthought, something he knew he should have felt but simply didn't. He felt no need to leave.

Until one evening The Mountebank had given him a gift. It thrust it into his hands as it pressed its lips, soft and splendid against his own. Hiram fingers closed around it and tried to look down to see

what it was that he held. Each time he was thwarted by the fervency of the kiss, trailing up his jaw and beneath his eyes. It took his hands in its own and pushed the object up into his chest.

"Keep it safe," it whispered, "and give me your name."

The sudden weight that sunk into his chest made Hiram gasp, and a bright pain snapped him from whatever half-conscious state he had been in. All at once he felt the bones in his feet that were broken, felt the blood roaring in his ears, so loudly that he felt they might burst. He felt the freezing press of silver against his lips and the overwhelming stink of blood and lavender filling his nose.

"Give me your name," it repeated, its kiss drifting into a sigh as hands found purchase in his hair and teeth nipped gently at his lips.

Hiram pulled back and The Mountebank followed, huffing at the loss, though it smiled faintly and its eyes fluttered open, revealing those horizontal pupils blown wide. They fixed on him, on the look on his face, terrified and fully aware. It paused.

"Give me your name." No longer were the words spoken warmly and with longing, but rather with a desperation that creeped into that low, croaking voice, mounting the longer Hiram remained silent, "*Give me your name! Give it to me!*"

Hiram hadn't wasted time in trying to decipher the distress that distorted its face, he only ran, feet bleeding and nearly deaf. He didn't stop until he reached the small town that sat down the road from the farmstead. He couldn't breathe, his chest felt as though it would be crushed. His heart just felt...heavy. It should have surprised him that the doctor didn't bat an eye at his injuries, only wrapped his feet tightly, checked his ears for internal damage, and after a thorough examination, suggested he stay in the clinic until his feet had healed.

She hadn't even tried to be sneaky as she handed him a book before he left, with the title *Warding Rites and Rituals*.

"You keep those sumbitches out," she told him, "Don't even let 'em get past the fence."

He took note, digging the wards like trenches in the ground outside the house before retreating inside. The music carried through the air as dusk settled into night and he tensed slightly at the sound of footsteps treading through the grass outside. They stopped when they reached the wards, and altogether the world fell silent.

Then air erupted into a deafening cacophony of shrieks and howls, maledictions distorted with rage and devolving into a language Hiram couldn't understand and that sent his eyes vibrating in his head. When the ground started to shake and he began to hear the caterwauling from the woods in return, he threw open the door and unloaded his shotgun into the cubist nightmare it wore for a face.

After that, Hiram had warded the fence around the property, intent on keeping the forest at bay. But every now and again, the bastard or its ilk would crawl their way through broken slats and come whistling and crooning to the steps of the porch.

These were the sounds that woke him that night, a little over a year later. For a moment, a familiar tension seized his heart, an old response to the now familiar sounds which, once registered, elicited only a frustrated groan. Was it too much to ask for one night without some fresh horror causing a ruckus on his property?

Crossing the room in a huff, Hiram snatched his shotgun from where it laid, before pushing open the door and turning on the porch light.

"*Christ!*" he shouted, fumbling with the gun in surprise.

At the edge of the wards, illuminated only by the dim, flickering glow of the old bulb, was The Mountebank. The face is wore

was disarming, a ghastly mask made from what might have been porcelain or what might have been bone. The expression carved into it was gentle, a pleasant little smile so unlike the wild grins and dripping jaws which Hiram knew, and beneath that long, wild mane, he could see hands unfolding.

"If that's what you want to call me, I ain't complaining," it said and Hiram stilled at the sound of its voice.

"Now those are mighty familiar words, goblin, and they ain't yours. Why don't you tell me how you came to have Jeremiah Nickels' voice, huh?"

"Well, he offered it to me, darling," the hands beneath its hair began to fan out in a conciliate gesture and Hiram flinched at the familiar drawl curling out from that sharp tongue, "offered me just about everything under the sun if I'd just make those damn hymns stop ripping their way up through his throat. So fair's fair, right? No hosannas or hallelujahs are going to be coming up from that throat anytime soon. But tell me what you really think, does it suit me?"

Hiram's hands twitched against the gun.

"What're you doing out here, creature?"

"Now precious, I've been courteous enough to give you my name and I'd be so pleased if you used it."

"Bullshit," Hiram snapped, "that name's no more yours than that voice is!"

Though the smiling mask hid its face, he could hear the warning that bled into its voice when it spoke.

"It belongs to me, not I to it. Just like this voice *belongs* to me," it cocked its head just so, "and don't that just rile you?"

"How about you get to the point," Hiram raised the shotgun, teeth clenched, a reminder of his impatience.

The Mountebank backed down, lowering its body ever so slightly, that fine smile hiding what Hiram knew from experience to be no less than a dripping snarl.

"I thought I'd be neighborly is all, build bridges. The forest is marching; the Hollow Queen and her Wicker Women, the giants and their hounds, the entirety of the Deep and Golden Court, the Moon. I've even heard the Brides are on the move - you remember them, don't you? You should, you danced with enough of them."

A feeling of dread settled in Hiram's stomach and his eyes flickered involuntarily towards the treeline.

"And?"

"And you've got yourself a great big hole in your fence. The wards are snapped; it's how I got in."

Hiram's hands loosened somewhat on the gun, blinking in surprise, his heart skipping a beat. The wind whistled over the farmstead, tousling his hair, and the faerie's familiar perfume drifted passed, enveloping him.

"You're lying," his voice was no more than a gentle hiss.

"Don't be silly, sweet thing. I've never lied a day in my life."

"You're talking out your ass then!"

"Darlin'," its voice was sweet and low, some of its croak easing into its stolen drawl, "do you think I'd waste my time coming to you like this? I could let those hellions rip their way through this paltry bastion you've built for yourself here, let 'em scream their songs into you 'till the notes are all that come out of your mouth. I could let 'em take you back to their palaces and they'd baptise you with blood and honey and you'd be nothing but a husk again. A fine dance partner you'd make for sure, but you're mine. I saw you first."

"I ain't your anything," Hiram jutted his chin up, glaring down at that amiable, bone white smile, "You got a word and that's it. It doesn't even work anymore. Whatever contract you and I had is done, fair and square."

The faerie's hands stilled, settling back beneath its hair in a flash as though it had been burned.

"Fine then," it said after a time, "you belong to yourself, you're accountable for yourself. But there is a *hole* in that *fence*. If I were you, I'd be dealing with it."

It turned squarely on its heel before collapsing onto all fours and breaking into a run. True to its word, Hiram watched it disappear through the fence which, had the wards still been set, would have trapped it.

"Fuck," he hissed. He knew The Mountebank couldn't lie. Manipulate and deceive, yes, but it could never tell an untruth. There was a hole in the fence and the fae were making their march, "Fuck."

---

The next morning found Hiram standing in front of the fence. The wood was snapped and broken, the runes severed and fragmented by the rot which had split the boards. The Mountebank's warning had been sound, which sent another slew of worries and questions racing through his head.

It took the better part of the day, tearing out the rotted sections and slipping in the new wood, but once they were fitted and nailed in, Hiram took a step back. The worst part of maintaining the farmstead, he thought, was painting the wards. He pulled a knife from his belt and brought it up to his palm, gritting his teeth.

"Now hold on there, darling."

His hand was caught before the knife could slice through the skin, pulling him back, away from the fence and into a fast embrace.

Hiram's head snapped back and his eyes immediately hardened into a glare as he stared up into that familiar wild grin, set beneath the bright gold plumage which now took up the entire top half of its face.

"Bastard!" he shouted, struggling against The Mountebank's grip, but it proved to be immovable. Here, without the wards, Hiram was vulnerable.

"Hush," the faerie passed its hand over his face, not quite touching but Hiram's body convulsed all the same, the familiar haze of magic settling over his mind, slowing his heart and sending him sinking to the ground. It followed, settling them both on the grass, Hiram's head lying in its lap, "I mean you no harm, but I ain't gonna speak to you from across a patchwork barrier; and I do mean to speak with you."

"Wretch," Hiram spat out and his face contorted into a snarl even as the faerie laughed, gently brushing his hair from his face.

"You say such sweet things," it said, smile shifting into something fonder, "and your suspicion serves you well, but there's something we have to discuss; a contract that must be acknowledged."

"I won't tell you again, I don't belong to you."

"Of course not. But there is the little matter of my personal property, the safety of which you have been most observant of."

Hiram opened his mouth to demand just what it meant by that, when it pressed its hand over his eyes, the other settling over his chest. His breath caught.

The sound he made then was strangled as blood roared in his ears, his chest all but collapsing with the weight of a second heartbeat. Something snapped and he wheezed, barely able to breath, a pressure crushing his lungs.

"There you are." The Mountebank purred, but its voice was lost in the rumbling pulse that deafened him, "Hush now."

Slowly, the roaring in Hiram's ears subsided and he was left, chest heaving and breath ragged, entwined in the arms of The Mountebank. After a moment, he became aware of its voice above him.

"I'd thought to hide it," it said, "There're those who would try to steal it, you understand? A heart is a valuable thing and mine has been...much sought after. I was going to keep you, see? Hide my heart in plain sight as it were. Who would suspect such a charming thing to be hiding such a treasure?"

"But then you ran, and I'll admit I became...*distressed*. I'd made it so that whatever happened to you," it tapped its fingers lightly against his chest, "would happen to *me*; and with nothing to protect you..."

The Mountebank trailed off, idly brushing its fingers through Hiram's hair, a hand settled over his- *their* hearts.

"You sure gave me a fright, though I suppose you had it handled, clever thing. Squirreling yourself away behind those wards; you make a mighty pretty treasure chest, I'll say."

Hiram writhed in the faerie's grasp, clawing at its arms and shoving his elbow into its stomach. While huffing out a breath at the force, it simply caught his hand in its own. Hiram shivered as cold lips brushed against his knuckles.

"You've kept me safe, precious, and that ain't something I'd make light of."

"Then take it out," Hiram rasped as it wove its fingers through his own, "I don't want it, take it back!"

"You misunderstand me," it laughed, high and joyful, "I don't mean to lose my protection, or the little influence I've got on you."

"What the hell do you-"

"Think, darling. You don't belong all to yourself anymore. Part of *me* belongs to *you* and so vice versa. If I were to call it, command it, well...perhaps you should stand up, dear heart."

The heart within him, the one that felt like it would crack through his ribcage with each beat, thrummed to life and, gasping in pain, Hiram found his legs moving beneath him, his veins pulsing with the force of each beat. The Mountebank followed, laughing gently as Hiram glared and ground his teeth, but continued to stand stock still and unmoving.

"See? I could have it braid your blood any way I want. I could have that little heart beat so fierce it rips through your chest. Or maybe I'll just have it stop."

Hiram's face paled and his head lightened. His own heart still beat but the loss of such a powerful rush left his left his knees buckling, collapsing back to the ground. Or he would have if he hadn't been caught, taken nobly into the arms of The Mountebank.

"Son of a bitch." he growled, teeth gritted and eyes glaring up at the faerie.

"Oh darling, I don't want to be cruel," its smile said otherwise, "I'm just wanting to make sure you won't be keeping me from what's mine."

A smile still played on its lips and it brushed a hand over Hiram's chest. He felt his own heart settle back into a steady rhythm, the other going quiet.

"Keep your wards. I'd say they've been keeping us both safe. I won't be impeding you much, I wasn't the greatest fan of being shot at, you understand. I've just...missed feeling the beat of my heart. Stay; just for a time?"

Hiram still struggled to find his breath. That didn't stop his lips from curling into a scowl or his eyes from glaring in suspicion; he was still vulnerable.

"Why should I?" he asked, in part just to prove he could still be difficult.

"I could make you," it grinned, its hand drifting over Hiram's chest.

"Fine," he sneered, "but one wrong move and I'm cutting a ward right into your chest."

"Deal."

The heart in his chest gave a violent shudder and The Mountebanks breath followed it, sudden and heavy and slow. It rested its forehead against Hiram's own as its other hand wove itself into his hair, pulling him close.

"How long?" he asked and tried to stay quiet, not wanting to bring The Mountebank's attention back to himself.

It hummed and smoothed his hair back gently, tangling its fingers tightly in his locks and letting its lips brush passed his ear.

"I'll tell you when."