

The Shakespeare Accord

By Bill Ricardi

“Will.”

The Bard didn't look up from his writing table. He had to get this *one* last thought out of his head before the outside world mattered again.

Puck crept closer. Soon he stood fully within the radius of the oil lamp's illumination. His gossamer wings appeared only briefly in the human-made light. The fairy caught their iridescent reflection out of the corner of his eye, and made the mental adjustment that caused the fantastic appendages to melt away.

It was instinct. Even in front of his oldest mortal companion, and even though he knew that it wouldn't matter after tonight, he vainly tried to cling to propriety.

As he scribbled his blank verse, Shakespeare said, “Have you seen this, Robin?”

The tall fairy bent his gaze to his best friend's hand. It was calloused from decades of smithing words. Rather than an ink-stained quill, the human held a length of graphite wrapped in butcher's string.

Puck took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He played the mortal's game. “Yes, I've seen it.”

“A *lead pen*, the Germans call it. The black core is mined right here in England, you know.”

“I know, Will.”

Shakespeare finished his thought with a final period. He blew the residual black flecks from the paper before deftly rolling and slipping his work into a thin leather tube. He said, “This is for Susanna. For her eyes alone. Do you understand, Robin?”

Pale fae digits covered the human's trembling hand. The shaking calmed under his touch, as it always had in the past. “Of course, old friend. A drink?”

The human echoed, “Of course. What else is left?”

He allowed his eternally young companion to tug him towards the oak side bar, a surprise gift from Thomas Nashe's estate some years back. He said, "You pick and pour. I'm afraid that my judgement is not to be trusted, at least in recent times."

Puck shot him a withering look, "Oh, you don't say?"

Shakespeare swallowed hard. He couldn't hold his friend's fiery gaze. Instead, he busied himself by selecting two port glasses and blowing the dust out. He gave them a brief rub and polish, using the clean white cotton rag that his wife insisted he keep on hand.

The fairy allowed his anger to drain away. There would be time for that later. He turned his attention to the vast array of bottles and decanters upon the bartop. Soft fingers caressed each vessel until one called to him. The thick glass was clear, revealing a wine that hedged more towards amber than white. "Is this..."

"Malmsey? Aye. A brave vintage. I think, my friend, that would be most fitting."

Puck uncorked the bottle and poured out two generous portions of the fortified wine. He said, "You know that we don't always like sweet things, don't you? It's isn't all honey and molasses for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

The Bard's voice was soft, kind. "I know. I would never judge you thusly. I've always represented your appetites as broad. Even earthy. Have I not?"

"You have, Will. I'm sorry, I don't mean to-"

"Don't apologise. I certainly don't plan to."

The men lifted their drinks. Puck sipped. Shakespeare was less reserved, draining a third of his glass in the first tipping.

The human glorified in the sugary wine, enjoying the way it made his mouth water and his belly burn. He said, "Take him on the costard with the hilts of thy sword, and then throw him into the malmsey-butt in the next room"

Puck immediately responded, "From '*Richard the Third*', act one, scene four."

"You always did remember my work better than I ever could."

“I hated that scene. What a ridiculous suggestion. Waste of good wine if you ask me.”

The pair shared melancholic smiles. A gentle sigh split the air before Shakespeare turned to stare at the lantern’s flickering flame. He murmured, “I’m going to miss this.”

His fae companion traced the lip of his port glass with a delicate finger. He asked, “Really? Then *why*, you daft man? Publishing play after play revealing the details of our realm, after we told you to stop. Why did you continue to give away our secrets?”

Another deep pull was Shakespeare’s only reply.

But Puck pressed the matter. “Why couldn’t you just enjoy the blessings of the realms Seelie and Unseelie alike? You were beloved... nay, worshipped in two realms. Three if you count this one. What possessed you to betray us?”

“Did you ever meet my grandfather? The one on my mother’s side.”

Mystified, the fairy could only respond, “No.”

The middle aged man swirled his candied wine, watching the liquid form a tiny whirlpool. He said, “Grandfather was a landowner. Farms, in particular. Mother took me up to the biggest one when I was a lad. And the thing that I couldn’t get out of my head was the swine.”

“Will...”

“The swine, you see, were not stupid creatures. Nor were they incapable of escape, not from the relatively feeble enclosures that they were typically kept in. And yet, they happily feasted on apple cores and cooled their hides in the mud. They ate and fornicated until they were so fat and lazy they could hardly move. And then, of course, they were eaten.”

Angry, the fairy flexed his invisible wings, nearly knocking over a pile of drink coasters. He hissed, “We weren’t going to eat humanity.”

The mortal countered, “Do you speak for the Unseelie realm, in this matter?”

Puck’s jaw snapped shut. He took the next sip of wine through clenched teeth.

“I thought not. And perhaps neither faction planned to literally *eat* the mortal realm. But enslave it? Pacify it? Dull its edge until any defiance was merely ceremonial? I saw the future, as clear as I saw the moon rise tonight.”

“I just came here to say goodbye to a dear friend, Will. I’m not going to stand trial on behalf of the joint fairy conclave.”

Softly, Shakespeare murmured, “And I’m not going to assign blame, my dearest Robin. I’m simply contending that humanity would eventually become enthralled or enslaved by the fae folk. They had to be warned. The veil needed to be lifted if they were to remain free.”

In a reversal of habits, the slim man closed his eyes and drained the rest of his wine in a single pull. He set the stout glass down, firmly. Only when the alcohol’s artificial warmth crept up to his lungs did he open his eyes once more. “It’s false loyalty, dear. After everything you experienced in our world? After everything you shared with us in your realm? You were more fae than human. This fascination with a dying race is the pull of madness.”

The playwright noted, “All loyalty is false loyalty. Or none of it is. You either trust the tug upon your heart and mind as genuine, or you dismiss it as unscientific and unworthy of your attention. In the end, I obeyed my instinct. I was born human, and despite our multitude of flaws, I will die as a human. To do anything else would be a betrayal of all I stood for in life.”

“And so, ‘*The Tempest*’. Very subtle. Subtle as a jackass braying at high noon.”

For the first time that night, Shakespeare laughed. He said, “Come now, my dear friend. I used a pseudonym at least. Unless there’s an ‘Ariel’ flitting about your clan who plans to raise charges of libel and challenge me to a duel.”

Puck shook his head, slowly. “A duel? No. We don’t work that way.”

“No, I don’t suppose you do.”

The human finally drained his own glass. His companion took it from an unsteady hand and set it down on the bar. Together, they made their way to the lip of the bed and sat hip to hip on the sturdy mattress.

The fairy asked, whisper-soft, “Where’s Anne?”

“Close. Just outside of Stratford, staying with a friend.”

Puck's voice was husky as he admitted, "I would have rather liked to see her again. Before tonight."

Shakespeare reached up to stroke the fairy's shoulder. "Oh, aye. Myself as well. But I sent her away in case your people dispatched... a less kind face."

"You knew, then?"

"I heard whispers. Murmurs. Despite my transgressions, I still have long ears in every realm. I settled my last will and testament a month ago. The kids will be taken care of, rest assured. Anne will receive this very bed. I'm certain you know why."

For some reason, those words invoked the rarest of things from the fairy: A genuine blush.

It took him a moment to chase away the all-too-human reaction and summon his anger once more. "Ah, the will. Within which you made sure to state that you were in **perfect** health. You knew what we were likely to do. You knew it *weeks* ago. And yet instead of running, you left a trail of breadcrumbs."

Shakespeare snorted softly. He said, "Oh, aye, run. Pray tell, dear Mister Goodfellow, where can I run where fairy wings cannot reach?"

"For Titania's sake, Will! That isn't the point. If you ran, it would have been someone else's territory. At least it wouldn't have been me."

The mortal admitted, "I wanted it to be you. If I am to be the quarry, I can think of no finer specimen to be my hunter."

Puck stood, abandoning his friend on the bed as he paced and ranted. "Oh, yes. I can feel the warm glow of your respect and admiration. Though it was *particularly* absent two months ago, wasn't it?"

"Robin..."

"At the Quiney wedding, I mean. When you gave her away."

Shakespeare used his calmest tone, "Now, Robin. You know that Judith-"

But the fairy cut him off, overtaken by a sudden rage. "She's **my** daughter, Will! Mine and Anne's! You have Susanna, but Judy is mine. How *dare* you?"

The Bard's heart nearly stopped. Flames danced in the eyes of his dearest friend. He watched the fae's fists clench, knuckles even whiter than his normal pallor. If he had the time, he could have written an entire sonnet on that murderous visage. He waited in silence, thinking that this might be the moment.

Slowly, Puck's fingers uncurled. He panted his way back to sanity, maintaining some measure of control despite everything. His next question was delivered in the barest of whispers, "How could you?"

The mortal folded his hands in his lap. He sighed, not really having to search for the words, but loathe to deliver them. "Because she has to live her life, Robin. You had time enough to introduce her to the other realms. And you tried. Hell, we both did. But she never took to it, did she? Judith chose the human ways years ago, and you know it. It's for the best."

The fairy's countenance dimmed. His steps back toward the bed were heavy, as if his entire body had been numbed by opiates. He sat at his friend's hip and murmured, "Her children will be monitored. Controlled. You know that, do you not? They won't be allowed to spread the spark. They must either commit to a solitary life, or be snatched away and removed from the human realm before they bear progeny."

"I understand. Perhaps that, too, is for the best."

"Because I can't be trus-"

"Because as much as you attempt to prove otherwise, I think you'll make a fine grandfather."

The pair sat in silence as midnight approached.

It was Puck who broke the stalemate, "She asked after you. Titania, I mean."

The Bard glanced back over to his writing table. His Bürgi clock was accurate to within a minute. He had no doubt that the fairy's internal clock was far more precise. Either way, they had a few minutes. So he asked, "How is she?"

"Disappointed. Devastated."

"I never meant to hurt her. You know that, yes?"

The fairy threw his hands in the air. He answered the question with a question, “What in the Hell do your intentions have to do with it, Will? She loved you enough to share you with Anne. A mortal. A sacrifice so great, so *unheard* of, that it became the insult that dethroned a fairy king. Oberon has been missing for over a year now. Close to two, by my reckoning.”

Shakespeare asked, “It’s been that long, has it?”

“Yes. The Seelie Court is fractured. You could have brought us unity. Instead, you broke her heart.”

The mortal murmured, “I regret nothing more than that.”

It was as close to an apology as he dared to utter, lest his resolve shatter.

But it wasn’t good enough for Puck. His voice breaking, the fairy asked, “And what about me?”

The man hardened his heart. “What about you?”

His dear friend said, “I loved you, Will.”

Shakespeare smiled wryly. He noted, “Loved? Oh, how deeply a trip of the tense can wound.”

Softer, Puck said, “I still love you.”

“Well then. I imagine that makes what comes next all the harder.”

Puck looked away.

The mortal reached up and turned the fairy’s head back towards him with a thumb and forefinger. “Don’t do that. Please. I need to know if it was worthwhile, Robin. Tell me what this means for humankind?”

“Any interaction between the realm of the fae and humanity will be strictly monitored. Metaphysical bonds and oaths will be required before the cultures are allowed to commingle, even in the most limited way. They’re calling it the Shakespeare Accord.”

The Bard was taken aback. “Really? Well, I must say...”

“Will.”

“...I must say that’s rather flattering, don’t you think?”

“I do not. Your name will be a curse in the worlds Seelie and Unseelie alike. The magic that we were bringing to humanity will forever be out of reach for most of your kind.”

“As it should be. Look at our history. We cannot be trusted.”

The fairy noted, “It also means that any chance encounters between our races must be erased from the minds of mortal men. My Seelie kin are already working on potent spells and brews that muddle the minds of humans. And the Unseelie, often far hungrier than they are circumspect, might simply devour those unfortunate enough to become tangled in their web. Either way, our kind will be sequestered to your tales of fancy. Is that what you wanted?”

Shakespeare nodded slowly. He said, “Yes. After a fashion, I think we’ll be safer that way. If it leaves our freedom intact, then I will pay any price. **We**, as a people, will pay any price.”

“So you speak for all of humanity now.”

“Someone had to.”

“You would doom them to a mundane existence.”

“Yes.”

“And trade paradise for struggle.”

“And trade the opiate of fairy promises for self determination.”

Puck gently removed the mortal hand that still caressed his chin. He said, “That was almost poetic.”

The human murmured, “I’ve been known to dabble.”

The fairy’s eyes drifted over to the Bürgi clock, which claimed the honor of midnight. It was running fast, but only slightly. Tears welled up in his eyes as he stood and moved a few paces away from the bed.

Shakespeare rose as well, almost instinctively. “It is time, then, my dear?”

“Yes. Only one thing remains to seal the Accord.”

The human shuffled nervously. He admitted, “I’m not even sure that I have one.”

Looking utterly distraught, the fairy said, “You do, Will. You do.”

Shakespeare covered the distance between them in two strides. He laid a comforting hand on his dear friend’s shoulder. “If that’s the case, I can think of no better cause to sacrifice it to. And I can think of no better *person* to be with at this moment.”

The squeeze of those mortal fingers coincided exactly with midnight’s arrival. A ruby dagger coalesced in Puck’s hand, like so much liquid fire. He couldn’t see a thing through the ocean of tears, but knew that his strike was swift and true.

As the tip of the impossible blade pierced the Bard’s heart, his world simply melted away. His soul drained into the fiery dagger, sealing the mystical agreement that he forced upon three worlds.

Flowing ruby vanished from the loving assassin’s hand, leaving his digits free to catch his best friend’s body before it fell. Finally, the great man was at peace. There wasn’t a mark on the still-warm corpse.

Puck cried into the shoulder of that perfect, if empty, shell. When he could think again, he lifted the remains of Shakespeare and laid them carefully upon the household’s second-best bed. The bed where they sired both of their mortal children. The bed bequeathed to Anne, who the fairy could never touch again.

The realization that he just lost *both* of the mortals that he loved overwhelmed him. He didn’t count the minutes spent with both palms flat on Will’s motionless chest. His shoulders shook as he anointed the body with the purest of tears.

In time, he wiped his eyes. The world transformed, shifting from a collective of wet, hazy curves into a solid dimension of straight, crisp lines. He hated the **realness** of it. He couldn’t stay any longer.

The fairy rose and walked over to the writing table. He reached out to take the leather case that held Shakespeare’s final story. He’d deliver it to Susanna personally, even if she would never see the courier. Then he would abandon this too, too solid realm.

After a final look around, Puck took a deep breath. He blew out the oil lamp. The smoke drifted away in the darkness. As did he.