

Urban Renewal

‘Disnae look bad.’ The first man squared proud shoulders inside his fluorescent jacket.

‘Aye.’ His companion tipped back a white hard hat, squinting up at a vast hoarding.

‘Near as good as the pictures.’

Sunlight sparkled on the painted Clyde as green leaves flourished on tall trees artfully planted around an open lawn where children played. Lovers strolled past apartment blocks elegant with tinted glass and unsullied stone.

For the present the recently laid turf was lumpy and lined with yellow. Spindly saplings merely offered twiggy optimism in their graceless sheaths of muddy plastic.

‘It’ll be better, come spring,’ the builder insisted.

‘Better than that old foundry,’ the second agreed. ‘Pint o’ heavy?’

‘Oh aye,’ The first nodded.

They walked away.

The fey had slept for a long age. Better to dream of better days in the way of his deathless kind. When the river had lapped untilled land. When his brethren had danced the circles of sun, moon and stars.

Before the short-lived had come, fertile as the rabbits burrowing into the earthen mounds that the fey drew up to mark gates between this safe, staid land and more tempting, more perilous realms. A curiosity, the short-lived, entertaining, especially when they were lured into the interstices of time and space. They proved wholly tied to their linear mortality, incurably reliant on physical senses so easily duped.

If they lacked the boundless perceptions of the fey, they had incalculable numbers. If they had no notion of shaping the land with mere will, they could hew stone, fell trees and bake bricks. Everything wild and free was tamed or killed or driven out. The fey fled or learned to live in the twilight.

The short-lived encumbered the land with herds and fields. They gathered to trade until their markets lasted year round. Their ships subdued the seas. They dug deeper than any rabbits, ripping rocks from mines and wringing out metals with fire and force. The waste from their smelting poisoned the earth. The river choked and died with the filth from their sprawling crowded warrens. Soot stained the very air. Those fey that stubbornly stayed retreated ever deeper underground, shifting into immaterial forms that couldn’t be sullied by mortal folly.

In his dreams, the fey sensed a change and stirred. Waking he found the soured earth had been scoured away. A newly planted grove spread tender roots through fresh soil rich with the sleeping seeds of meadow flowers. The cleansed waters of the river nearby were flowing with life. Scarcely more than sea salt tainted the cold wind or the clear blue sky above.

Intrigued, he slid upwards to rise from his land’s ancient embrace. Cautious, he realised the short-lived were still here. Why? He studied the advertising artist’s vision, readily relating it to the unfulfilled reality around him. His kind always dealt in desire and illusion. His glittering eyes fastened on the children in the picture. He had always enjoyed stealing those. He could easily summon up a changeling.

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