

Faerie Halfling Seeks Southern Woman

a *Forgotten Relics* short story

He’s never been this miserably hot and uncomfortable his entire life. Every step he takes down the crowded Atlanta sidewalk makes him feel heavier and more obviously foreign than the last. How do people live like this? Unnatural clothes stuck to damp skin. Choking on air thick with burned-up reptile fumes. Totally blind past their immediate surroundings. It’s barbaric.

The longing for cool, clean breezes and springy grass under his bare feet ends with a stab of homesickness. He shoves it down beside the hundred others he’s collected in his short month away. He’s committed to a year away. He has to make the best of it.

It’d be easier to cope with the heat if he wasn’t wearing this long leather jacket, but it stays put. His sorry halfling magic isn’t strong enough to obfuscate what it hides. The suspicious looks he’s getting from passersby are friendly handshakes compared to what they’d do if he took it off.

An elderly lady jaywalks away when he reaches the corner. He flashes a movie-star smile and winks when she checks to make sure he didn’t follow her. She scuttles away, clutching her purse.

Humans are so adorable.

He chuckles as he steps across the street but pauses before heading into the bar. Adjusts the weight on his back, runs a hand through his chin-length red hair, exhales sharply. Suddenly, all he wants is to sleep. How long has it been since he’s done that? Passing out at the strip club last week doesn’t count. The copious visceral pleasures of this world are taking their toll.

But he’s not about to stop indulging in them.

He pushes open the pitted door to annoyed grumbles as early afternoon sunlight exposes the bar’s clientele. Mostly solitary old men in trucker caps. But all isn’t lost. A knot of girls have commandeered the rickety bar, filling the tiny space with conversation. Their praline-sweet voices are languorous but loud. Whether it’s their Southern heritage or the alcohol, he’s not sure. He wants to find out.

It happens the way it always happens. He dips his head politely to the ladies, all of whom have swiveled their heads to notice him as he comes in. Then he takes a seat, one barstool removed from the nearest girl, orders a triple scotch, waits ten heartbeats. Then...

A tap on his shoulder. It’s not even magic—just one of those funny differences between here and home. Mundanes are drawn to fair folk like bugs to a torch. Nevermind how it turns out.

His grins knowingly as he turns to face the beautiful creature standing next to him.

She’s about twenty but makes herself up to look older. Thick mahogany hair held back from her smooth forehead with a wide yellow banana. Brown eyes ringed with black and shiny from drinking, lips stained with both lipstick and wine. The best bits of her packed into a few strips of black fabric that leave nothing and everything to the imagination. And he has a good imagination.

But she’s not smiling. That throws him. They always smile.

“Hey, buddy, you mind? We’re not here to pick up guys,” she says. Her voice is like honey on warm bread. “Go find somewhere else to sit.”

His mouth hangs open as she glares expectantly at him.

A big nasty blond wearing hoop earrings the size of her own head and a flimsy paper crown slurs, “Yeah, what Suz said. Piss off, Red. Don’t need any more grabby-handed pricks today.” A giggling chorus of agreement.

“Danny.”

“What?”

“My name isn’t Red. It’s Danny,” he repeats. “Danny Riley.” Stupid mortals don’t understand how important it is to get names right.

The brunette in front of him raises her eyebrows when he speaks. He sighs a little inside, both relieved and annoyed. If the pull of Fae blood doesn’t get them, the Irish accent does. There’s a flicker in her expression that belies her rudeness, though, and for a moment, he’s sure she knows who he is. What he is.

But there’s a cackle from the girls, and any semblance of interest disappears.

“Nice to meet you, Danny,” she says flatly. She puts down her empty wineglass and sticks out her hand. “I’m Susannah Porter. Welcome to America.”

He hesitates before taking it. Not because he doesn't want to—he's dying to touch that sunkissed skin—but because he has no idea what's happening. She's obviously human, yet she looked right through him. Everyone else he's met on this side of the Gauntlet's fallen to his charm. But not her. That's got him spooked. And desperately curious.

The bartender comes and pours more thin wine into Susannah's glass. Her friends are starting to stare, and her hand is still out. He takes it. Inhales sharply and tries to hide it as hormones flood his brain. One, two, three pumps.

She lets go first, then puts her hands on her hips and says, “Great. Now get your ass out of our space before Rocko has to do it for you.”

“Hey! I thought we were friends now. We shook and everything.”

“Got plenty of friends, Danny. Don't need any more. Especially not ones looking to hook up with a drunk girl the day before her wedding.”

He glances at the blond in the tiara. She's snorting white powder and tittering through smeared lipstick. He shudders.

“Trust me, miss, I'm quite happy to stay away from your charming friend.” A little laugh to defuse the tension.

But neither her facial expression nor her stance changes.

He sighs. Runs a hand through his hair. He's lost the standoff. Too bad. He'd had his eye on Susannah from the start, but it's obvious she's not impressed. Certainly not enough for what he had in mind.

“Fine, you win. Plenty of other places to go.”

“I'm sure.”

He throws a crumpled bill on the bar. Slams the scotch. When he stands, he notices he's only an inch or two taller than she is. The urge to take her in his arms to see how their bodies fit together is suddenly overpowering. What is it about this girl?

Instead, he bows his departure, then forces himself not to look back even though he can feel her eyes following him past the mens' room sign.

Takes a leak. Washes his hands, his face. Checks his glamour. It's hanging on, but his freckles are distinctly blue now. He'll need to refresh the spell before the pointed ears and weird eye show up.

By the time he saunters out of the bathroom toward the back door, he’s already spinning up new plans. Maybe it’s time to head to Memphis. Graceland’s been recommended by several friends after their own gap years. Elvis lives, brother. Meet the King.

He’s so caught up in the idea that he doesn’t notice his path is blocked until he puts his hand out to push open the emergency exit. His hand hits warm, soft flesh instead of cold, hard steel.

“Hell-o? Earth to Danny?” Susannah sneers. “You in there, boy?”

He recoils as if he’d touched iron. They’re close enough to kiss. He backs away, the surprise of her appearance throwing his usually-genteel manners.

“I’m leaving, okay? You don’t have to be such a bitch about it.”

She’s not moved by the profanity. “Don’t take it so personal,” she says dismissively. “I had to protect Shelia. She’s high out of her mind, and it wouldn’t be the first time she’s screwed a stranger in a bathroom stall and had to beg Bobby to forgive her.” Then she nods her head at him. “I want to see ‘em.”

He casts a surreptitious glance down at his crotch. Fairly certain she didn’t mean *that*. Although he kind of hopes she did.

“See what?” he says.

“Nobody wears a coat like that unless they got something to hide.”

Panic rises. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He tries to push past her to escape, hands shaking, mind racing.

But she holds her ground. They lock eyes.

And then he notices that she’s smiling. It stops him cold. The crinkles around her eyes, the crooked teeth, the knowing curl of her lips. She’s more than beautiful.

Something inside says *yes*.

He gulps a breath and takes a few steps back from her. Four heartbeats pass. Then, wordlessly and without drama, he shrugs off the heavy leather, letting it fall to the floor.

He shivers as the air conditioning hits the sweat on his back and rolls his shoulders. The wings unfurl. They stretch until they brush the sides of the narrow corridor. He lets out an involuntary sigh of relief as dragonfly-shaped shadows fill the space between him and her. Fluorescent light filters through the delicate membranes and cast golden glitter on the floor, the walls, the ceiling.

She gasps.

Images of prisons with iron bars and freezing metal tables instantly flood his mind. This is either the best idea he’s ever had or the worst. It’s so hard to tell when he’s listening to the magic or his own stupid brain.

He looks down, ashamed and terrified of what will happen next.

There’s a moment so long he starts to wonder if she’s still there. If someone will stumble around the corner and see.

Then there’s one finger under his chin. He lets her raise his head to meet her gaze. The dark brown of her wide eyes sparkles with his wings’ dim magical glow. His birthright illuminating her face.

“I knew it.”

“How?”

She just smiles. He’s more confused than ever now, but fear is evaporating like dew in the summer sun. Whatever foresight he inherited from his mother tells him something important is happening.

“You’re not from here, are you?” He can tell from the way she says it that she doesn’t mean America or even Ireland.

“No, I’m not.”

The smile widens, softens. “Tell me all about it, Danny Riley,” she whispers.

He does.