

Clan Rathskeller

By Kevin Hearne

This story takes place ten months before the events of Hounded, the first book in The Iron Druid Chronicles.

Decembers in Arizona are decidedly cool, but not what I would call cold. People shop at outdoor malls like Tempe Marketplace wearing nothing but a light sweater, and they utterly fail to slip on black ice or lose toes to frostbite, because those dangers don't exist in the desert. For similar reasons, they fail to get inhaled by ravenous yeti or snacked on by esurient cephalopods. One would think they'd also be safe from the attentions of sociopathic kobolds, but I discovered, to my chagrin on a Monday night, that this was not the case.

Tempe Marketplace is a sprawling shopping mecca anchored by a large cinema and some glowing big-box stores. Near the cinema, smaller retailers and a host of restaurants huddle around like Dickensian orphans, hoping for a scrap of post-movie commerce to feed their hungry bottom lines. ("Please sir, spend some more.") A cobbled walkway sprinkled with upscale patio furniture and water features permits shoppers to feel casual and la-di-dah at the same time. Best of all, there isn't any canned music blaring through eight-bit speakers, a rare and special blessing while shopping in America. The music is live Thursday through Saturday nights because the mall sponsors free concerts on their outdoor stage, always featuring family-friendly bands who play as if they're contractually bound to avoid minor chords. The stage gets used for other events the rest of the week, like visits from Santa Claus and his elves.

The dads were home watching *Monday Night Football* and the moms had brought out their kids to see Saint Nick and maybe shop a bit for their husbands. ASU students and young hipsters were crowding into San Felipe's Cantina for happy hour, as well as a few older members of the twenty-something-and-single demographic. I could see them all because San Felipe's was missing most of its walls, opting instead for a low metal fence behind which customers could legally pound a brewski and enjoy the show, if there was one, as the cantina sat directly opposite the stage. It was between the stage and San Felipe's that I first became aware that something was profoundly wrong. That was because Oberon, my dog, smelled something that wasn't human.

Oberon is an Irish wolfhound, and though he's a sight hound, his nose is still much better

than my human one. And since I'd bound my consciousness to his and he'd gradually picked up my language through the link, he's not limited to barks and wagging his tail when he wants to tell me something. He says it in his mind, and I hear it in mine.

<Atticus, there's something here that isn't human,> he said.

That would be you, Oberon. Or me, if you want to get fussy with the definition.

<No, I mean it's something I've never smelled before. But it's not a plant, and nothing like any animal I remember. Kind of earthy.>

That gave me an acute case of shifty eyes. I looked first toward the patrons of the cantina and started to scan people's auras to make sure they all had human shapes. I saw colors of amusement and arousal sitting next to angst and loneliness, but nothing out of the ordinary.

<Hey, you know what? I think it's coming from over there, by Santa and the elves,> Oberon said.

I turned my head to the stage, where a corpulent Santa with a curly white beard tried to appear avuncular as an elf placed a screaming child on his lap. Santa's aura told the truth: He was irritated and wanted to be anywhere but here. Perhaps the kid was screaming because he sensed that. Or perhaps he was screaming because kids don't have years of logic and science blinding them to the true nature of things. Some primal part of him realized that the "elf" handling him was truly a different species.

Those aren't elves, I told Oberon, though I could see why he'd make the mistake. They were excessively darling little dudes, and they blended in well with the festive holiday atmosphere. But one look at their auras confirmed that they weren't locals.

<Oh, I know. They're dwarfs pretending to be elves.>

No, they're not dwarfs either.

<Okay, okay, they're "little people," I'm sorry! Can't believe I have to be politically correct when you're the only one who can hear me.>

Oberon, those are gnomes. That's what you're smelling. There were five of them, not quite four feet tall in platform shoes, but only one seemed to be paying any attention to Santa and the line of kids waiting to see him. The rest kept their eyes skimming over the passing throng of shoppers, and I figured we should keep moving in case they noticed the Irish lad and his giant dog staring at them. I resumed my walk past San Felipe's extensive frontage.

<Gnomes?> Oberon asked. <You mean those white-bearded guys people put in their

front yards for me to chew up?>

No, not garden gnomes. Those didn't show up until after World War II. These are real gnomes from the Old World. They're quite rare. If you try chewing on them, they'll chew back.

Oberon stopped and cocked his head to one side. <You're telling me those are gnomes pretending to be dwarfs pretending to be elves? Are you trying to play Six Degrees of Bilbo Baggins again?>

I clapped him encouragingly on the shoulder, not wishing to tug on his leash. *Come on.* Oberon followed and I turned right past San Felipe's until we were just out of sight of the stage. There I drew closer to the fence separating the sober from the soused and tried to find a space between the bobbing heads through which to view the gnomes unobtrusively. Oberon destroyed that plan.

"Holy shit!" a random customer breathed, putting down a half-raised pint glass.

His buddy followed the direction of his gaze and said, "Damn!"

"That's a huge fucking dog!" the bright one of the group said.

The first guy got the attention of another guy at a neighboring table and pointed. "Hey, look at that huge fucking dog!"

"Holy shit!"

I sighed. *And so it goes.*

<Why do people always say that?> Oberon wondered, drooping his ears and sitting down as he gave breath to his own heavy sigh.

I'm not sure. People used to say obvious things ironically or as a form of understatement, but in the last few decades they seem to say it with a sense of discovery, and it worries me.

<Do we have to stay here and listen to them for long? You know I usually like hanging out with random people, but even you have to admit that the drunk ones can get annoying in about three nanoseconds.>

No argument there, buddy. Soon they'll notice I'm holding your leash and they'll start asking me questions. I just want to get a half-decent stare at the gnomes.

I discovered a window between a couple of gossiping sorority girls and examined one of the gnomes as best as I could. His aura told me nothing except his race. Unlike human auras, which broadcast emotions in a full spectrum, gnomish auras are a soft, solid brown, like milk chocolate, save for the white line of magic nearest their skin. But his mere presence, and that of

his companions, bespoke something terribly amiss. Gnomes despise humans and have as little to do with us as possible. For five of them to be out in public like this—well, it was unheard of. They were either extremely upset about something—a point of honor, perhaps—or actively insane. They weren't even bothering to hide their large noses and magically groomed mustaches; the shoppers, of course, blithely dismissed these features as prosthetic parts of their costumes.

If they were here on some sort of vendetta, it would be best for me to stay out of it. But if they were on a suicide mission born of immortal ennui, or something equally dangerous to the people here, then it would behoove me to prevent it. Tempe had proven to be a good hiding place for me for more than ten years, and I didn't want a few gnomes messing it up by causing a ruckus and drawing attention.

“Hey. Dude,” one of the bar patrons called. “Is that your dog?” I didn't reply, just held up the leash. Unfortunately, this was construed as an invitation for further comment. “Well, he's pretty fucking big,” he said.

I turned toward the voice. It belonged to a blue-shirted mechanic with the name *Jeff* embroidered in red on top of a white badge sewn to his pocket. I saw a couple of pens and an air pressure gauge tucked inside a plastic pocket protector.

“Hi, Jeff. May I borrow one of your pens?” I asked him. He blinked and tried to process how a stranger had known his name. He'd forgotten that it was on his shirt and that people could read it. “And maybe a bar napkin too?”

“What? Wait, dude. Do I know you?” His expression made it clear that he doubted it, though it wasn't clear why he thought we must be acquainted before he could loan me a pen. His drinking buddies, picking up on his cues, scowled at me.

“No, I'm just functionally literate. May I borrow a pen, please? And a napkin. I'll return the pen shortly, I promise.”

Jeff wanted to refuse, but I'd said the magic word and he didn't want to be a dick in front of his friends.

“Sure, man, whatever.” He plucked a pen out of his pocket and passed it to me over San Felipe's low fence. He tossed a napkin at me as well.

“Thanks,” I said. Holding the napkin down flat against the curved railing of the fence, I scrawled a quick message in Old High German. It was my best guess at the language the gnomes used among themselves. It said, “I'd like to talk with you. Follow the dog.” I gave this to Oberon

along with some instructions. *Take this to one of the gnomes and drop it in front of him. Bark once, wait for him to read it, then lead him back here.*

<Got it.> I unhooked Oberon's leash and he trotted off, one edge of the napkin held gently between his teeth.

"Hey, where's he going?" Jeff asked.

"Here's your pen. Thank you." I awarded him a tight smile. He took his pen and thrust it absently back into his pocket.

"You know your dog just walked off without his leash?"

I decided right then that if I owned a car—which I didn't—I would never take it to Jeff when it needed repair. He'd just tell me it had to be fixed, or that the sky was blue, or something else painfully obvious. But I kept these thoughts off my face and smiled amiably.

"Oh, he'll be back, no worries. We're playing fetch."

"What's he fetching?"

"One of Santa's elves."

"In his *teeth*?" Jeff's drinking buddies haw-hawed. "Is that legal?"

"No, that's not what's happening." I searched for a modern phrase to alleviate his mild case of civic concern. "It's all good," I explained, then looked away, signaling that I thought our brief conversation (and acquaintance) over. Jeff was willing to let it go, but he couldn't resist lowering his voice a tad and muttering about me.

"All *kinds* of weirdos in this town," I heard him say. He had no idea what an understatement that was.

<We're coming,> Oberon announced. In a moment he appeared around the corner, tail wagging. Behind him came a frowning gnome, tense and ready for an ambush. His costume was one of those red military Sergeant Pepper jackets over a linen shirt with a high starched collar. The jacket had white piping across the chest and entirely too many brass buttons. Red knickers gathered at the knee, a yellow stripe blazed up the sides, and yellow stockings fell into some enormous platform shoes that added nearly a foot to the gnome's height. He'd be just over three feet, I guessed, without those shoes. When his eyes focused on me and flicked down to the tattoos on my right arm, he relaxed. He spoke in Old High German, as I suspected, a tongue I hadn't spoken in centuries.

"Here you are," he said. "Good. We were beginning to worry. Is all in readiness?"

I boggled. He behaved like he knew me, but I was positive we'd never met, and absolutely certain that my name wasn't on my shirt.

"I certainly hope all is ready," I said. "Remind me of your name, friend?"

Suspicion veiled the gnome's features. His dark eyes narrowed and his mustache quivered. "Tell me who you are first."

"You recognized me a moment ago."

He twitched his head at my right side, using his nose to point. "You have the tattoos of the Tuatha Dé Danann and I can see this is your true form," he said, "but I do not think now that you are the one we have been waiting for."

My face paled. They were waiting for one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and those were precisely the Irish gods from whom I was hiding. Originally they were mere Druids, like me, and were bound to the earth—as I am—through their tattoos. At first glance, it would be easy to mistake me for one of them. But which one was coming?

"No, I am not he," I admitted. "I am merely passing through and curious why the folk of the earth are walking amongst humans."

"Hey, dude, what language is that?" Jeff called. "Russian? You guys Commies or something?" His companions laughed and then offered him congratulatory fist bumps for his rapier wit.

It was no use explaining to Jeff that the Soviet Union had collapsed decades ago and the Cold War was over, nor that Slavic and Germanic languages are completely different. I ignored him and motioned to the gnome that we should move away from San Felipe's. If Jeff wished to pursue the matter he'd have to leave his beer, and I felt intuitively that he would never do that. The gnome was only too happy to put distance between himself and the loud humans; we shuffled closer to the California Pizza Kitchen, which lay across the walkway.

"We are here to recover that which was stolen," the gnome said. "The thief will be here soon. Goibhniu is helping us."

The barometer measuring the internal pressure of my paranoia fell abruptly. Goibhniu was an Irish god of smithing and brewing, and he was a decent sort, the last time I'd seen him. But that was in another country, a thousand years gone or more. I had no idea how he'd regard me now, but taking the side of the gnomes was a good sign.

"What was stolen, may I ask?"

“Truth for truth,” the gnome said. “Tell me who you are.”

I clasped my hands together and gave him a short bow. “You are speaking to the last of the Druids.”

The gnome snorted in disbelief. “The Druids all died centuries ago.”

“Aye, except for me. You know I speak truth. You recognize my tattoos. Few people can speak the old tongue anymore.” The gnome’s eyes shifted to consider Oberon. “And yes, I converse with my hound. So tell me what was stolen.”

His shoulders slumped and his mustache puffed out with a resigned exhalation. “We five are all that remains of Clan Rathskeller,” he explained, “the finest brewers of our people. You may have noticed that there are no women amongst us. We are in danger of extinction, and for fifty years we have worked on a kingly gift for the meister of Clan Fruchtbar: the Draught of Unending Strength. This was to be exchanged for five brides, but it was stolen.”

“By whom?”

“Kohleherz and some faery.”

I had no idea who Kohleherz was. But the fact that a faery was involved displeased me no end. I might be able to trust Goibhniu, but I’d never be able to trust a faery. He’d give me up to my enemies among the Tuatha Dé Danann for a flower petal.

“You say the thieves are coming here?”

“Any moment now.”

“Then I should continue my journey,” I said. I’d originally come to the Marketplace to try out the Irish pub near the movie theatre, so it wasn’t technically a lie. But the gnome would be left with the impression that I didn’t live here, should he choose to share with others our visit. “May harmony find you and all of Clan Rathskeller. As I am even more endangered than you are, I would appreciate it if you would keep my presence here a secret.”

The gnome nodded and turned back to the stage without another word. He didn’t say he’d Facebook me or anything.

<What was that all about?> Oberon asked.

We have to hide. I’m going to camouflage you.

<Okay, but hide from what?>

A god, a faery, and whatever Kohleherz is.

<Why don’t we just leave?>

Because I'm curious. I cast camouflage on Oberon and he melted from sight as the spell bound the pigments of his surroundings to his own. It wasn't perfect invisibility, especially when he moved, but it was good enough. I then cast it on myself and looked around to see if anyone had noticed. A couple of passersby did a double take in my direction, but they shook it off quickly, consumed as they were with consumerism. Convinced that Oberon and I were out of sight, I walked slowly across the cobbled intersection to the building cater-corner to San Felipe's. Finding a low-traffic area, I stripped and asked Oberon to guard my clothes. I placed them under his front paws.

<Where are you going?>

Right above you on the roof. We're going to people-watch for a while. Let me know if you smell anything else that isn't human.

<All right. But I'm getting kind of hungry. Hope we won't be doing this for long.>

Try to bear it with patience, Oberon. I'll buy you a steak when we're finished.

<No fooling?>

No fooling. You did a great job alerting me to the gnomes, so you can have a filet wrapped in bacon if you want.

<Just one? I smelled five gnomes. Doesn't that mean I should get five filets?>

I smiled and bound myself to the form of a great horned owl. It was one of four animal shapes I could take, and ideal for surreptitiously observing skulduggery on a late-autumn night. *I don't think the gnome-filet exchange rate is one-to-one.*

<Don't get cheap on me now, Atticus,> Oberon said as I took wing. Since I was still camouflaged, my flight was almost as invisible as it was silent. A couple of people caught flickers of movement and turned their heads my way, but gave up when their eyes failed to lock on anything but the visual noise of the mall. I'd have to be careful with my magic from here on out until I could reconnect with the earth. I had a charm on my necklace—one of ten—that served as magic storage, and it was half empty now thanks to those spells. The necklace was a neat piece of work I'd crafted over many centuries that would shrink or grow depending on the form I took. Shape-shifting took quite a bit of energy, and maintaining camouflage would be a small but continuous drain on the remainder. This completely paved environment was just the sort of place where I was most at a disadvantage, and without any weapons at hand I really needed to avoid a scrap. I felt one coming anyway.

Less than five minutes after establishing a perch on the roof, I saw Goibhniu stride into the square from the west. His hair wasn't as red as mine; it was more of a burnt auburn shade, and he wore it down to his shoulders, parted in the middle. He was dressed in jeans and an Irish sweater that covered up most of his tattoos. He paused in front of the stage, smiled wryly and nodded at the gnomes, and they nodded back, visibly relieved to see him. He carried a stainless-steel thermos in his left hand and kept his right hand in his pocket as he headed for the entrance to San Felipe's. He disappeared for a few moments, but reappeared soon on the periphery across from the stage, except inside the fence. All the tables along the edge were occupied because they afforded the best chance to see and be seen. Goibhniu strode confidently to one table of four, pulled something out of his pocket, and laid it down. It was four Benjamins. He offered one each to the patrons; they immediately took their drinks and left.

Now in sole possession of a prime table, he sat on a high stool and set his thermos prominently in the center. A svelte waitress appeared to ask his pleasure, and he ordered a drink that he would probably never touch.

Shortly thereafter, I could sense tension build in the area like a subwoofer crescendo, seismic and inescapable. I'll admit that it ruffled my feathers. Someone down there was causing it, but I couldn't tell who. It was time to look at things a bit differently. I activated the charm on my necklace that bound my sight to the magical spectrum. I try not to use it too often, because seeing how all things are bound together is a recipe for sensory overload. Still, it's invaluable for seeing through the glimmers of faeries, and it's for that reason that I call the spell "faerie specs."

The source of the magical mojo was indeed a faery, or rather it was something he carried on his back. The faery was posing as a dark-haired emo boy, with a shaggy haircut obscuring half his face and what looked like extremely uncomfortable skinny jeans. In reality he was blond and athletic and a bit taller. A large burlap sack was slung over his back, the size of those garbage bags used for lawn clippings. The drawstring had nearly closed the contents away from my sight, but inside I could tell there was a dark and roiling magic waiting to get out, magic of the deep earth that was better left buried.

<Atticus, why is my hair standing up along the back of my neck?>

Because something wicked this way comes.

<Smells like motor oil mixed with ass.>

The faery spied Goibhniu and moved to the entrance of San Felipe's to join him. The

gnomes saw the faery and went about their business, but it was clear they were all distracted now.

The waitress returned to Goibhniu's table and deposited a pint of beer and two empty shot glasses. He thanked her and she left. The faery slouched into view afterward and nodded once to Goibhniu, making no move to sit down or lay down his burden. Goibhniu nodded back solemnly. I wondered if they were related, and if he'd brought that steel thermos purposely to taunt the faery.

All faeries—I mean the real Irish ones, not the cute winged horrors of Disney—are descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann, born in Tír na nÓg. Unlike their sires, faeries are beings of pure magic, and as such cannot stand the touch of iron. Steel is very bad. Wrought iron is worse. And cold iron—or rather iron from meteorites, unbound from the world's magic—is the worst. That's why I wear a cold iron amulet in the center of my necklace: it's Grade-A faery repellent.

Without speaking, Goibhniu reached for the steel thermos and unscrewed the lid. He poured a measure of amber liquid into one of the shot glasses, then screwed the lid back on and set it down on the table. At this point my vision began to show me two different things.

What the human eye could see remained the same: The dark-haired emo boy just stood there, looking at the shot glasses and the table, and the bag hung motionless across his back. But in the magical spectrum—a better reflection of reality that appeared like a green overlay in my sight—the blond faery picked up the empty shot glass and held it near the top of his right shoulder. A thin black arm, its skin like chiseled charcoal, snaked out of the burlap bag and reached for the glass with a three-fingered hand. The drawstring loosened, the bag rippled, and an ugly black head and shoulders emerged, a cruel grin of teeth like cooled lava rocks splitting the face. The gnomes saw this, too, their magical sight as good as mine, and they stiffened. This must be Kohleherz, the source of all that bad mojo, and though I'd never seen one of his kind before, he could be nothing else but a kobold of the darkest mines and subterranean caves.

Kobolds are to gnomes as the Sith are to the Jedi—or even as yin is to yang. They are both wee species of bipeds who wield earth magic and whose faces cry out for rhinoplasty, but kobolds are bound to the deeper forces of violence and upheaval in the earth whereas the gnomes serve the forces of growth and nurturing. If legends about them are true, kobolds have fantastic resistance to heat and pressure. Show a kobold a lake of lava and he'll wade into it like it's a

Jacuzzi, maybe even order a drink with an umbrella and a piece of fruit on the rim. Then he'll calmly, cavalierly plot some really evil shit, like an encore for Krakatoa.

The creature's left hand produced a golden flask from the bag—not merely gold-plated but solid gold, stamped on the outside with gnomish script and encrusted with gleaming gems. He poured a smaller measure of a silvery liquid, thick and viscous, into the shot glass and put it back into the faery's upraised hand. The faery put it down on the table and then picked up the shot glass full of Goibhniu's brew. Goibhniu, in turn, picked up the glass full of Clan Rathskeller's magnum opus. It was like a drug deal, with both sides sampling the product before the exchange.

The kobold tossed back the amber shot and coughed, then nodded appreciatively. Goibhniu savored his wee sip of gnomish brew, clearly a rare moment of bliss in his long life. At last he nodded and set down the glass. I couldn't really hear anything over the noise of the mall, but I imagined a hiss of pleasure coming from the kobold. He leaned out of the bag, proffering the flask. Goibhniu picked up the steel thermos since the faery could not, and rose from his chair. He took the flask from the kobold; he gave the steel thermos in exchange, careful not to touch the faery with it. The kobold grinned wickedly and melted back into the bag with his prize.

The parties did not shake hands and wish each other well. Goibhniu casually took a step toward the fence and stretched out his hand, dangling the golden flask out into space. This, apparently, was a signal. The gnomes shouted "Rathskeller!" in a decidedly un-elvish register, ceased all pretense of being Santa's helpers, and sprinted off the stage, much to the confusion of Santa and much to the trauma of all the good little boys and girls.

Sweet! He's giving the hooch right back to the gnomes! He's totally screwing the kobold!

<Are gods allowed to do that?>

Gods can screw anything and anybody. For reference, see history.

The faery's jaw dropped as he saw the gnomes rushing his way, their noses red and their mustaches aquiver with righteous fury. The kobold's dark silhouette popped out of the bag briefly to see what was going on and his loud cry of dismay shuddered through the square. Clearly he and the faery were as surprised as I to see gnomes mixing with humans. People stopped in their tracks, shut their mouths, and turned to stare as the elves charged the fence of San Felipe's. The kobold screeched at the faery to flee in Old High German, a raspy, keening noise that scraped across the nerves and yanked everybody out of their happy place. Nobody

could see what was making that noise and I'm fairly certain nobody wanted to see it. Children began to scream, and the first fingers of panic began to trace shivering paths down the spines of adults. The faery bolted for the exit as Goibhniu grinned at Clan Rathskeller. The gnome who'd been helping Santa took possession of the Draught of Unending Strength, and they all bowed in thanks to him.

Goibhniu said something to them—probably “you're welcome”—and bid them farewell with a wave. He vaulted the fence effortlessly and began to jog west toward the bookstore, the direction from whence he came, leaving his untouched drink on the table. The gnomes formed a wedge and began to trot around San Felipe's fence to cut off the faery and Kohleherz. I didn't think they'd make it; the faery was almost to the door, and then he'd head south for the parking lot. There was no way those short gnomish legs could keep up with the strides of a long-legged faery. The kobold would get away if I didn't intervene—and I had good reasons to let it go. It really wasn't my affair, for one thing. And I had a good gig going here: I'd managed to stay in one place for more than ten years, I had a thriving business, and no one suspected that I was older than three major religions and spoke forty-two languages. If I stuck my nose into this and either the faery or the kobold escaped, I'd have to work hard to disappear again.

On the other hand, I knew I'd feel guilty if I let the kobold go. They possessed a profound lack of redeeming features, from all I'd ever heard or read. They were kind of like mosquitoes that way—they're pests capable of inflicting serious harm, and whenever I see one I have to kill it as a community service. Pompeii, if the stories were true, hadn't been a natural eruption, but spawned by a trio of kobolds who had a beef with a warlock in the town. It was lucky for us that they rarely bothered with humans.

Stay there, I told Oberon. I'm going to make sure the bad guys don't get away.

<Okay, but if somebody drops a muffin and it disappears you can't blame me.>

Fine, but you're not allowed to help them drop it. I spread my wings and sailed silently toward the entrance to San Felipe's just as the faery and his malevolent friend burst through it. They collided with a mother and her two children making their way toward the stage, bowling them over and forever associating Santa with violent falls in the minds of those poor kids. The faery quickly found his legs again and put them to excellent use as the wailing began. Clan Rathskeller turned the corner and spied him, but a quick glance told me that they'd never close the distance without some help.

I wondered what their escape plan was as the faery ran south and the kobold surveyed their pursuit, his coal-black eyes peeking out from the top of the sack. Indeed, why had they chosen Tempe to make this bizarre exchange in the first place? Faeries can't shift to Tír na nÓg without oak, ash, and thorn to aid their journey, and those trees were in short supply in the Phoenix metro area. Ah, but kobolds—especially the black, sunless ones like Kohleherz—they knew their way around underground. And a peculiar feature of the Tempe Marketplace is its close proximity to a sand-and-rock quarry based in the bed of the Salt River. I concluded that the kobold had gotten them here, and the kobold would get them out.

They were indeed heading in that direction, directly east along the northern throughway once they hit the lot, the gnomes in pursuit but falling behind. If I waited until they got to the bare earth of the quarry, I'd have access to all the power I'd need—but then, as earth-based magic users themselves, so would they. And there'd be no stopping the kobold once he got to some earth he could sink into. If my skills at moving dirt were like a kid with a plastic shovel, gnomes and kobolds were like Caterpillar hydraulic excavators. On asphalt, all of us would be working with limited power—but me especially, since the shift back to human would drain me further. My defenses would have to hold until the gnomes in their silly platform shoes could catch up.

The lot wasn't particularly busy with comings and goings at the moment—a small blessing. If I could take care of this without ruining anyone else's Monday, that would be a victory. I spiraled down in front of the faery's path and dissolved my camouflage. The sudden appearance of an owl in the parking lot startled and slowed him a bit, but he didn't brake fully; he simply tacked left to run around. He skidded to an alarmed halt, however, once I shifted to human form in front of him. I purposely presented my right side so that he could see the Druidic tattoos that covered me in a continuous band from my heel to the back of my right hand. If he looked at me in the magical spectrum, he'd see them backlit as the energy from the shift spent itself among the knots and recycled. He'd also see something else. I was counting on it.

He cursed in surprise, and so did the kobold riding on his back. A querulous bark in Old High German demanded to know why he'd stopped.

The faery's eyes widened as it sank in that I wasn't one of the Tuatha Dé Danann. To him, I was a spooky story told round the campfire come to life.

“He's made of iron!” he squealed.

I smiled at his mistake—though perhaps, from his perspective, it was entirely accurate. I had bound my cold iron amulet to my aura, so to him I looked like naked death. I used some of my dwindling supply of energy to quicken my reflexes and to scare the faery even more; he'd see the white flash of the energy course through me in the magical spectrum and wonder what I'd just done.

“Just keep going! We have to get to the quarry!” the kobold's voice grated.

The faery tried to obey, fainting first to the left and then to the right to get around me, but I matched his moves and he knew he couldn't get around without me touching him. The game we were playing was Tag, You're Dead; my aura would dissolve his very substance. I lunged toward him, hand outstretched, and he backpedaled frantically to avoid me. He even turned and began to flee, blindly, back toward the gnomes.

But he'd forgotten he was in the parking lot of one of the most popular shopping destinations in the Phoenix metro area. As he fled, the kobold cursing him, he ran right into one of those giant, manly trucks with a steel ribbon in front of the grille and a chrome steel bumper. Both he and the truck were going perhaps five miles an hour, not normally life-threatening, but all that steel coming into contact with the faery walloped him forcefully, and he fell backward on top of his dark passenger, unconscious before he hit the ground.

At that point, Kohleherz decided that there was nothing more to be gained by stealth and subterfuge. Using the inhuman strength of the earthborn, he kicked the faery off him and then tore through the fabric of the bag. He immediately seized the faery in both hands and threw him up over the hood of the truck to land sickeningly against its windshield. The driver of said truck, already traumatized by thoughts of how much his insurance premiums would go up after this accident, was now nearly apoplexed. He thundered out of the cab, cursing and looking for someone to blame. He wore jeans and a T-shirt with the sleeves torn off; he was one of those people who think their arms constitute a “gun show.” He saw me standing there, naked, but missed the kobold, who was after all much closer to the ground and had skin the color of asphalt anyway. He immediately concluded that the skinny emo boy who'd run into his truck—and then somehow leapt back onto it from the surface of the parking lot—had been trying to escape my unwanted sexual advances.

“What the hell did you do, you pervert? You mighta killed this poor kid! They oughtta lock you away and 'lectrocute your nads!”

I didn't respond, because naked people never win arguments. They get yelled at, arrested, and Tased, but nobody ever listens to them. Besides, I had smaller, more dangerous fish to fry. I couldn't let Kohleherz escape. He'd snatched up the steel thermos and was now checking on the location of Clan Rathskeller. The gnomes were huffing and puffing their way toward us, getting closer, but it was clear that they wished they had some cross-trainers on instead of clunky elf risers.

The faery expired, his system unable to deal with the twin shocks of steel and blunt-force trauma, and began to turn to dust on the hood of the truck, whereupon the driver began to babble a series of what-the-fucks and do-you-believe-this-shit and other modern expressions of impotence.

Kohleherz turned to face me for the first time. "Get out of my way!" he growled, but he didn't wait for me to comply. He probably assumed that I didn't speak Old High German. Saying it, however, was a focus for the spell he threw at me. He held the thermos under his left arm, while his right arm swooped up dramatically in one of those aggressive gestures favored by megalomaniacs, as if they're grabbing the world by its metaphorical balls. I'm quite sure that the spell was supposed to launch me bodily into the air, far out of his path, but it did no such thing. Spells that target me have to get past my aura first, and since it's bound with cold iron, most spells tend to fizzle on contact, leaving me unaffected. My amulet twitched on my neck, but nothing else moved to indicate that his spell had ever been cast.

Bemused by this, the kobold opted for a do-over. "Move!" he said, cutting the air in front of him this time. Again my amulet twitched, but my feet stayed firmly on the ground, blocking his escape. Clan Rathskeller was approaching fast—or at least as fast as their awkward shoes would let them—and he couldn't like the odds. He hissed his frustration and, perhaps for the first time, considered me seriously.

I grinned at him mockingly and spoke his language. "I am quite likely older than you, Kohleherz. You cannot toss me aside so easily."

The kobold blanched, but he didn't get drawn into conversation as I'd hoped. Instead, my taunting seemed to remind him of someone nearby whom he *could* toss around easily—namely, the swearing truck driver, who hadn't shut up or even noticed that I was ignoring him.

Kohleherz's inky fingers shot out toward the man, and he said "Move!" again, but this time his gesture was very specific instead of a careless swipe. He brought his arm over his head

and the hapless man arced up into the sky, a high-pitched scream gurgling incongruously out of him, and then the kobold's fingers pointed directly at me. So I could move out of the way and let the man splat headfirst into the pavement, or I could catch him. There wasn't a binding I could whip up in time to save him magically, and in any case my juice was dangerously low. I chose to catch him.

I was hoping he'd thank me for saving his life, but that's not the way he was wired. He already thought I was some sort of sexual deviant, so finding himself forcibly thrown into my arms and rolling around the parking lot with me was possibly the most horrific turn of events he could imagine. His teeth were stained brown, his breath was foul, and his throat made hoarse panicky noises as he began punching and slapping at me in an effort to extricate himself. I tired of that instantly and hit him back harder than perhaps was strictly necessary. He slumped unconscious, and I looked around wildly to locate Kohleherz.

He was edging backward to the quarry but involved in a running fight with the gnomes, who'd finally drawn within range to bring their own magic to bear. In the visible spectrum, all anyone would see were five of Santa's elves walking briskly and waving their arms about somewhat spastically. In the magical spectrum, though, I saw that they were trying to bind the kobold and he was deflecting every attempt. He didn't counterattack—he didn't have time to muster a response under the relentless assault of the gnomes—but neither was there a need to as long as he could keep making progress toward the quarry.

I had nothing I could contribute magically at this point. My last dregs of power were needed to keep Oberon camouflaged; I couldn't have him be seen unleashed and unattended at a mall. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough left to cast it on myself, and I sorely needed it now that other shoppers, drawn by the sounds of conflict, were paying attention to our little imbroglio—especially since they saw a naked man lying next to a clothed man. I could see how that might excite their curiosity. I needed to get out of there and reconnect with the earth—and help the gnomes while I was at it.

Gasps and cries and an outraged “Hey! What are you doing?” reached me from various parts of the parking lot as I rolled the man over, looking for anything that might help me in a fight. I was hoping for a pocketknife, but had no luck. However, a bulging, telltale ring on the back pocket of his jeans suggested that he owed his brown teeth to chewing tobacco. I fished the round can out of there, satisfyingly heavy in my hand, and then streaked east toward the

quarry—in both senses of the word.

Indignant cries chased me. They probably thought I'd taken the man's wallet. If they pursued me in earnest they'd risk getting themselves drawn into the fight between the gnomes and the kobold. The sooner this was over, the safer everyone would be.

I scooted along the northernmost edge of the lot, which would allow me to pass the duelists with the grace of maybe three or four yards. As I drew even with the gnomes, I contributed to their cause by chucking the can o' tobacky directly at the kobold. He saw me and the flash of the can in the light of the lot and desperately whipped a deflection spell at it, perhaps thinking it was a throwing star or some other kind of weapon. It was nothing more than distraction.

It served to open a fissure in the wall of the kobold's defense, however, allowing one of the gnomes' binding spells to squirt through and knock him down. The steel thermos clattered loudly on the ground a couple of times before rolling away. Now that the breach was made, other spells piled on. Kohleherz screeched a nerve-shredding chalkboard scream, knowing that his death was imminent and there was nothing he could do about it. I kept running east and left the gnomes to it as they rushed in to make the kobold render them personal, physical restitution; Kohleherz's cries cut off abruptly with a wet noise—and the sense of wrong I'd felt as a subtext ever since his arrival dissipated.

Sirens approached as my feet found the sandy soil of the quarry. Relief flooded through me as I drew energy up through my tattoos and camouflaged myself. Once I'd topped off the magical tank, I strolled back to make sure Kohleherz was truly dead.

He was. Nothing remained but an oily, oozing patch of asphalt and a group of savagely pleased gnomes. I felt sure they would keep my presence here a secret, and the faery would be telling no tales, since his ashes were scattering in the wind. Goibhniu had come and gone without ever seeing me, so I concluded, as I wished to, that it was safe to stay in Tempe for a while longer. The Rathskellers retrieved the steel thermos, and that was for the best; whatever Goibhniu had brewed, it was not intended for humans. They saw me passing by, my camouflage providing no concealment to their magical vision, and they bowed briefly. I nodded back, acknowledging that I'd done them a favor and someday, if occasion arose, they'd return it.

The smokeless tobacco guy would be getting an ambulance soon, judging by the sirens and the few people clustered around him holding cell phones, so I walked back to where I'd left

my dog and got dressed so I could walk in plain sight again.

<It's about time,> Oberon said when I returned. <I am famished!>

Famished, eh? That's a pretty big word for a dog to use.

<I have been saving it for a special occasion, and here we are. We have moved beyond simple hunger into hoity-toity synonyms. Nobody dropped a muffin or a sandwich or anything the whole time you were gone.>

That's tragic.

<I know! Hey, Atticus, will you tell Santa I want sausage for Winter Solstice?>

Santa leaves gifts for Christmas, Oberon, not a Druid's holidays.

<Well, you know, just in case?>

Okay, just in case. I'm sure you're on his list of very good dogs.