

Introduction:

This short story, like *The Guardians*, grew out of a need to work through a plotting problem when I was drafting the book that would become *The Dust of Ancients*. Just as with *The Guardians*, this is not intended to tell any of the scenes from that book, it's just a story with some familiar characters, that has a totally different ending, and is complete in itself. For those who've not read *The Dust of Ancients*, I would like to introduce you to...

Jacky Greencoat

I live on Bodmin Moor, near a village they calls Minions nowadays. There's history here. Oh, I know all about the stuff most people talk about; the mines and so on, and them smugglers and wreckers down on the coast, but I'm talking about *real* history. History that would make your mind curl up if you tried to take it all in at once; that cries out from the standing stones, and from the ancient blood spilled on this very ground. History that me and my kinfolk feels in our bones.

I'm a spriggan. One of the "little people" of Cornwall. Not like those pretty, fluttering and foolish creatures that you like to call "folklore," and decorate your ridiculous crockery with – I'm the real thing. Ugly, they say, but that must surely be in the rare eye of them as sees us. Squat in shape, and our faces graced with a mouth some say is too wide. Too wide? Can there be such a thing, when food is to be had? I think not!

In days gone on, those fairies haunted every part of these moors, and they was creatures of such beauty it fair made you weep to look at them. They was bright, they was kind, too, I'll confess, and all dressed up in such finery ... what a pity they was so stupid! Time was they ruled over all of us, but they was never strong enough to survive.

They had a king. Loen was his name, and he was even more glorious to look upon than most, but when it came to finding a wife he found none good enough. None, that is, among his own people. Restless and curious, he'd spied a village woman who sent his mind and heart where it ought not to have gone, and had been watching her in secret for many moons. But the villagers have always been superstitious, and believed the fairy folk to bring terrible luck to whoever saw them, so he couldn't just walk up

to her and order her to lay down for his royal self. Instead he used the gifts given him; he was full-human sized, though no more noticeable than the breath of wind that stirs the grass ... but when he wanted to, he could be seen by mortal eyes just as clear as we could see him.

The woman found him to be beautiful and mysterious, of course, and willingly lay with him under the stars. We mustn't cast judgement upon her for that; those mortals was a people just learning to grow, and Loen was, as I've said, possessed of certain charms and an ability to calm fears of strangers, and put aside loyalties. What they did was, in the eyes of her people, unforgiveable, but Loen knew she would not speak of it, lest they cast her out for coupling with a moorland spirit.

He left her when the sky began to lighten, but he had already planted his seed and it's said by those who knew him that he was a different man, so happy was he; he knew the child would carry both his beauty, and the human strength of its mother. A matchless infant, many time blessed, and destined to rule, as *he* did.

But Loen's happiness was not to last; the old lady who helped birth the child recognised it for what it was, and collapsed in a state of utter terror ... at last demanding of their chief that the child be sacrificed to their goddess; their people would suffer terribly otherwise.

Loen could do nothing to stay the murderous hand of the chief, but flew into a terrible rage and, powerful elemental that he was, his anger drew down a storm upon the ritual. He was felled by lightning that he himself had created, and his life, and power, and all he might have been, leached out of him into this ground where I now stand. Foolish king! Before death claimed him, Loen charged his kinsman with gathering up his remains – nothing more than dust – and keeping them safe until the time came when he might have his revenge upon the bloodline of the chief – slayer of babes.

Since before your Christ-Lord was said to have been born, and a thousand cycles beyond, my people have tended the jar in which the King's remains were kept. Now it is *my* task. Until my dying day I shall see that no harm comes to the jar, and to my king. Foolishness aside, he *was* king after all.

So, you see? *Real* history.

I am well known hereabouts, going about my business when necessity calls, my dusty green jacket always pulled tightly around me to fight off the biting Cornish winds that howl across the moor. I live beneath a mine that was closed down, due to them striking an underground cavern instead of a new vein of copper, and they was worried the engine house was going to fall right down through. 'Course, it won't. And if it does, well, we'll know about it soon enough, no sense living in fear of it. Anyway, I don't go above ground more often than I can help, but it so happens that once every moon-cycle I am required to take the jar containing the king, and bear it up through the layers of granite and earth, to the place where he died. So I wrap it tightly in my coat and we begin our journey to the standing stones, where his son was sacrificed to the Goddess, and where he swore revenge on the village chief. 'Course, the chief is long gone now, but still – if Loen is not borne up to that spot when the moon commands, his spirit grows restless and angry, and the so-called “pure fairies” tell us his anger will be turned on us, instead of his true enemies, if we fail in our duty.

But, of course, I do this task not out of fear, but out of loyalty. It's not commonly known, but we spriggans, guardians of treasure, bringers of storms and oftentimes stealers of babies, are as deeply loyal to our rulers as are the beautiful ones – the much-lauded “small people” who are courted and lusted after, but whose powers are weak by comparison. And what's more, I have a secret! Yes, I, Jacky Greencoat, have a secret which will make Loen turn to me with such gratitude, and those lovely fairies will soon take their rightful place below me in their king's estimation and friendship

I can help him win his revenge at last!

Jacky Greencoat – despised, ugly Jacky Greencoat, can tell good King Loen where the last remaining descendant of that village chief lives, and yes, Jacky can lure that boy to the mines where the king will at last avenge his poor lost babe! Oh, I dance at the thought! Those pretty, winged creatures who flutter so helplessly when their king weeps and rages, who call to each other in dismay, and sorrow that they cannot help him – those pathetic, pandered, charming creatures, whose exquisite songs take flight and colour the air silver on warm summer nights, whose fine clothes swish and swirl as they dance ... they cannot begin to imagine how I will hold them in my fist when I have their king's gratitude!

I will not whisper of my plan to Loen, I will bring his treasured remains up here to the standing stones tonight, and I will listen to the wailing and sobbing of his spirit,

then when he is safe and quiet once more, hidden in the mine, I will begin my plan to lure the boy Thomas to the cavern below.

And now...

A giggle escapes me as I place the king's jar lovingly in the treasure chest at the back of the ledge, a little laugh of glee you'd be more likely to hear coming from some silly pixie than a respectable spriggan, but it won't be silenced. Tomorrow I will be the one who Loen is pleased to call "friend," and "advisor," I will be the one he turns to, once his revenge is claimed. And such a power that will give me!

I'll tell you how I did it, shall I? If you promise not to breathe a word to those meddling fairies.

Listen well then.

I was above ground, minding my own business, for the most part, and I heard children playing nearby, among the standing stones as they like to do. Mortal children, yet playing the same games as our young ones. Can you imagine? Hide-and-find, chasing games, heroes and villains – who'd have guessed they would play in that manner too?

Then I saw him. The boy known to be the last descendant of Ulfed, the village chief. He was almost mythical to us, never seen – only spoken of with fear, and with hatred, for what his ancestor had done, but as soon as I saw him, something that spoke to my ancient self just *knew*, and all I had to do was find a way to get him down into the mine. My first thought was to create a storm, to drive him to safety out of the wind and rain, but I needed him to do more than shelter, I needed him to explore. Deep in the tunnels, far below ground, a reason to bring him down to where he would be at my mercy... I mean the *king's* mercy, of course.

He had lived perhaps ten or eleven cycles, a perfect age to be challenged and not to back down – but who to cast that challenge at his feet? Then my eyes found his friend, Michael. Michael had been in the mine himself, and we had met – oh yes, my friends we had met alright. He had almost taken my precious jar with him, until I'd scared the horrid little thief away. Michael still wasn't sure whether what he *thought* he'd seen was real; we have a way of turning memories to shadows, it's one of our best-used tricks, see?

So then, how to get Michael to dare Thomas to come down into my secret hideaway? A night visit. A dream, the boy would have, and that would do it. When the moon rose high that night I crept into Michael's garden and, closing my eyes, I thought hard at the sleeping boy. It hurt, mark you! My goodness my head did scream afterwards with the strain of it all, but it was worth it; the boy appeared at the upstairs window and stared down directly at me. I winced as he raised the window, the rope sash squeaking and straining against the old wood. Then he leaned out and I whispered a few well-chosen words, and he listened. His eyes as round as saucers they were, but I knew he'd only remember what I wanted him to the next day. My head was pounding like something rotten when I left the garden and hurried back up across the moor to the old mine, but I knew that soon Thomas would be in my grasp.

The *king's* grasp, that is.

So, that was how I did it. I, guardian of the king's spirit, and of his dusty remains. I, barely drawing so much as a dismissive glance from the fair ones, who have such important matters to be about, I alone have found a way to set Loen free! Michael's challenge had been thrown down with just the right amount of "don't care if you do it or not," and of course Thomas seized upon it as I'd hoped he would. Better still, I believe he's bringing his sister with him! She's a threat to the family's extinction too; of lesser strength than the boy's blood, but if she has a child someday the chief's line will continue, and Loen's vengeance will be incomplete. Better to get it all tidied away now, don't you think?

Once the jar is opened, the king will be able to rise up and take over the boy's body as easily as you like! Then the boy will be lost forever, and the king can either dispose of the girl, or ... well, or then he can wait until she's old enough to bear children and plant his own seed in her. That'll be frowned upon, no doubt, but just think of the strength of the king's line then! Oh, Jacky thinks of it all!

And here they come. Listen to them, arguing, complaining, the girl is nothing more than a whining little missy, and the boy is too loud and sure for his own good.

I sit on the back of a wide shelf, hewn from the granite, waiting. The boy has already crossed the cavern floor and is heading this way. I'll just make a tiny noise on the lid of this chest... There. Now he'll come, for sure. I can see his torch swinging

around, looking for the source of the little scratching sound my pitchfork made on the wood. Just listen to that silly girl, calling out to him, getting angry with him for leaving her without light – soon she'll have much more to worry about, and she'll wish she had stayed at home!

I can only wonder at how this plan has gone so smoothly! The boy is calling his sister across, showing her how clever he is to have found this stone shelf, and the chest that sits on it. I shrink back into the shadows; won't do to scare them off too soon. The girl finds her brother, and he hands her the torch so he can climb up onto the shelf. She's shaking. She heard something too, I must make myself known now. Thomas has found the jar... oh, this is perfect!

Just as I judge the boy to be about to take off the lid, I step forward into the light of the torch. The girl tries to scream, but cannot. I can see how wide and terrified her eyes are; she's grown past the age of simply believing, without the fear. About thirteen or fourteen cycles I'd say, a pretty young thing. All the same I imagine she'd be quite happy to see one of the elegant and gentle fairies she's seen pictures of, but she's stuck with me. She's so shocked, she drops the light. Now's my chance; I need to get that jar back off the boy, to remove the lid, to give my king the freedom to see what I have done for him.

Reaching out with my long-tined pitchfork I jab the sharp ends into the back of the boy's leg. He cries out, and the girl finds the torch again, brings it up, and this time her scream is loud and long.

Then, oh – horror! The boy still has hold of the jar, and he stumbles back – I see what's happening but I am unable to prevent it ... the jar smashes to the floor in a burst of shattered clay and dust. But such precious dust!

“NO!” Even as the awful female-child shines the torch in my face I can feel my mind twisting with grief and dismay. The children are backing away from me, I scream curses upon their stupid heads, gathering up the pieces of broken jar and trying to pull together the treasured remains of the king. How had this all gone so terribly, terribly wrong? Sobs are wracking my body as I stare about me at the floating, grey powder. The king's beloved remains scattered all over my green coat, turning it that same ghostly colour. Jacky Greencoat is so sorry, my lord, Jacky only meant to help ...

Can you hear that? The children are gone, but the cavern is full of fluttering sounds and soft keening. Intense sorrow on the faces of those piteously weak fairies who now have no king. I try to tell them that I meant no harm, that I grieve as deeply as they do, but they do not listen. They are calling to one another, spreading the word, telling of the dark deed of a poor spriggan who sought only to guard his king, and to give him the revenge he desired.

Now they turn on me, and I grow weak at the sight of them. My bowed legs turn to wet mud, I feel my hands shaking as I drop the pieces of clay back onto the floor. Fairies. No longer the gentle, kind and delightful creatures of your old stories ... their fury gives them a terrible, blazing beauty which leaches me of all strength. Incandescent in their anger they rise off the floor as one, swooping down on me, and - oh, their teeth! How, in those tiny, exquisite faces can there be a place for such horrors? But their mouths open as they shriek their fury, and then they are upon me. I can feel each tiny, nipping pain and although it seems as nothing, I know that before long I will be no more than a ragged shadow on the cavern floor, my jacket no longer deep green, or even dirty grey, but stark, wet red.

I fall to the floor, my face in the dirt, breathing in the dust, so much ... dust! Even as the cloying, burnt taste fills my mouth, my tongue growing heavy with the caked and soggy mess and my nostrils filled with choking powder, I can feel a new strength, filling my heart and my head.

Loen! My king. I can feel him, like worms in my blood, filling every tiny channel, every single bloodway that threads through my body. Soon there will be no Jacky Greencoat left, I shall be Loen through and through. The fairies are already starting to sense the change in me, and the agony of their biting is becoming less.

My dark green coat, already stained with the blood that runs down from my torn cheeks and gouged flesh, is now clothing the body of a king. I sit up, and then stand, no taller than I was before, but now I am a giant indeed in all things that matter. I raise my hand, and the voice that rolls from my throat, demanding attention, is huge, booming, echoing off every chamber wall. The fairies stop their hitherto relentless snapping at my flesh, their faces once again the picture of quiet, gentle beauty that humans find so appealing.

One by one they drift lower and bow at my feet, and there's still enough Jacky left in me to giggle at the feeling. Then tenderness fills me; such charm and elegance are

theirs. My people, my subjects – I hold out my hand, and some of them flutter up to sit, weightless in my palm, looking up at me with trusting, worshipful eyes.

And wiping blood from their chins.

© This Edition: Copyright Terri Nixon. 2014