

Jacky Greencoat

For those who've read "The Guardians," this is another angle on the story. Written purely as a plotting exercise, this short story now forms the basis of my novel "The Dust Of Ancients," and if you have read "The Guardians" you may recognise a certain inquisitive boy who makes a "cameo" appearance!

Do you believe?

My name is Jacky Greencoat. I live on Bodmin Moor, near a village called Minions. There's history here ...

Oh, I know all about the history most people like to discuss; the mines and so on, the metal taken from the ground here, 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, history that cries out from the standing stones and from the ancient blood spilled on this ground. History that only I and my kinfolk can fully appreciate.

I suppose I should explain a little about myself first; 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 china with – I'm the real thing. In the olden days the fairies haunted every part of these moors, and they was creatures of such exquisite beauty it fair made you weep to look at them. They was bright, clever, dressed in such finery ... what a pity they was so stupid! No longer are they the dominant ones; they was never strong enough to survive.

They had a king. Loen was his name, and he was as glorious to look upon as any of them, but when it came to finding a wife he found none good enough. None that is, among his own people. Loen had 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 weeks. The villagers have always been superstitious, and believed the fairy folk to bring terrible luck to whoever saw them, so he couldn't simply walk up to her and order her to lay down. Instead he ordered a potion to be prepared by his magus, a forbidden draught, handed down that line through thousands of years. It could only be taken on a certain night of the year, and his frustration was almost the undoin' of him.

But eventually the time was right; the stars were correctly aligned and the drink was prepared, and for one night he became as a human. Full-human sized, handsome to behold and as gentle as could be. He found the woman, and although he couldn't use any of his fairy powers to cast an enchantment upon her, still she found him beautiful and mysterious, and lay with him under those same stars which held the secret of the magical drink. He left her when the sky began to lighten, and she was already expecting his child. It's said he was a different man, so happy was he, although his union with the human woman must forever remain a secret. He knew the child would be a boy of extraordinary intelligence and beauty, for how could he be otherwise? Pah!

But his happiness was not to last; the villagers counted among their number an old woman who, being the ninth child of a ninth child, was blessed – or cursed as she saw it – with an instinctive affinity with the fairy folk. Straight away, even as she assisted at the birth of the king's son, she recognised its fairy origins, and called it an insult to the Goddess – demanded that it be left to starve to death.

Ulfed, normally a strong chief, was so terrified that he agreed, in the hope that such an act would stay any punishment the Goddess could inflict upon on his people.

Loen could do nothing, but flew into a terrible rage and, powerful elemental that he was, his anger drew down a storm upon the ritual. He was hit by lightning that he himself created, and his powers leached out of him into the ground where I now stand before you. Foolish king! Before he died, he charged his brother with collecting his remains – nothing more than dust – and keeping them safe until he was able to have his revenge.

Since before your Christ-Lord was born, and a thousand years further back, my ancestors have taken care of the jar in which the King's remains were kept. Now it is my job. 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 to me to fight off the biting Cornish winds that blow mercilessly across these rolling moors. It's hard to remember whether I got my name from my habitual wearing of this tattered garment, or whether the name came first and this was an identity tag of sorts that I am loathe to lose. Whatever the truth, the fact remains that one day, when my own powers and fairy longevity wear off, this jacket will remain, the cool dryness of the old mine where I live will preserve it long after I am gone, my duties passed to another.

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 take the decorated piece, 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 that his anger will be turned on us instead of his true enemies if we fail in our duty. I quail in terror!

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 leaders 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 is 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, *wicked* 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 avenge his poor lost babe! Oh, I dance at the thought! Those pretty, elfin-faced, winged creatures who flutter so helplessly when their king cries, 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 once more, hidden in the old mine, I will begin my plan to lure the boy Thomas to the cavern below.

And now...

Jacky Greencoat is prepared. A giggle escapes me as I place the King's jar lovingly, reverently 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 like myself. 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...?
Very well.

I was above ground, gathering fruits to store for the winter, and I heard some of the local children playing nearby, among the standing stones as they like to do. Hide-and-seek, chasing games, football ...the typical games of children. I was alone, as always, (no-one else brave enough to venture out there in daylight) and to make it back to the mine across the open ground would have proven awkward without being seen, so I lay low. Easier to wait until the little brats were gone than to risk being chased.

Then I saw him – there was a boy child known to be the last descendant of Ulfed, the village chief. A while back his sister had been the one, but then along came Thomas. He was almost mythical to us, never seen – only spoken of with fear and what amounted to hatred for what his ancestor had done. But as soon as I saw him I knew. Something that spoke to my ancient self just *knew*. He was playing as any child would, climbing over the leaning stones that dotted the moor, running, chasing, laughing – all I had to do was find a way to get him down into the mine. I toyed with the idea of creating 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 down 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 was about ten or eleven years old, a perfect age to be challenged and not to back down – but who to cast that challenge at his feet? Then I spotted his friend Michael. Michael had been in the mine himself, we had met – oh yes, my friends we had met alright. It was several weeks ago, and he had almost taken the precious jar with him until I scared the little bugger off. The thing was, Michael still wasn't sure that what he thought he had seen was in fact 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 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 something rotten when I left the garden and hurried back up across the moor to the old mine entrance 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, the king's remains in that jar ... I alone have found a way to set Loen free! The boy should be here anytime now, Michael's challenge thrown down with just the right amount of "don't care if you do it or not," and of course Thomas seized upon it just like I was sure he would. Better still, I believe he's bringing his sister with him! She's a threat to the family's extinction too – if she has a child someday the chief's line will continue and we can't have that. I'd planned to help Loen get her later, but this is even better.

Down there, 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 he can wait until she's old enough to bear children and plant his own seed in her. That'll be frowned upon, of course, but it's the only way to bring the king's line back. Oh, Jacky thinks of it all! No-one will think to look down these mines for the children. And if they do, they won't be found. There are more places to hide down here than you'd believe, and I know that for a fact. The girl would be looked after until she has a baby to carry on the king's line, and then she'd just ... disappear.

I rub my hands together now, waiting for the arrival of Thomas and Laura. The jar lies in the treasure chest, the king knows nothing and nor will he until the lid is removed, his spirit is quietened again after the trip to the standing stones last evening and has no strength.

And here they come! I can hardly contain myself, so soon the power of the king will be restored within the body of a human, and all thanks to little Jacky Greencoat! Listen to them, arguing, complaining, the girl is nothing more than a whining little missy, and the boy is too cocky for his own good. Ah, they've found the chamber at the bottom of the tunnel, I must hurry into the hidden room at the back, make sure they find it..

I sit on the back of a wide, cut-away shelf bored into the granite, waiting, my pitchfork at my side in readiness. The boy has already crossed the cavern floor and is heading this way. I'll just make a tiny noise this old 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 fingernails made on the wood. He's coming! Just listen to that silly girl, calling out to him, getting angry with him for leaving her without the torch – soon she'll have much more to worry about!

He's here! I can barely wonder at how this plan has gone so smoothly! He's calling his sister across, showing her where he has gone and now he's even found this shelf and the chest that sits on it. Laura finds her brother and he hands her the torch so he can climb up onto this stone shelf. She's shaking. She heard something, I must make myself known now. Thomas has found the jar, oh, this is perfect!

I step forward into the light of the torch, and the girl tries to scream but cannot. I can see how wide and terrified her eyes are, she's a little too old to simply believe without the fear. About thirteen or fourteen I'd say, a pretty young thing. I imagine she'd be 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 torch. Now's my chance; I need to get that jar back, to remove the lid, to allow the king 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. She's seen me alright!

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!" I scream, and even as the awful female-child shines the torch in my face I can feel myself going half crazy 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 the same ghostly colour. I had meant to tell him, I had! Jacky Greencoat is so sorry, my lord, Jacky Greencoat only meant to help ...

And I hear them now; the cavern is full of fluttering and gentle 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 deeds of a poor Spriggan who only sought to guard his King and give him the revenge he desired.

Now they turn to 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 jar 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 - dear Goddess, 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 dusty grey, but stark, wet red.

I fall to the floor, my face in the dirt, breathing in the dust, the dust, the ...the 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! I can feel him like worms in my blood, filling every artery, every capillary, every single blood vessel that threads through my body. Soon there will be no Jacky Greencoat left, I shall be Loen through and through. The vicious, biting 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 straighten up, 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 is huge, booming, echoing off every chamber wall. The fairies stop their hitherto relentless snapping

at my flesh and hover feet away from me, their faces resuming the quiet, gentle beauty that humans find so appealing.

One by one they bow down 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 hands to them and some of them flutter down to sit on my hand, looking up at me through wide, beautiful eyes ...

And wiping blood from their chins.

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