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The World Through the Tree

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Abstract

ONCE again Ain had returned to the tree of his parents, the great willow at the edge of the marshland, but with little of the peace he had brought to his journey in former times.

Keywords

Fiction; The World Through the Tree; Steve Rasnic Tem

The World Through the Tree

Those who were once numerous, who were powerful: he knew this might be his last time for recreating them.

by Steve Rasnic Tem

ONCE again Ain had returned to the tree of his parents, the great willow at the edge of the marshland, but with little of the peace he had brought to his journey in former times. For Ain knew this would be his last time, and he was not sure whether he was saddened or relieved.

From the opposite edge of the marsh the willow looked much like a fountain of green, shimmering light, the spray spreading fan-like before falling to the wet ground. The sun had just risen, adding an orange halo to the tree's silhouette. Ain knew as he drew closer the tree would lose this impression, for the early morning breeze would bring the rustle of the many leaves, and he would be thinking then of grass skirts and straw shades.

The tree was quieter than usual as he approached it, but he tried to believe he was merely anticipating the worst. After all, he was still some distance away: although as small as most of the older elven-folk, he was heavier and sank a bit into the marsh with each step.

But he knew, too, that most of his elders were dying or changing. How could he be sure his parents, or any of the others, were still left?

He was changing, too, he considered grimly, but into a different path.

Once beneath the old willow he heard a scurrying in the upper branches. He looked up anxiously. A small head with bright eyes peered down at him.

"Ain?" the head said, then purred brokenly. Ain was troubled by the purr.

"Mother?"

The head disappeared. He could hear a series of whistles, grunts, and purrs in the upper branches hidden from him.

Ain began to climb and was pleased to see that he still retained at least some skill at it. When he reached the branch where the head had appeared he stopped and looked about him. "Mother? Father? Lael?"

The purrs and grunts picked up again, this time from a shadowed area closer to the main trunk of the old willow.

Ain crouched low and closed his eyes, then moved for-

ward into that darkness. He tried to let the willow take him within, but did not know if the connection would still be strong enough. After a few moments, the familiar yet vaguely uncomfortable sensation of webs passing over flesh came to his body, and he felt himself moving into the shadowed part near the trunk. His body protested a moment, feeling heavy and awkward as it attempted the transformation, so he concentrated further, picturing a bridge in his mind, a passageway, and finally slipped through.

They were there, his family, mother and father and his sister Lael. His father approached him, his eyes wide and bright so that Ain had a small moment of hope that he might not have lost everything, that there might still be home here.

But his father's eyes suddenly grew dull. When he opened his mouth to speak only grunts and purrs came out.

Ain stared at his father. The hair had grown over his cheeks and forehead. The teeth were sharper than before, the posture of the body more crouched. When his mother and Lael moved up to join his father, Ain saw they looked much the same.

No longer elven-folk as he was no longer elven-folk. But in different ways. He had always been closer to the human side of elven nature than the animal side. Another side of the bridge. He found it difficult to even look at his family now. The bridge which had been the elven race was disappearing from their faces.

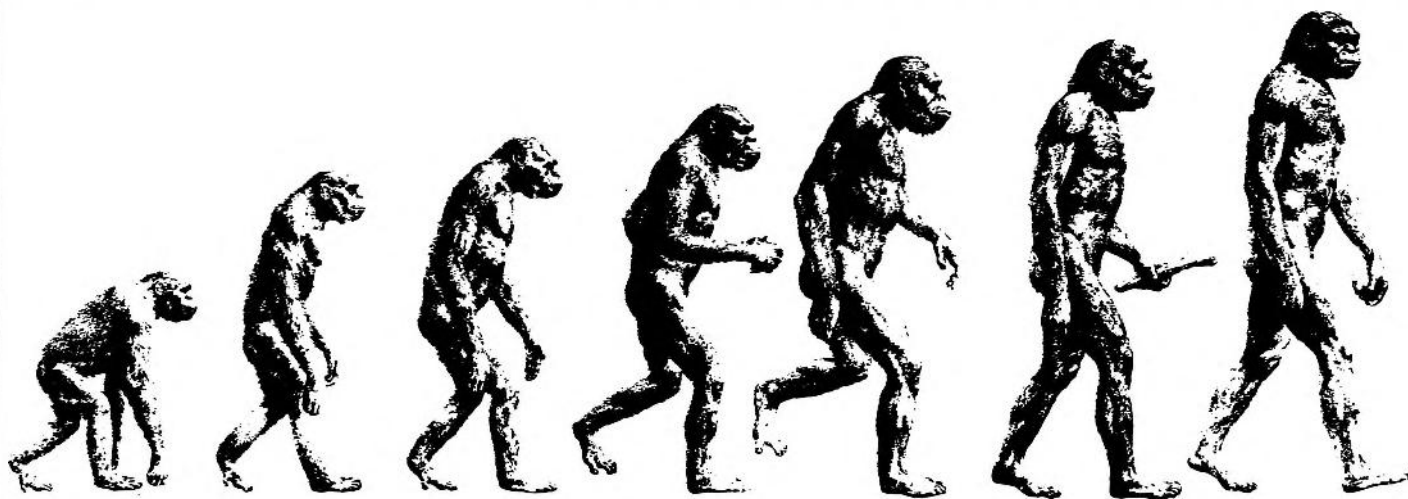
Lael moved closer. "Ain?"

Ain stirred anxiously, then moved to her, but suddenly her eyes went dull. She tried to bite him.

Ain stepped back as Lael retreated into the shadows, grunting.

He moved away from his family to another branch. There he curled up and closed his eyes. He felt sure that even in their present state they would not disturb him. Somehow they would recognize what he was doing and respect it.

He pushed his thoughts out into the tree. He let his mind drift, following his thoughts, pulling apart and



drawing out like thin cloud. Then his nerves, his blood, the strong pulse of his heart, the long sigh of his escaping breath . . . awkwardly, roughly, so that he knew indeed this would be his last time. He would be too different before long. The world would be too different.

Ain saw the world through the tree. He drew moisture in through his skin. He tasted earth on his feet, and sun-filled morning air in his fingertips. He felt marshland spreading out around him, distant hills within his scope. And all glowing, all filled with white, green, yellow, and brown.

He felt the ghosts of elven-folk within his hair and ears, all those who'd been born and died within the scope of the old willow. He looked deeply into the barrows, wells, and standing stones where they once dwelt and found that they were few, and wondered when they would be none.

He sensed the richness, the many-sided manifestations of life in the wood, now only half-recalled, shadowed parts of his mind. Those who were once numerous, who were powerful: he knew this might be his last time for recreating them. The green folk, the hags, bodiless powers and children of the serpent, the wandering dead, demons, dark elves like caterpillars grubbing the dirt, all the elder races dwindling away within him.

Ain was overcome with sadness, a sadness which expanded even as these last visions through the tree were leaving him, and he knew he would never see such things again. The elven-folk were now so small inside himself he knew he would never be able to find his way back. The threads of their being grew dim as the knowledge inside him grew more ponderous--the knowledge that at last he had grown to be completely alone. He would hear no more voices in his head.

When Ain awoke his family was still there with him, almost unrecognizable to his changed senses. He could not even feel sad over their loss. They were no longer elven-folk, but animals much like squirrels or moles. Their eyes showed no recognition of him.

There were many legends among the elven-folk of how occasionally a couple from the elder races would give birth to a mortal child. But none, Ain realized, had considered what eventually happened to all such parents and their children.

The world constantly changes. Ain's family became Animal, even as Ain became Man. And the bridge the elven-folk made between the two would soon be no longer.

Ain began to descend the old willow for the final time. ■

LON CHANEY'S LAMENT

Bones crack, I emerge
in Diana's full sway
a victorious howl;
night wins over day.
Some rites remain:
I drop on all fours,
but now I prowl alleys
in lieu of the moors.
Hollywood scarred me,
though Lon was a friend,
Halloween maimed me,
and where does it end?
Ah, when I leap sure,
the fear in their eyes
and astonishment at
the end of their lives . . .
But their numbers grow.
I keep out of sight;
damn Edison for
uncloaking the night!
I might be outmoded--
perhaps a new look
or a guest shot on Carson
to plug my new book.
They laugh and debunk me,
fear they're without,
but one cool night I'll call,
and who will come out?

-Gerard F. Keogh Jr.

