

Praise for Faerie Blood

"A magical journey of self-discovery, with music, adventure, and elves on motorcycles. And an Unseelie Elvis impersonator who totally steals the show."

-- David Sklar, author of Shadow of the Antlered Bird

"The adventures of a violin-playing, Techie Geek, half-fairy heroine in supernatural Seattle, Faerie Blood is sure to please Urban Fantasy, Manga and Anime fans."

-- Gary Inbinder, author of Confessions of the Creature and The Flower to the Painter

"Kendis Thompson's quick-thinking geekery surprised and delighted me, start to finish. Traditional faerie lore gets some really fresh twists, including a stunning moment that is the most moving take on the magic of true names I've seen since A Wizard of Earthsea."

-- Sarah Avery, author of Atlantis Cranks Need Not Apply and Closing Arguments

FAERIE BLOOD

by

Angela Korra'ti

To Mom and Dad: I wish you could have seen this.

To my beloved Dara: I'm so glad you have.

CHAPTER ONE

I was on my way home from work, biking along the Burke-Gilman trail, when a troll decided to eat my face.

Now I know what you're thinking: wait a minute, a troll? You're kidding, right? But if you've seen the inhabitants of Seattle the census-takers don't track—and I'm not talking about the homeless—then you're wondering what I was doing biking under a bridge in the first place. Yeah, I know. Going under some of the bridges in Seattle is pretty much like going through the drive-through at a troll restaurant, except you're the incoming food.

The Burke-Gilman trail goes over and under multiple bridges on its course around the city, but for the record, I was nowhere near a bridge at the time. I live in the Sand Point district, near where the trail swerves in close to Lake Washington and gives bikers and hikers a great view of the water. I'd already crossed the bridge along that part of the trail when my old, temperamental bike slipped a gear on the way down a slope in the

trail. Ten miles an hour on a bicycle may not seem like much, but you can still break a limb if you hit something. So I squeezed down on my handle brakes to dump speed, but not before I bumped across the shards of a shattered bottle on the gravel just beside the paved part of the trail.

I found one huge slice through the back tire, three smaller punctures in the front one. To add insult to tire injury, I'd forgotten to restock the patch kit I carried on the bike's back storage rack; I had only enough patch material for one tire, not both, and that lent a bluer vigor to my swearing. I'd already had a hell of a week, burning overtime hours to help my department at work get our latest software release out the door, keeping my cat Fortissimo from disemboweling the vet at his annual exam, and fighting off an inexplicable headache that'd been nagging me for the last three days. This blowing both my tires thing? Not helping.

Through gritted teeth I cursed whatever thoughtless idiot had left broken glass on the trail, then plucked the fragments out of what was left of my tires and stalked to the trashcan I'd passed twenty feet back. On the way I weighed my options: fix one tire now, or fix both later. The latter won out. I wanted to trade my backpack and sweat-scented biking gear for a T-shirt, shorts, and comfortable bare feet. And though I still hadn't forgiven Fort for the scratches he'd left on my elbow as retribution for the vet excursion, feeding the cat his dinner

sounded a lot better than crouching on a bike trail, pumping and patching a tire while the dusk got darker and I got hungrier for a dinner I wasn't having. Besides, I was almost home. If I had to, I could carry the bike the rest of the way.

It was too early in the evening for proper darkness, but clouds lent strength to the growing twilight, and heavy moisture pressed in on the air. Seattle's reputation for constant rain is unjust during the summer—usually. Today August had decided November was right on with the gray, gloomy, and drizzly look. Not long before I'd started the commute home a shower must have swept over this part of the trail; the asphalt that paved it as well as the grass and gravel on either side were still damp, and the scents of wet mud and wet grass tangled thickly around every breath I took. With them came the smell of wet refuse as I reached the trashcan and pitched the bottle fragments into it.

The wind shifted as I headed back to the bike for the rest of the broken bottle, and slapped me in the face with a pungent, musky odor that made me wince and wonder if something had died in the bushes. A possum, maybe, or a raccoon. I couldn't get a bead on what or where it was; the stench was too thick, and it aggravated my headache until it stabbed at the insides of my eyes, prickling, like needles.

But it was no raccoon rustling through the undergrowth on the far side of the trail. I heard it coming as I paused about a yard shy of the bike and massaged the bridge of my nose, trying

to fight the headache off, and paying the noise no mind until the ugliest creature I had ever seen in my life sprang out of the greenery. 'What the hell is that?' became the theme song of my shocked brain as I dodged out of its path.

It wasn't as tall as me, three and a half feet tops, but breadth and bulk more than compensated for what it lacked in height. Shoulders twice as wide as mine sported a cinder block of a head, with close-set beady eyes, a flat, squashed nose that looked like it had collided with a wall at ninety miles an hour, and a broad slash of a mouth with wickedly curving, three-inch tusks. It was squat. It was hairy. With arms far too long for its short, stubby body, it looked like a cross between a tiny linebacker and a mutant gorilla. The musky, muddy scent I'd noticed before flooded from it in a choking wave, and just like an attacking Doberman, it growled and charged straight for me.

Instinct flung me at and onto the bicycle, but instinct had forgotten that I'd just sliced open both tires. With all my strength I pumped at the pedals. But rather than launching me off at top speed as I'd hoped, the bike jolted for a foot or two, with a dull, painful scraping of damaged rubber and metal, and skidded onto the gravel beside the trail.

Flat tires, idiot!

I had just enough time for that single thought before the thing closed the remaining distance between us. Its arms flailed out with paws that looked big enough to squash my head between

them, grabbing the bike with one—and me with the other. Somewhere in the scuffle I felt my cell phone fall out of my pocket, much to my alarm. But there was no time to retrieve it before the thing's heavy feet stomped it flat, with a crunch of plastic and glass, taking out my first and best method of calling for help.

So I punted to plan B, and screamed. What can I say? I was Kendis Thompson the software tester, not Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Fighting a monster wasn't in my job description.

Didn't stop me from trying, though. I wriggled, kicked, and punched, anything to break away from the hairy, stinking creature that had seized me. The headache behind my eyes spiked up as I struggled, and along with the fear flooding my system in a hot wave, it seemed to fuel my every blow. I didn't pull off much, but I did land one unthinking kick, somewhere sensitive enough to make the creature hiss in indignation. And, more importantly, let go of me and the bike.

That won me only a second or two of reprieve, nowhere near enough time to run. Instead I flung myself back off the bicycle, heedless of gravel and grass burns along my knees and elbows as I hit the ground. Then I leapt up again and took my turn to seize the bike, hoping that if I couldn't use it for escape, I could use it for attack instead.

Good idea—bad execution. A bicycle is not exactly a graceful weapon, even if you're trying to use it as a club. I

got in one blow with it before the monster tackled me to the ground. The impact drove every scrap of breath from my lungs; for an instant I could do nothing but lie there, with the bike in a tangled heap on top of me, and struggle for air. But there was no time for that either. The only barrier between the thing and my throat was the bike's fragile frame, and that began to bend alarmingly as those paws, which looked bigger and bigger with every passing second, tugged at it, hard.

Panic? Hell yeah. But even as I freaked, I remembered three vital things: it wasn't dark yet, it was summer, and therefore somebody else would probably be coming along the trail any second now. So I screamed again, loud and long, even as I wrestled in desperation with the thing that had me pinned.

I lucked out. From somewhere farther along the trail, footsteps broke into a pounding run and a male voice shouted, "Hang on! I'm comin'!"

By sheer virtue of timing and the relief of knowing assistance was imminent, my rescuer's entrance should have been spectacular—a tall, brawny young man rushing into the fray, with a thick wooden walking stick hefted high in his hands. But all I could see from where I squirmed between bike and monster was a shadow falling over me, and the bottom end of the staff cracking across that cinder-block head. And I didn't know it at the time, but clobbering even a small troll over the head is pretty much only going to make it mad.

Which is exactly what happened.

With a howl of protest the thing turned to face the new, unexpected threat, lumbering off me to spring at the man who'd come running at my call. My arms collapsed with the sudden absence of weight, and for a few moments I lay shaking, unable to push the bike off of me, much less get up and run for my life. But I did raise my head and get a glimpse of what was going on.

The creature had the reaction time of a drunken sloth. My rescuer practically danced around it, his staff swinging this way and that as he belted any part of the thing he could reach. It looked like some sort of nightmare version of golf, minus plaid pants, plus the world's biggest, toothiest golf ball.

"Yeah, that's right, you ugly little bastard," he bellowed as he swung, and the back of my mind registered a deep voice and a lilting accent. It could have been Irish or Scottish, but something about it didn't sound quite like either, and in the grip of my panic I couldn't figure out why. "Think she's a tender piece, do you? How about a piece o' this?"

Then he spun to face me in mid-swing, and a gaze burning somewhere between green and gold bored into mine. As if I were as much of an irritant as the thing he harried, he shouted at me, "Are you foolish, girl? Get goin'!"

If there isn't a handbook for would-be heroes, there ought to be. And in the chapter on hand-to-hand (or in this case,

staff-to-paw) combat with refugees from Where the Wild Things Are, the following tip should be included:

Never let yourself get distracted by yelling at the damsel in distress until the distress is dispatched.

Okay, fine, critiquing your rescue party is easy when you're the distressed damsel. But if my self-elected knight in faded blue jeans and a black flannel shirt hadn't been busy yelling at me, he might have seen the troll's big paws grab hold of the end of the staff and yank at it the same way it had yanked at my bike.

It couldn't have planned it. I'd realize that later. The thing had no conscious calculation in its tusky face, and the grab was the purely instinctive, annoyed reaction of a wild animal to something hurting it. But it was enough. The man's eyes went wide, and a startled curse burst out of him as his surprise attack turned into an impromptu, vicious tug of war. One that, I abruptly guessed, the creature was going to win. My rescuer had the reach to match his height, but the thing's arms were as long as his and half again their diameter.

Mustering all my remaining energy, I pushed the bike off of me and dove for the cargo bag that still clung to its storage rack. The patch kit and my other repair tools wouldn't be much good, but what I wanted was my Swiss Army knife. It wasn't much more of a weapon than a bicycle; it wasn't intended to be. I had it for tech-chick credibility, taking apart and reassembling

bicycles and computers, and an excuse to make MacGyver jokes. But it was the only thing remotely close to a weapon I had, and at that moment in time I was experiencing a need hitherto unparalleled in all of my twenty-eight years to get something sharp and pointy into my hands.

My rescuer hadn't had to tell me twice. As I tore into the bag and snatched up my knife my only other thought was to run like hell for the nearest source of additional help, and I'd take anything from a passing jogger, to a kid on a skateboard, to a little old lady in a wheelchair. I didn't care what kind of help I found as long as it involved a portable missile launcher, or at least another phone.

But as I scrambled up off the ground the creature won the tug of war, ripping my rescuer's weapon out of his hands with enough force to make him stumble. Before he could regain his balance, the troll—who had learned by example—decided that the staff was now its very own personal battering ram. Without grace or control but with plenty of power, it drove the top end of the staff into the man's chest and sent him flying backwards off his feet. On his way down a second blow caught him across the head, slamming him into the ground. Most of him hit the asphalt that paved the trail, while his head and shoulders landed on the gravel-strewn grass at the trail's edge.

Something swept over me then, though I didn't notice it much, not while I was in panic mode. My headache crackled like

storm-charged ozone, sending lightning through my blood rather than the air. I couldn't pay it any more attention than that. I had none to spare. I was too transfixed by the sight of the troll, snarling and gurgling like a drowning mountain lion, whipping the staff back over its head in the universal gesture for 'Hulk SMASH!'

"Shit," I squeaked. Then I shrieked in mounting terror at the man sprawled on the trail, "Get up!"

He stirred. His eyes flickered, urgency warring with grogginess in his bearded features as he clued in that he was now up the proverbial creek, unequipped with paddle. But he couldn't seem to make himself get out of the troll's way, even when its next strike with the staff missed his skull by scant inches and pounded a hole into the grass instead.

Since he couldn't move, I did.

Attacking a pissed-off troll with a Swiss Army knife was probably not the wisest thing I could have done. No, scratch that, it was definitely not the wisest thing I could have done. But wisdom wasn't high on the agenda right then. What I saw before me was a guy getting the crap beaten out of him because he'd answered my scream for help—which made said beating my fault. And that bothered the hell out of me. I couldn't leave someone to get his head split open like a piñata on my account without at least trying to do something to assist.

So I flicked open the knife and threw myself in a headlong

rush at the creature. I'd like to say that a flash of brilliant inspiration gave me the best possible place to hit the troll with my laughably miniscule blade, and how to tackle it to knock it off of my downed rescuer. But I can't. I can't even say that I knew what to call the monster, much less how to fight it. My charge had all the finesse of an intoxicated farm boy trying to tip an armed and all too dangerous cow. I almost knocked myself out when I barreled low into my target, catching the staff between it and me before it could take another whack at the stranger.

Blindly I stabbed out with my little knife. I couldn't tell where I connected; I could barely tell that I'd connected at all, thanks to almost gagging on the troll's stench and trying not to faint as I got my other arm around it and held on for dear life. But the tip of my blade caught somewhere along its hide—caught and sank in and stayed there.

With another gurgling howl the troll let go of the staff, nearly choking me in the process as the carved wood jammed up against my throat, and started pawing frenetically at the place where I'd struck. It writhed violently, knocking me sideways, away from the tall figure spilled along the trail. And as it writhed, it began to change.

Color leached out of its form, turning greenish-brown skin, black tufts of hair, and tusks the stained yellow of old ivory to an overall rocky gray. Flailing arms and paws began to slow,

their motions increasingly sluggish, till the troll fell over onto me with one fist still reaching for the knife and the other jabbing clumsily against the ground beside my head. One great foul blast of breath from its maw nearly made me retch before that maw, too, began to freeze up and change color inside as well as out. Its screeches of pain dwindled down to a few burbling gasps, then cut off with an unmistakable finality. Before I grasped what was happening, the weight pinning me to the earth had transformed from monster to monster statue.

The troll had turned to stone.