

# **Chasing the Bard**

Coming soon from [Dragon Moon Press](#)

**by**

**P J Ballantine**

*Read more samples and find out about upcoming works at <http://www.pjballantine.net/>*

**Copyright Philippa Ballantine 2003-02-13**

**No portion of the original articles, stories or poetry contained on this site may be copied, retransmitted, reposted, duplicated or otherwise used without the express written permission of [Philippa Ballantine](#)**

## Chapter 1

‘Lord, what fools these mortals be!’

It was of course a guilty pleasure. When Puck parted the Veil Between Worlds, and stepped into the forbidden delights of the human realm, it was with a delicious shudder of anticipation. If he were found out of course there would be more than the Christian hell to pay for it. He could think of a hundred unpleasant things that Auberon could punish him with, probably even more than the king himself, and yet he couldn't quite bring himself to step back.

The wood was so pleasant, and the trees were actually sighing to him as he took his first step into the crisp layer of leaves. Surely the rest were wrong about this human world. Beauty still lingered here- even if his people's music had faded.

He bent and scooped up a handful of the trees castoffs, and with a little flicker of his Art he formed them into a very passable brown coat which he slipped over his head with an almost giggle. What he wouldn't have given for a mirror.

The trees whispered again, the slight wind giving them an eager breathy voice, and head cocked, Puck listened.

“Why thank you,” he leapt on light feet to where a sliver of water had gathered between the roots of a grandfather oak. Reflected in nature's mirror the Trickster admired his handiwork. He flicked his silver white hair out from under his new vest and grinned. The dark leaves looked good, even on this, his smallest and most childlike form, but it still needed something.

Head on one side Puck considered. Another flicker of art bought a sleeping hyacinth out from its hiding hole. He thanked it just as kindly as the tree, before plucking it and putting it behind one ear. He'd just settled down for a decent spell of admiring himself when a smell came to him on the breeze. Something human was plodding towards his little nook. Quick as a startled squirrel he'd bounded up the tree, and nestled into its friendly crook long before the old woman came puffing around the corner. She paused with a great huffing sigh, and wiped a thread of sweat from her creased face.

Puck had never seen a human so weighed down with objects, a scraggly bag on her back, a sheaf of herbs under one arm, and even more interestingly an oddly shaped stool under the other. His eyebrow went up a notch, and despite not wanting to be seen, he leaned perplexed over the branch for a closer look. The woman passed right beneath him, all the while muttering to herself in a low angry voice.

The Trickster had never been one to resist his impulses, and was not changing that today. Nor was he known for his skill with Art, but even his stern cousin Sive the Silver would have been impressed with the sharp sliver of Art he sent into the human's consciousness; she didn't feel a thing.

The old woman's mind was heaving with anger, all tied up with someone called Joan who had obviously failed in some way, and not aided by the fact that her burden was heavy. This Bess's bones hurt, her feet were almost worn raw in her clogs, and the path was slippery at this early hour. Still the concern at her slowness was not solely for herself, she had a duty that he had not quite winkled from her brain, but it was what drove her to walk so fast in the chill misty morning. She had a good heart, and he'd always had a soft spot for her sort of humanity, so if he called his Art to strengthen her muscles he wasn't to be blamed. Sive's stern look was a whole world away. It was only a moment's work.

It was gladdening to see her face relax, and her back straighten as the power filled her. It wasn't his imagination; her eyes did drift to the tree he was hiding in.

"Thank you Lord Callirius," her voice was very low but his otherworldly ears were equally sharp. Bess had straightened and moved on by the time Puck recovered. He should have been incensed that she'd mistaken the reprieve as a gift from his cousin, but he was more shocked that she'd named a Fey at all. How extraordinary, thought Puck as he climbed atop the branch, to watch the woman walk away faster, and with a great deal less puffing. Could it be that some of the old ways still remained in the humans even after his kind had forsaken this realm? It would have been remiss of him not to find out.

His people had always hidden from the humans, but as Bess was moving quickly beyond the reach of the trees, there was nothing left to do, but wrap a glamour of invisibility about himself, and follow after. Sive should be proud of his determination- if he ever told her the whole adventure of course.

Unseen then he trailed after the old woman, his hidden shape masked by wind blown grass, or a minor cloud of dust kicked up by her heels. True invisibility was beyond him, so this was more his Art giving any watchers a gentle nudge to look somewhere else. Certainly Bess was moving with such speed she never spared a look over her shoulder. Puck had to really set his mind to keeping up, turning away from every distraction that tempted his eye. He would have loved to pause a while, and delve into the hedgerows they passed, or perhaps shape shift to gamble with the thick coated sheep he saw on the rolling hills, but he had a higher purpose today.

They approached a town, a fact he had detected long before he saw the huddle of buildings. That was the one thing he disliked about humans, no matter how amusing or pleasant they were, there always remained a vague scent of decay about them.

As if she had picked up on his stray thoughts, Bess drew up for a second, letting her eyes wander dismally over Stratford. "Aye the plague is here," she muttered darkly before stamping on.

Protected he might be, but Puck still shuddered. He knew all about plagues, and buboes, and shrieks of agony- more than anyone of his light nature should. Many was the time when his cat

shape had been lapping up the milk a goodwife left out to please him, and he had heard the moans of the afflicted. Why would Bess be going toward a place of infection, when she was no fool? Curiosity overcame his desire to avoid any unpleasantness. As they drew closer, the smell became worse, so that even Bess had to halt, and wrap a portion of her cloak around her face. Puck recoiled. Great Mother they had come upon the limed cesspits where the dead were thrown. He wasn't his cousin, he wasn't used to the real ugly nature of this realm- he almost fled.

"Great Mother hold my life," Bess whispered, clutching her bundles tighter before plowing on.

It really would not have been very brave of him to abandon her after that. Holding his breath Puck and his glamour passed quickly on, almost knocking the old woman's heels, until they reached the somewhat less odorous village itself.

Piles of refuse were burning on the street, which did not add to the ambiance. A group of women perhaps the same age as Bess were gathered around one smoldering near the corner, bonneted heads pressed close together, clucking into each other's ears dismally.

"Bad time for birthing I'd say." One nodded sagely.

"Oh yes, hardly worth the bother," another pressed her hands together pronouncing judgment.

Bess passed them in silence as their eyes turned contemptuously on her. They could never place how, but they knew she was not one of them.

Puck though had enough to concern himself with, being surrounded by humanity in all its grime was bad enough, but there was something far worse about the town, a tension that rang through his head. Preternatural senses told him that behind every wall was an anxious human, terrified of death for themselves or their loved ones. Some were locked in fornication in a desperate attempt to forget, others were wearing holes in their knees trying to pray past it, but all wore fear around their heart like a chain. Puck pitied them, as was his nature, but there was not enough Art in his body to cure this malaise.

They turned a final corner in the strangely still street, and Bess' mind was ringing with relief.

Finally there was her destination. For a single one of his immortal breaths Puck was unimpressed, for it looked like any other of the houses in the row, and then his Art broke loose. His ears buzzed with a mighty hum, his vision drained of all color, and his skin suddenly became hot. In that one instant he almost lost hold of his glamour, and his shape. The power he had always wielded with such ease was abruptly staging a revolt, the center of which was the house Bess was now approaching. It was bright white to Puck, as if the sun was caged within its frail walls, and even as he stood struggling with his Art, it pulsed faintly like a human heart. And he now he could hear it calling to him, softly but persistently like a half recalled dream, and so much of him wanted to follow after Bess that tears spilled from his eyes. The ache inside him was a burning pit, and every ounce of Art was urging him toward the house.

Puck was not a great Fey. He'd not walked the elder days, nor taken up a godhood among the humans; he was the Trickster, not made for serious or important matters. But still he knew when he saw them, and better still he knew those that were more equipped to deal with such momentous events.

With a half cry of sorrow, Puck threw open the Veil, and quit the suddenly frightening human world. Whatever secrets the house held, would have to wait. He could not let it burn his foolish eyes, and change him forever. As he passed Between and into the Fey realm, he couldn't have even identified what he did as cowardice. For the Trickster it was merely survival.