

Excerpt: Fey West

By Michael J. Allen

1: Hatred

Fey do not forgive, and they do not forget.

Neither do gunslingers, though by the Mother I wish I could.

The heavy thrum of the dwarven steam wheeler's engines slowed. Its two great paddle wheels splashed, throwing pungent sea spray into the air.

A dwarf porter stuck his head in my open door. "Almost to the Baltimore docks, Mister West. Best prepare your belongings."

Perhaps a half-breed like myself, he was thin for a dwarf though of common enough height. At just over five and a half feet, he stood a head shorter than me. He was young enough that his beard was still thin, much like my own unshaved chin.

His thick, salted-brown brows rose in question. "Sir?"

I tossed him a coin. "Thank you, Hoff, I'll only be a minute."

"Captain wants a word before you depart." He disappeared out the door before I could answer, taking with him the burnt smell from the coal stacks.

I stared down at the steamer trunk, realizing just how little I'd appreciated the freedom to walk around the ship unarmed.

Lifting the lid I saw my gunbelt and revolvers coiled atop my belongings like a snake. I reached in, careful for the moment not to touch the six-guns, and slung my rig around my waist. It weighed more than I remembered, an anchor hung on my hips. Practiced fingers ran along the belt,

each empty loop feeling like a hole in my soul. I was down to my last few blue shells and totally out of white and red. I'd have to seek out Alexander for more.

A smile crossed my face. Not everything about coming back was bad.

I drew the first pistol, feeling with satisfaction the hum and burn of cold-iron against my skin. There was something right, something cleansing to me about the burning. The pain reminded me who I was and of the cost of being me. The burns would heal fast enough, accelerated regeneration a boon of my mixed human and elf blood.

I checked the cylinders loaded, holstered the first and repeated the process with the second. Next came a brown leather duster, its weight reassuring on my shoulders as it settled around me.

A letter burned in my shirt pocket as much as the revolvers had scorched my hands: a summons that filled my gut with angry sprites.

I knew its contents and the address of my meeting by heart. A mysterious benefactor had reached across the ocean, paid for my release, my passage and managed the return of possessions including my horse - though he'd died panicked by a small fire in the steamer's hold.

The sound of passengers and baggage preparing to disembark, doors slamming, and excited chatter reached my pointed ears.

I tied back my brick-colored, shoulder-length hair. The end of my wavy hair curled up behind the leather thong like a gnarled claw. No matter. I settled a wide-brimmed hat in place and didn't bother to check my ear tips in a silvered glass.

I'd hidden them all my life. They were a death sentence - in the Old World as well as the New it seemed. I'd disguised the angular whispers of my elven features while in Norse Europa by not shaving. It hadn't been enough.

The dwarf crew's docking song rose in volume and passion until the beat energized me. I'd heard it on the voyage to the Isles of Gaelic Britannia too. The crew stomped a beat with heavy, steel-nailed boots. Joyous voices rang out in celebration of their task. It pulled a corner of my mouth

upward, but envy of their brotherhood kept the other corner from rising.

The song's end beckoned me up on deck. Picking up my tack and saddle, I emerged from my stateroom and strode across the treated oak deck. I joined the end of a long line of passengers. A cloudless, blue, spring sky stretched out to the horizon, no longer marred by coal stack exhaust.

Beyond the ship's oak rail with its copper edging polished bright, Baltimore's docks stretched out unwashed. The harbor district teemed with crates, passengers and workers. Mule-drawn wagons trundled away heavy with cargo. Some rolled from my sight toward warehouses on the wharf while others descended stone ramps disappearing beneath the city. I preferred forest or open sky, but to see the under-ways - bone dry no matter how near the water - demanded respect and even a little awe for their craftsmanship. They'd delved deep, extending the city a dozen stories beneath the Earth.

Over the aft rail open water rose and fell, brownish-blue to the horizon. I glanced around the harbor at steamship and sail, wondering if any offered passage to safe harbors where my birth wasn't a crime, somewhere I might lay aside my revolvers for good.

A broad dwarf in a salted peacoat beneath equally salted dark hair stepped up to me. "Mister West, I wish to apologize again for the loss of your horse." He offered me a bag clinking of coins. "A weregild. Please assure your benefactress that it was an accident. We meant you no ill."

It seemed my summoner was female and the dwarf captain afraid of her. I opened a pouch filled with gold coins and frowned - very afraid.

We shook hands. "I'll do so. Thank you, Captain."

I listened to the gulls argue above us, chuckling at a creative jibe from one to another.

I hesitated only a moment before disembarking. My legs would be unsteady once they met unforgiving, unmoving stone. I stepped onto the shore, surprised to find it less unsettling than before. I had my bearings almost in hand when a voice shouted from behind me.

"Abomination."

I figured that meant me, so I turned toward the voice. He was tall for a human and very young, decked out in a midnight blue robe with a wizard's ludicrously-compulsory silver stars embroidered along the hem. A pair of hawthorn wands hung from holsters on the silver rope belt.

A sigh escaped my lips. "Look around you, magician. Humans are barely tolerated in the harbor district. Go about your master's business and leave off trouble."

"I couldn't call you out whilst aboard ship, but dwarf protection doesn't extend to you here."

I searched his face, finding zeal and hatred both. This was what I'd hoped to escape in the Old World. There wasn't much hope of dissuading him, but neither did I want any more weight added to my conscience.

"Kid, go dry behind your ears a bit before you try your luck. I'll still be around."

"I'm calling you out. Face me or die a coward."

Don't get me wrong, it wasn't the first time someone had called me coward. No doubt it wouldn't be the last either. Youths with power possess no end of arrogance, yours truly included.

My voice pitched toward him on a whisper. "Please."

"Begging will not save you."

Had I ever been that young?

At least the kid had wands. Few wizards come against a gunslinger without wands anymore. They're faster than working spells on the fly, though only a young mage would call me to a duel surrounded by so many fey.

I swept my duster back on either side of the gunbelt. "If you won't relent, may we step away from so many bystanders."

Hatred filled his voice. "Afraid you'll injure some other freak?"

I moistened my lips. "It's not my aim that's in question."

"I'll not let you escape my sight again."

Understanding slapped me, right cheek then left. I focused a narrowed gaze on the twisted,

bejeweled wands at his sides. I'd seen them before.

"I recognize your master's wands, boy. I'll offer you a weregild for his loss, lost training and your passage. Leave your master's mistakes his own."

He shook his head.

"Very well, just a moment." The words escaped in such a whisper I doubt he heard it. Maybe I could keep him from killing any innocent bystanders. I stepped to a patch of dirt with the sea at my back, set down saddle and tack then reached slowly across my body. If he'd possessed a decent survival instinct, he would have blasted me then. I've practiced firing cross body and could have put him down without effort. I removed a pistol from its holster, careful to lift it by the cylinder rather than the handle, and dumped out the load on the dirt. The iron burned my hand, but I had to reload. It wouldn't do to fire cold-iron bullets into a crowd of fey. I slid two blue-jacketed shells into the revolver.

"Put in a full load, changeling. I won't have it said I cheated you."

I glanced up at him. Damn the kid was dumb. If it took more than two shots to take down an opponent, then you should already be dead. I slid in another blue and followed it with three green. I spun the cylinder so that the blue would be up first, pushed it into position and holstered the weapon.

I took a moment to rub cool, soothing earth between my hands before rising.

"You're sure you want to die today, kid?"

"Won't be me on the ground when this is done."

I glanced around at the watching audience. Even fey, or perhaps especially fey, aren't immune to death's draw. Species that live long past many others, who see the light of centuries dawn, are attracted like moths to flame when life is about to be extinguished before its natural end. Just the same I checked their positions clear of the line of fire.

I inclined my head and waited for him to move.

He drew with all the fluidity of a baby robin thrown from its nest. He bent the left wand up too early and it caught inside the slim leather holster. The right he got free. Ignited even before he had the wands pointed at me, two continuous flames - one burning through its holster - lanced out across the cobblestones.

My own pistol leapt clear of the holster before his flame had traveled a quarter of the distance between us. The metal frame burned the crook of my thumb and the inside of my other fingers while the wooden grips protected my palm. I set my finger to the trigger and felt it burn along the faint scar there from countless pulls.

It fired once.

A tiny ball of storm-struck wood streaked across the distance haloed in a sapphire aurora of captured lightning. It struck him through the head somewhere in the vicinity of his nostrils. What remained of him was blasted backward, tilting his flame lances upward.

The lead lance flashed across my left side, burning through my leather duster and ruining my shirt. Pain surged along my side, hot and fierce. The second lance blackened the stones to my right. Both vanished a moment later. I cursed and checked the bullet's path. It hit a stone warehouse wall behind the dead wizard and its magic burned out.

I holstered my revolver, bent down and cooled the burns with fresh earth. As an afterthought, I grabbed a handful and rubbed it over my burning side.

I stomped across the intervening distance to his body and raised my voice. "Do any here weigh claim against me for actions dishonorable? Do any challenge my claim of recompense against this soul?"