

the cup of dreams

VOLUME FOUR OF
The Immortal Eyes Saga



jackie cassada and nicky bea

the cup of
dreams

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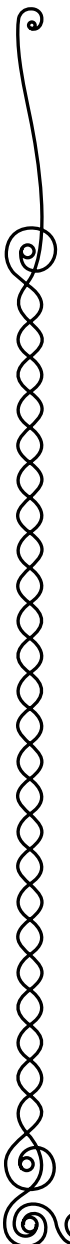
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Written by: Jackie Cassada and Nicky Rea

Developed by: Matt M. McElroy

Edited by: Maria Cambone

Art Direction: Michael Chaney



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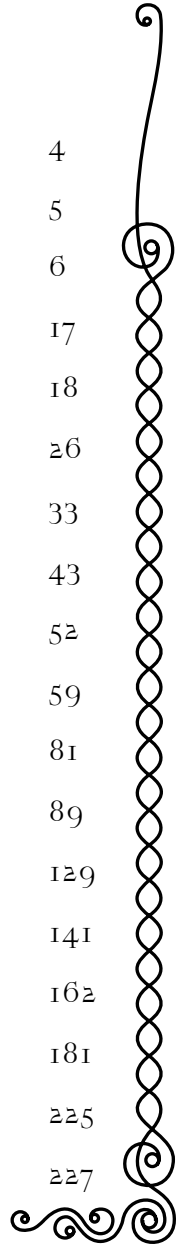
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THE COP OF DREAMS

| | |
|--|-----|
| dedications | 4 |
| A NOTE from the authors | 5 |
| The immortal eyes chronicles: the story so far | 6 |
| prologue | 17 |
| chapter one: in dreams | 18 |
| chapter two: autumn | 26 |
| chapter three: a gathering | 33 |
| chapter four: battle begins | 43 |
| chapter five: awakenings | 52 |
| chapter six: the ball | 59 |
| chapter seven: suitors | 81 |
| chapter eight: travels | 89 |
| chapter nine: the return | 129 |
| chapter ten: dreams | 141 |
| chapter eleven: strange alliances | 162 |
| chapter twelve: countdown | 181 |
| author bios | 225 |
| author special thanks | 227 |



dedications



From Nicky:

To my parents who, try though they might, could never understand their willful, fae child, and to my sister, Peggy, who has always done her very best to do so.

From Jackie:

To my mother and father, for being who they were and for standing in my corner; and to my brother, Skip, for helping me and Nicky keep our lives together and for the marvelous meals he's prepared for us. To my nephew and niece-in-law, Barry and Marie, for helping me keep the Dream alive.

From both of us:

To Tadd McDivitt for his unending enthusiasm, inspiration, and friendship. May he continue to enact brilliantly the role of Yrtalien, the Forsworn Prince, in any **Changeling: the Dreaming: 20th Anniversary Edition** games we play in the future.

To Greg Freeman, a most kind and dedicated friend, who has always helped when we needed it.

To all those who have written, edited, and developed for **Changeling the Dreaming** and all the artists who have contributed so much to the game.

To all the fans who love **Changeling the Dreaming** and have made it what it continues to be — one of the most innovative and hope-filled games ever attempted — while not ignoring the darkness which gives it meaning.

A NOTE from the authors



In writing *The Cup of Dreams*, we wanted to touch on places visited and old friends made in prior books as well as to introduce some of the new material from **Changeling: The Dreaming 20th Anniversary Edition**. Nicky joined on in writing this book, though she has lurked behind the scenes like a sluagh on the first three.

The ballad “The Green Leaves,” performed by Liam in Chapter 10, is based on the Child Ballad variously known as “The Elfin Knight,” “The Elfin Knicht,” or “The Fairy Knight,” among others. This version was written by Jackie Cassada. Those wanting a tune to fit to the lyrics can use the ballad “Greensleeves,” with some minor changes in the tune.

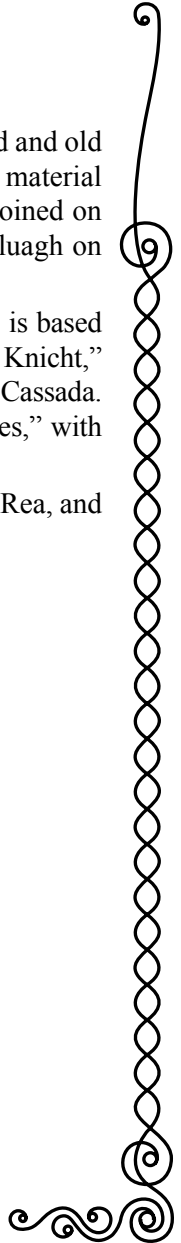
The children’s counting rhyme in Chapter 12 was written by Nicky Rea, and is based on the children’s rhyme “One, two, buckle my shoe.”

*So fill to me the parting glass
Good night and joy be with you all*

— The Wailin Jennys, “The Parting Glass”

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we’ll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

— Robert Burns, “Auld Lang Syne”



The Immortal Eyes chronicles: The story so far



Book One: The Toybox

When the Autumn World and the Dreaming split apart, Silver's Gate, the last open gate to Arcadia was closing. Two sidhe brothers stood blocking the gate, each claiming precedence for his followers. Neither would give way and they turned to stone as the gate closed, cutting off all the sidhe, commoners, and other Kithain trying to escape. The brothers' staring, angry eyes turned to gemstones, which fell into the palm of the Selkie queen. The gate sank beneath the waves as she distributed the gems with instructions to take each to a place of safety. They became known as the Immortal Eyes.

Set in the late 1990s, a conspiracy to bring down Duke Aeon's Seelie rule of the duchy of Golden Gate in San Francisco begins and entwines through the story. It features a cursed harp (courtesy of Lady Glynnis, an Unseelie sorceress) that sings to Aeon in his dead beloved's voice, driving him mad; a vengeful, banished satyr named Malacar, who has replaced his own eyes with two of the Immortal Eyes; and a plot to release Yrtalien, an imprisoned sidhe known as the Forsworn Prince. Into this mix are thrown a group of changelings, who will unravel the plots and achieve much more before their tale is told.

Leigh (Dame Eleighanara of House Fiona) is awaiting her knighting ceremony. She is also Morgan's (see below) escort to the court and among the changelings of Golden Gate. The eshu Valmont is a proud commoner and semi-Unseelie who has a finger in every pie. Tor, a troll losing his fae soul and memories to age, accompanies his granddaughter Morgan, a 12-year-old sidhe childling who is a baroness of House Eiluned. Morgan's true dreams help guide the group. Rasputin, once the fool in Aeon's court, is one of their friends. He is a troubled, tortured pooka who cannot tell a complete truth, and who dreams of the horrors of his past. Finally, there is Edmund, an unruly 8-year-old redcap street kid whose Unseelie leanings are a constant trial to the group.

Valmont, an advisor to Count Elias of Oakhold, is forced unknowingly to bring Malacar, disguised as a stranger, to the duke's fall revels. Malacar disrupts the revels, managing to embarrass Aeon and almost ruin Leigh's knighting ceremony. Then, he flees. Morgan and Princess Alera, heir to Golden Gate, finish Leigh's knighting.

Furious when he discovers the satyr is the banished Malacar, Duke Aeon charges Leigh to track him down and re-banish him. While trying to geas her to do so he discovers a stronger geas already lies on her. Nevertheless Leigh, Morgan, Valmont (who feels responsible for bringing the satyr), Tor, Edmund, and Rasputin all accept the quest.

The group adopts the Toybox, a homey coffee shop and freehold in the Haight as their home base, since they have become friends with Fizzlewig, the boggan owner. When Malacar unlocks the old steamer trunk, an army of chimerical escapes into the streets. Each enchanted toy is a faerie treasure that helps to keep the Toybox Coffee Shop englamoured. Finding and returning the toys is a triumph for the group. Unknown to the rest, Edmund pockets a toy clown.

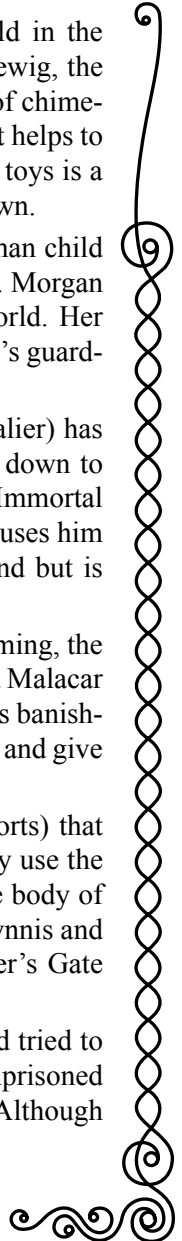
Morgan experiences many trials as she navigates being both a human child and a faerie baroness. This is resolved with the help of her companions. Morgan enchants her parents so they will understand her true place in the world. Her parents agree to let Morgan travel with the group under Leigh's and Tor's guardianship.

None of them know that a Dauntain named Cyprian Ryder (Chevalier) has been set on their trail by this turn of events and means to track them down to force their fae souls from them. Ryder, himself a sidhe, has one of the Immortal Eyes, a blue gemstone, embedded in the palm of one hand. The gem causes him agony when exposed to enchantments. He attempts to capture Edmund but is rendered unconscious and put on a plane to Boston.

From beyond, in a place neither of the Autumn World nor the Dreaming, the exile, Yrtalien of House Ailil, has been directing both Lady Glynnis and Malacar through their dreams. When Leigh finds Malacar and delivers the duke's banishment, Yrtalien directs the satyr to rip out his emerald eye (the Eyestone) and give it to Leigh, which the satyr does.

The group discovers (due to meddling from Yrtalien and his cohorts) that a gate exists in Golden Gate Park. Believing it to be Silver's Gate, they use the Eyestone to open it, releasing Yrtalien. The Forsworn Prince steals the body of a mortal Glynnis has compelled to go to him. Yrtalien escapes with Glynnis and Malacar, intent on acquiring all the Immortal Eyes and opening Silver's Gate himself to try to overthrow Arcadia.

Leigh remembers that she and Yrtalien used to be lovers. They had tried to unseat the ruling powers of Arcadia. As punishment, he had been imprisoned while she was exiled to the Autumn World and placed under a geas. Although they still care for one another, the two are on differing sides.



The companions manage to destroy the cursed harp, freeing Aeon from its influence. Once cured of the curse, Duke Aeon charges the group with finding and opening the real Silver's Gate.

Meanwhile, in Boston, Ryder is recalled to himself by his supporter, Signe. He, Signe, an eshu, Diana, a troll — both Dauntain as well — and Vargas, a mortal who once wanted to be a priest, decide to return to San Francisco and take up the quest to capture the changelings who defeated Ryder.

The first book ends with the changelings having become oath mates determined to recover the gems, though their reasons for reopening Silver's Gate are for the benefit of the changelings in the Autumn World.

Book Two: Shadows on the Hill

Weaving together the storylines of the companions, Yrtalien, and the Dauntain, the book opens a month or so after the first one. It's almost Yule when Duke Aeon summons them to his palace. When they arrive, he tells them that they must travel to Point Reyes to meet with Kithain who have information about the Immortal Eyes. Morgan has a waking dream about a white swan chasing a black one across the water. She realizes they are boats, and the black swan can only be Yrtalien going for the other stones. They depart the next afternoon for Point Reyes.

Ryder and his companions arrive and begin their search for the fae of San Francisco. He uses his Eystone to locate sources of Glamour. He and Signe assume their fae miens and enter the Toybox Coffee Shop. The powerful Glamour of the toy chest inside the shop sets off his stone, bringing him down in agony. The shopkeeper, Fizzlewig, orders the two to leave. Unable to do anything else, the Dauntain comply.

Lady Glynnis has acquired a freehold in Hilo, Hawai'i, so Yrtalien can regain his strength and learn more about the modern world. He does so and sets up what he calls his own Shadow Court there, encouraging other Unseelie to join him. Espousing the free use of Glamour, he Ravages mortal artisans. Yrtalien considers it the right of all fae to rule mortals and take whatever they want.

The companions meet at the Toybox Coffee Shop the next day to exchange Yule gifts. Ellen, a shy sluagh wilder who's a friend to Morgan, gives the group her journal, which contains many secrets. She gives them tokens they can use to convince strange sluagh to trust them. The companions go just after dark to drive to Point Reyes in Valmont's Cadillac. As they travel, they realize they're being followed. Two carloads of foes, led by Blade, Valmont's rival, force them off the road.

In the light from the cars' headlights, Leigh, Valmont, Tor, and Edmund engage in a vicious battle with the enemy forces, who are armed with cold iron. Trapped in the car, Rasputin and Morgan help by casting cantrips against the foes, who outnumber their friends. As Tor takes a heavy blow from a chimeric

sword, making him forget he's a troll, Morgan realizes the attackers are trying to strip all of them of their faerie natures and forget the quest. Tor wanders away. Morgan runs off into the darkness looking for him.

Though the companions fight bravely, they sustain some serious wounds. The outcome is in doubt until the selkies who have come to meet them there join the fray. Once the fight is won, the selkies escort the oath mates to their clifftop freehold of Stony Point where they help to heal the companions. Ondine, the selkies' leader, tells them the story of the closing of Silver's Gate and the brothers, explaining where the Eyestones originated. She also explains that the group will need to travel to Hawai'i to meet with the Menehune, that land's native faeries, as they have knowledge of another Eyestone.

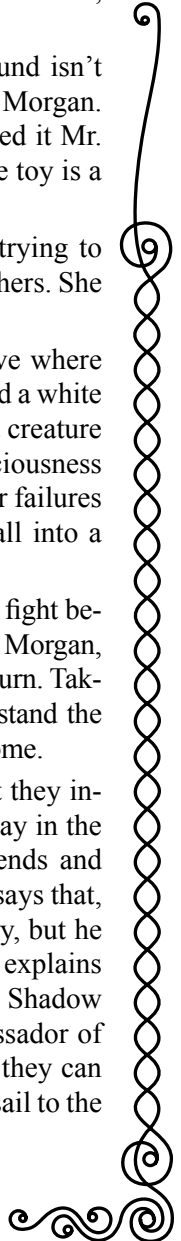
Most of the companions rest in the selkies' cave overnight. Edmund isn't tired. He resents how everyone else treats him, especially in contrast to Morgan. He goes outside and pulls out the painted clown he stole. He has named it Mr. Dumpy and uses it as a confidante. Although Mr. Dumpy can't talk, the toy is a sympathetic ear for Edmund. Eventually, Edmund goes back to bed.

Inside the cave, Morgan has a prophetic dream of the Dauntain trying to capture the group and learns that one of the oath mates will betray the others. She loses the dream as she wakes, unable to recall the name of the traitor.

The next morning, the selkies take the oath mates to a hidden cove where they open a trod to Hawai'i, sending the companions on their way aboard a white swan boat. After traveling for a while, the oath mates are engulfed by a creature resembling a sea serpent — the trod's guardian. They each lose consciousness and have a dream particular to their pasts, either reminding them of their failures or testing them in some way. They awaken and slide down a waterfall into a grotto.

There, they meet the Menehune, who are decidedly unwelcoming. A fight begins, but the Menehune sorcerer entangles and captures them in foliage. Morgan, knowing they are not supposed to fight, surrenders; they all surrender in turn. Taken to a village, they are given shell necklaces that allow them to understand the Menehune speech and speak with the chief, explaining why they have come.

The companions tell the chief and tribe about their quest and what they intend to do with the stone possessed by the Menehune. They agree to stay in the village while the chief decides their fate. While there they make friends and learn many crafts and customs. Finally, the chief calls them to him and says that, because of their respectful and friendly behavior, he believes their story, but he cannot give them the stone. Someone else had already claimed it. He explains how Yrtalien came to them claiming to be the rightful owner of the Shadow Stone. He left, taking with him the chief's elder daughter as an ambassador of her people to his court in Hilo. The chief regrets this now and asks if they can recover his daughter. The Menehune open a trod for the companions to sail to the Big Island (Hawai'i) and bid them farewell.



Blade contacts the Dauntain and convinces them to leave San Francisco to follow the companions to Hawai'i. They fly to Hilo, where they find rooms and make their plans for Ryder, Signe, and Diana to infiltrate changeling society, leaving Vargas behind as a monitor. They end up at Yrtalien's freehold, where Yrtalien speaks with Ryder about the stone in his hand. Yrtalien reveals that he has a stone as well and uses it to heal the pain in Ryder's hand. He then says Ryder must pay him homage the next time he wants healing. The three Dauntain are sickened by the court's practices, but Yrtalien tells them that the fae they are after will come to his court. The prince hides the Dauntain from most of the rest of the changelings there.

The companions land on a strip of beach on the big island where Hilo is located. In the distance, through jungle and rocky terrain, they can see Kilauea, the volcano said to be the home of Pele, the goddess of fire. After a long walk, they are sure they are lost and stop to camp and eat. While there, an old lady wanders into their camp. They share their food with her. She tells them that the volcano sometimes sends noxious fumes to this area, so they should go. Using her directions, they travel just a bit farther to a road where they get a ride to town. They acquire rooms at the same bed and breakfast where Ryder and company stayed. Vargas is still there and reports their presence to Ryder. In the morning, the companions find out that Kilauea did erupt the night before, and its fumes would have killed them had they stayed in their camp. They hear a story that Pele, disguised as an old woman, sometimes walks about before the volcano blows, warning those in the area.

The companions go to the beach, where Yrtalien locates Leigh and invites them all to come to his freehold. They agree. Yrtalien does not tell them of Ryder's group, but does introduce them to Kanani, the chief's daughter. Valmont forms an attachment to her. Even though she is treated like royalty, she feels unhappy there.

Valmont thinks Yrtalien means to harm Kanani, perhaps using her as some sort of sacrificial offering. He shares his insights with the other adults. Yrtalien lays out his plans to Leigh. At midnight on the longest night of the year, Yrtalien plans to throw Kanani into the volcano, Kilauea. Leigh no longer feels she and he should be together because of his depredations. Lady Glynnis tries to tempt Morgan into stealing Leigh's stone. Signe goes down to a small beach with Rasputin to see what she can find out about him, and discovers that the pooka had a horrible, painful childhood. In fact, she learns that his faerie nature has saved him from despair.

Yrtalien and Ryder reach a bargain whereby the Dauntain won't try to stop the sacrifice of Kanani and in return, the prince will let them capture the companions. He and his courtiers go up to Kilauea. The Dauntain conceal themselves and Vargas along the way. The companions go to rescue Kanani, and the Dauntain attack them and are attacked with iron weapons. Valmont convinces Signe to help him save Kanani before they fight, and they do so. Once Kanani is pulled away from the edge of the volcano, Pele appears and says she has never asked for human sacrifice at Kilauea. She takes Kanani, promising to return her to her father.

Ryder and Tor are locked in combat when Yrtalien removes his healing from Ryder, sending him into agony from the gem in his hand. Tor honorably doesn't strike while Ryder is down. When the agonized sidhe holds his hand out, pleading for Tor's help, Tor severs his hand at the wrist. Ryder, freed from the curse of the gem but still left with his hatred of his fae nature, throws himself into the volcano to end his intolerable existence.

During the combat, Edmund seems to be constantly in the wrong place, as he "mistakenly" cuts Leigh's pouch from her waist and grabs her stone. He then runs forward and grabs Ryder's severed hand. He also impulsively picks up a stone from the top of the volcano, which he's been told not to do. As the rest of the group is taken down, Edmund disappears to join up with Yrtalien, who gave him chimerical armor and promised him a horse like a real knight.

The companions are manacled with iron and thrown into a van. Signe stands the first guard inside the truck with them, holding Vargas' gun. During the ride, she witnesses the terrors and unending pain Rasputin endures as his fae self is suppressed, and she comes to believe he is better off as a fae, even if it is madness. She releases them all, and at the first stop, they overpower the other Dauntain and escape.

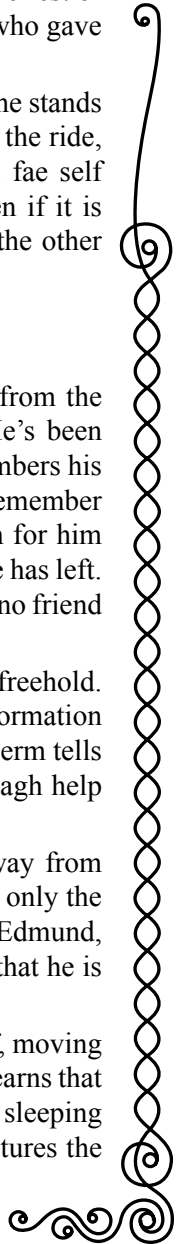
Book Three: Court of All Kings

After their escape from the Dauntain, Tor has become separated from the others and has lost his memories, wandering off during the night. He's been found by a nun and priest who run a homeless shelter. Though he remembers his name and has a photo album with pictures of Morgan as a baby, he can remember nothing else clearly. Morgan is devastated. The companions all search for him while trying to avoid Vargas and Diana, who are still on their trail. Signe has left. Vargas finds the homeless shelter first, but Sister Beatrice suspects he is no friend to Tor. She turns the hunter away. Vargas leaves but says he'll return.

Valmont goes back to the abandoned house where Yrtalien had his freehold. He searches for a sluagh there to see if the secretive fae have any information about Tor. He locates one named Germ and shows him Ellen's token. Germ tells him where he thinks Tor is, and Valmont also arranges to have the sluagh help in another matter.

Yrtalien, Lady Glynnis, and Edmund sail the black swan ship away from Hawai'i. The Forsworn Prince now has three of the Eyestones, lacking only the ruby. He has been torturing Glynnis and threatening and demeaning Edmund, who is questioning why he joined the prince. Yrtalien finally explains that he is using the three stones to locate the final one.

Malacar has been using his remaining Eyestone to disguise himself, moving from freehold to freehold to research information on Silver's Gate. He learns that it was in a place called the Court of All Kings in Ireland. As Malacar is sleeping one night, Yrtalien's swan ship glides to land nearby, and Yrtalien captures the



satyr. Rather than be blinded by the loss of his remaining eye, Malacar agrees to go with the prince and company to find Silver's Gate.

The companions go to the shelter, where the nun and priest recognize Morgan from her pictures. Rasputin stays outside to watch for the Dauntain. He sees Vargas and Diana coming down the street, so he jumps up and down and yells to lead them away. They chase him as he heads toward the beach. In the shelter, the oath mates learn that Tor is staying there but he's on the beach. They leave to find him, wondering where Rasputin went. Going to the beach, the group sees the Dauntain attacking Rasputin and Tor moving to help the pooka. Together, the group beats down the Dauntain and capture them. Morgan uses her Glamour to restore Tor. They return to their swan ship and leave Hawai'i. Valmont's former arrangements with Germ come into play as Diana and Vargas are rendered unconscious and loaded onto a ship going to Hong Kong.

Leigh uses the trip back to Point Reyes to read Ellen's journal and discovers that Silver's Gate is in Hibernia (Ireland). Ondine explains that there are selkies in Ireland too. The companions head for the next leg of their journey. They each dream on the way, with Rasputin dreaming of his own doom before Silver's Gate, while Valmont remembers that Malacar had the ruby Eyestone. The companions land and are met by Emer and Kieran, two selkies who take them to the faerie thorpe (town) of Glenlea. There they meet the other villagers, including a fox pooka named Brit who forms a one-sided attachment towards Rasputin.

That evening, a welcome party occurs during which the companions meet Liam, a clurichaun bard. He tells them they don't need the stones to locate Silver's Gate. They just need to speak with the Hidden King, an ancient fae living in his own beghamoured forest. Liam agrees to guide them there. He also tells them he used to have the sapphire Eyestone but met Ryder and thought he might remember himself if Liam gave him the stone. He had no idea what would happen to Ryder.

Yrtalien's group lands in Ireland near Sligo and makes their way to a pub where local fae hang out. Unseelie sidhe twins Donal and Dougal are impressed by Yrtalien's power and agree to guide him to places where the gate might be. The twins suggest that they start with Queen Maeve's grave, explaining that she's also called Mab, Queen of the Faeries. Malacar urges them to go to her grave first, as he thinks it might be the Court of All Kings, where he hopes to find a place where all the fae have a king of their own.

Edmund has a terrible nightmare about the stone he took from Kilauea. He also dreams that opening Maeve's grave will release something horrible. He regrets stealing the rock and dreads going to the site. The group travels there the next day. Malacar demands that Yrtalien use the Stone of Opening to see if the grave hides anything. When he does so, a small earthquake occurs. They leave, not realizing that the rock fall released a spirit known to the Irish as a *bean sidhe* (banshee). She flies out seeking Glamour to slake her thirst, particularly preying upon those who feel sad and bereft.

The banshee is attracted to the Glamour of Glenlea and focuses in on Rasputin. Morgan sees the banshee and manages to talk the wretched spirit into leaving

before she kills him. The rest of the village has heard the banshee's scream, and Liam rushes in to use his music to bring Rasputin back to himself.

The group decides that they must seek out the Hidden King. The next day, they journey to the mountains where his stronghold lies. Before they enter the king's forest, Liam warns them that they need to remain together as the path is quite tricky. Despite their best intentions, the companions become separated, with Morgan and Tor together, Valmont and Leigh paired off, and Rasputin by himself. Liam seems to have disappeared. Valmont and Leigh talk and settle their differing opinions, with Leigh realizing Valmont is just as noble as any sidhe.

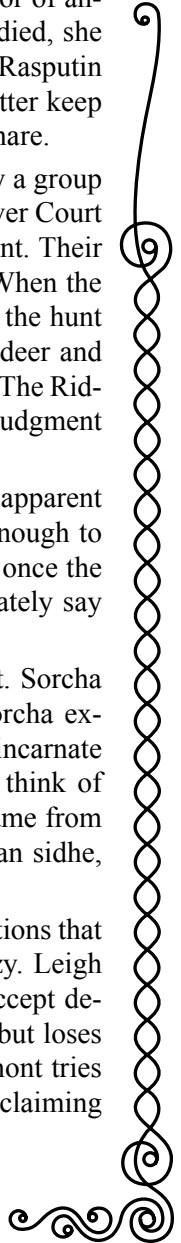
Tor recalls some of his past, remembering he once was the protector of another sidhe lady also named Morgania. He remembers that when she died, she gave him a silver locket which he gave to Morgan at her Chrysalis. Rasputin ends up following a red deer he sees moving through the forest. To better keep up with the deer in the tangled undergrowth, he assumes his form as a hare.

Unknown to the companions, the forest is guarded and patrolled by a group of sidhe sworn to the service of the Hidden King. The Riders of the Silver Court are currently out in the forest honing their skills by having a mock hunt. Their quarry is the youngest and newest Rider, Sorcha of House Scathach. When the Riders learn that there are intruders nearing their liege, they break off the hunt and move to intercept the group. Sorcha sees Rasputin following the deer and nets him in his rabbit form. The others are caught by more senior riders. The Riders bring the companions to their clearing, where they plan to render judgment on the trespassers.

The other Riders tease Sorcha on her rabbit hunting. It becomes apparent that despite Sorcha's prowess, the other Riders feel she is not good enough to be among them because of her House. Liam wanders into the clearing once the Riders all gather there and joins the companions. The Riders immediately say their judgment is for the companions to be banned from the forest.

Leigh claims the right to prove their case through trial by combat. Sorcha accepts the challenge. That evening when Sorcha and Leigh talk, Sorcha explains that House Scathach stayed behind when the gates closed and reincarnate into certain family lines as commoners do. For this, the other sidhe think of them as half-breeds. She also informs Leigh that the original Riders came from House Scathach and remained that way until the return of the Arcadian sidhe, who usurped Scathach's place.

The next day, their fight to first blood occurs. One of the riders mentions that he hopes Sorcha doesn't fall prey to her house's curse of battle frenzy. Leigh draws first blood, thus winning. Sorcha, too far gone to stop, won't accept defeat, and claims she's fighting to the death. She badly wounds Leigh, but loses her sword, then pulls Leigh's sword down to slit her own throat. Valmont tries to heal her, but the other Riders prevent her healing and let Sorcha die, claiming she had made her decision not to live.



Meanwhile, the twins help Yrtalien search for Silver's Gate. Along the way, Edmund figures out Yrtalien is stealing what bits of Glamour remain from Ireland's treasures. When they visit the Giant's Causeway, Edmund goes by himself to a feature of it called the Wishing Chair. There, he wishes he could undo all the wrong things he's done and get away from Yrtalien. He asks Mr. Dumpy for a little of his Glamour to power the wish.

Signe has made her peace with Ryder's death and travels to San Francisco to find the companions. She feels her path needs to cross theirs again. She tracks them down by proving her good intentions to their friends at the Toy Box and in Hawai'i. Eventually, Signe flies to Dublin.

After Valmont heals most of Leigh's injury, the Riders take them to the Dreamers' Glen to dream-speak with the Hidden King. Rasputin looks haggard, and the oath mates suspect that the banshee has found him again. Liam plays to restore him, then plays them all to sleep. In their dreams, Morgan awakens and sees a unicorn that she follows. The others wake and follow her, and they meet the Hidden King deep in the forest. He tells them they need to let go of their faults before they'll be ready to find the gate. They awaken back in the glen.

Sorcha's brother Connor invites the companions to Sorcha's wake to ensure she is reborn as one of the fae. Before the wake, the companions travel to the home of one of the Riders, Sir Odhran. The Rider facilitates a meeting between the Seelie King of Leinster and the other three monarchs of Hibernia, where the assembled monarchs and their courts salute and honor Tor as the hero who protected the Queen of Munster's sister in the past and proved true even unto protecting another child of her line, Morgan. Tor remembers his past in full.

A troll named Bridie guides Signe around Dublin and agrees to help her find her friends. Bridie takes Signe to the court where she meets Rasputin and the others again. They agree that they will meet again. Signe and Bridie leave together.

The companions and some of the Riders attend Sorcha's wake. The banshee has continued to target Rasputin. He dreams that he must stop the Unseelie from going through Silver's Gate so they won't poison the Dreaming. Sorcha's brothers forgive Leigh for Sorcha's death after they realize Leigh didn't kill Sorcha. They think it was a terrible accident. Liam takes Rasputin to a barn behind the house where several musicians have gathered. He lets the pooka drink poteen (whisky) and bask in the Glamour there. The next day, they start back for the Hidden King's glen.

Yrtalien has busied himself draining Glamour and bullying his companions. He tortures Edmund, Malacar, and the two brothers, as well as Lady Glynnis, finally exacting forced oaths of fealty from them all except Edmund. He takes the last Eyestone, forcing Malacar to rip it from his eye socket and give it to him. Rather than taking an oath from Edmund, who has already broken an oath to his companions, Yrtalien makes the childling give him Mr. Dumpy as surety to keep his promise to obey and act as the guide for Malacar. Glynnis realizes that the prince has been driven mad with the Glamour that formed his prison, and from bathing in the constant Glamour of the Eyestones.

A short time later, Mr. Dumpy wakes Edmund and gives him the Waystone and some money, presumably stolen from Yrtalien. The clown indicates that Edmund needs to escape and take Malacar with him. He does. Secretly watching, Yrtalien gets Mr. Dumpy back and makes plans to track Edmund. Edmund and Malacar follow the pull of the Waystone, making their way north. During one of their stops, Edmund mails the rock he stole from Kilauea back to Hawai'i. Finally, the Waystone leads Edmund and Malacar to a forest clearing where the childling senses that he needs to wait.

The companions arrive. Morgan runs to Edmund, hugs him, and apologizes to him for being mean. He accepts her apology. They all go to the Hidden King's palace where he reveals his name to be Meilseoir. He opens a trod leading to Silver's Gate. Stepping out of his Glamour-infused trod, he begins to fade until Edmund and Morgan give him the Waystone to shield him from Banality. Meilseoir raises the Isle of Dreams.

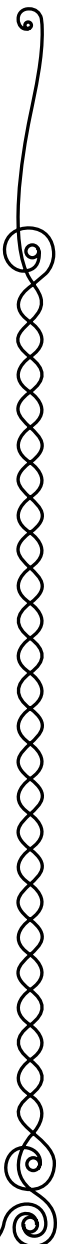
A silver bridge forms over the water from the cliff where they are standing. Yrtalien shows up with the other stones, and they all cross the bridge. The Forsworn Prince asks Leigh to use two of the stones (the two Seelie gems) and he'll use the Unseelie ones to open the gate. Leigh refuses, telling him she is no longer oath bound to him since he gave her to the Dauntain. She insists that Valmont will use the other two gems. The two go to open the gateway.

Yrtalien calls his army across the bridge. The first indication they are there is when Morgan is shot in the leg by an arrow. Tor moves to guard her, while Edmund throws himself atop her to protect her. Liam tells Malacar to lie down and play dead, then joins Tor to hold off as many as he can. The selkies and the Silver Riders show up to join the fight.

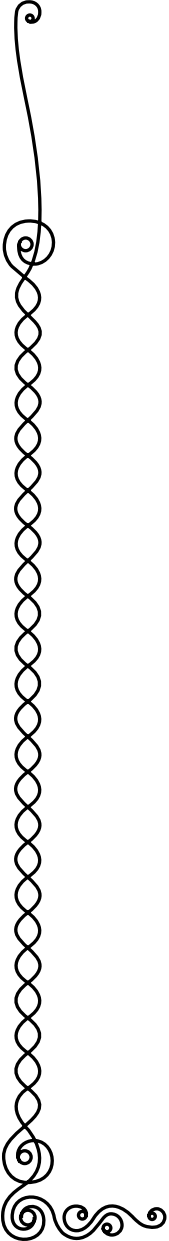
Yrtalien and the twins go to Silver's Gate. Yrtalien tells Leigh and Valmont if they want to join the fight, they'll have to give up the stones. The brothers take their places at the gate. Leigh ends up fighting Yrtalien and separates his faerie self from his mortal self. Glynnis wants to kill him, but Leigh convinces her not to. Instead, she cuts the pouch that held the stones from the prince's neck and throws it behind them, not realizing the chimerical clown is still inside it.

Meanwhile, the banshee has been attracted by all the Glamour and dives down to steal Meilseoir's potent magic. Rasputin moves to shield him, taking her Ravaging on himself. Morgan and Edmund come to the rescue. Morgan knows the banshee must have Glamour, so she sacrifices the locket Tor gave her and the sea shell from the Menehune. More is needed, and Edmund gives up his chimerical sword. Mr. Dumpy shows up behind him, and Edmund sadly lets the clown go to feed the banshee. The hungry spirit breaks off her attack, and Meilseoir tells her to go through the gate.

Rescued for the moment, Rasputin sees Malacar headed for the gate. Knowing he'll steal the stones and break the portal, Rasputin attacks him and drags him off the twins. Weak already, he can't stop Malacar from stabbing him. The others arrive, but the pooka is already dead. The king takes the stones from the



twins, releasing them from the Gate. He gives one stone each to Leigh, Valmont, Edmund, and Tor. Morgan elects to stay behind and grow up. The others go through the gate, taking Rasputin's body with them. Signe and Bridie agree to take Morgan back to her parents. The Hidden King and the Riders go back to the trod with Liam keeping the king's Glamour steady with his music. With the opening of Silver's Gate, a new venue is created through which Glamour can pass from Arcadia into the Autumn World, reawakening hope that the two realms may someday be reunited.



prologue



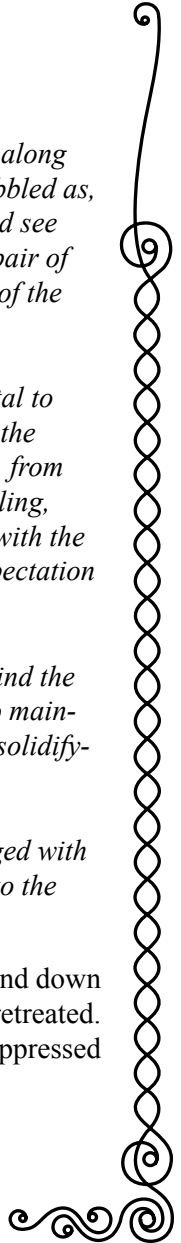
The sky ahead of Morgan shimmered with an ethereal glow as she stood along the rocky shoreline facing the ocean. Below her, the water roiled and bubbled as, from beneath the waves, an island struggled to the surface. Morgan could see a brightness take shape in the center of the island, a place marked by a pair of stone columns that bore faint resemblances to ancient warriors, princes of the sidhe.

Unlike the last time she had visited this place, Silver's Gate, the last portal to the faerie homeland of Arcadia, the gate did not need reawakening from the mortal world. This time, the portal glowed with light from the Dreaming, from the essence of faerie itself. The raven-haired young woman, once a childling, now grown into her time as a wilder, full of her adulthood yet still filled with the wonder of youth, watched, transfixed by the sight and by the sense of expectation that filled her. She had come here to await just this moment.

From behind the gate, a sweet, clarion call sounded. The brightness behind the gate magnified, growing so intense that Morgan had to shade her eyes to maintain her gaze. Beyond the brightness, she discerned figures taking form, solidifying as they passed through the gate between worlds.

Morgan counted them as they passed through, noting the first pair emerged with linked hands. After them, a single figure, slim and unfamiliar, crossed into the world. He was soon overshadowed by a towering form, and after that —

A blaring noise woke Morgan from her dream. She slammed her hand down on the old-fashioned clock, silencing the noise, but the visions had retreated. Morgan sat up in bed, a sigh of relief escaping her as twenty years of suppressed waiting found release: "They're coming home."



chapter one: IN DREAMS



Dame Eleighanara, the Princess Knight, stood in the copse of silver-leaved birches that marked the edge of her father's lands, waiting for Valmont to appear. Memories of another forest, a small piece of the Dreaming stranded in time and place in the mortal world, danced along the edges of her thoughts. The Hidden King is dreaming, she knew with a confidence she had only recently come to possess. Even the smallest matters, such as asking her parents to call her "Leigh," her mortal name, instead of the more formal "Eleighanara," at least in private, came more easily to her now than when she had first returned to Arcadia from the mortal world. Her choice of light faerie armor instead of formal court *voile* as her preferred attire also added to her feeling of competency, her identity as a knight, capable of action, rather than a princess, seeking the protections of court and title.

"Did you miss me?" Valmont's smooth voice, velvet to her ears, still surprised her. Before, in the mortal lands so far away from them, his manner of addressing her had held cynicism and resentment of the superiority that the sidhe held over those commoners like himself, despite their friendship. Now, it was easier for him to show her respect, love, and understanding. He and she had grown together in the mortal world and had kept their bond strong here in Arcadia, despite the constant need to prove themselves.

She turned toward him, veiling her surprise in a gesture of welcome, an embrace between warriors and compatriots.

"I haven't seen you for some days now," she said. "Family matters —"

"Royal matters," Valmont interjected, not unkindly.

Eleighanara shrugged. "It's not easy being the daughter of a king," she said. "Who knew?" Here, in Arcadia, her father's courtiers titled her Princess Eleighanara; she preferred her knightly title of "Dame," but had long since stopped correcting those who insisted on ignoring her preferences. She wondered if her parents had fully understood the consequences of sending her into exile and exposing her to the ideas of the modern world — equality, indepen-

dence, freedom. While these concepts had always existed throughout history, they had come to fruition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as mortals realized their incredible potential for creating their own stories. She suspected that the daughter her parents had sent away was not the child they hoped would return. Sometimes, however, when she caught one or the other of her parents looking at her as if about to speak, then quickly looking away, she wondered if she underestimated them. It was possible that they were not as disappointed in her as she feared.

“Perhaps now you understand their reluctance to sentence you to more than exile for your rebellion,” Valmont said, reaching a slender, long-fingered hand to trace the line of Leigh’s jaw, a gesture no mere commoner could have aspired to in a more public situation. “For them, it was an easier sentence for rebellion. I suppose they could have locked you away —”

“Like they did with Yrtalien?” Leigh’s voice held a tinge of bitterness. “I still blame them for creating the monster he became,” she said. “They know I still hold that in my heart.” A flood of memories of her youthful rebellious past and the young hotheaded sidhe to whom she once pledged her heart washed over her. That he betrayed her in the end, as he had betrayed others before her, did not lessen the hurt she felt.

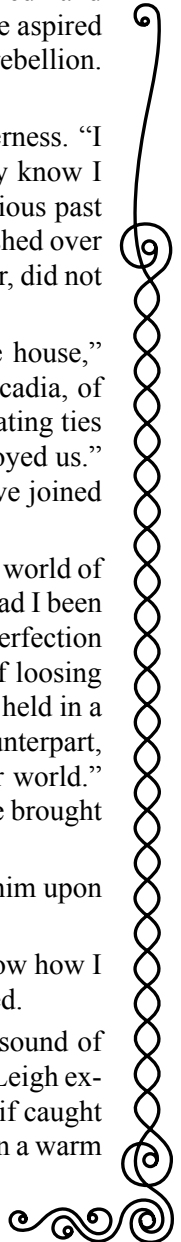
“We were to be betrothed, even though he was from an Unseelie house,” she said. “He had grand plans to create a new, free society here in Arcadia, of throwing down the differences between sidhe and commoner, of reinstating ties with the mortal world and fighting the blind disbelief that nearly destroyed us.” She paused; her ardor dampened for a cause now lost. “You would have joined us had you been here.”

Valmont touched her arm, a simple gesture, but one that conveyed a world of affection and understanding. “You’re right,” he replied, “I might have, had I been there. But that was long ago, and much has changed. Even here, in the perfection of Arcadia.” Now Valmont’s voice held a bittersweet edge. “Instead of loosing him upon the mortal world, they decided to imprison him with himself, held in a cage of Glamour somewhere between the Dreaming and its mortal counterpart, close enough to know what he was missing but too far to grasp either world.” His expression became harsh, judgmental. “What he became, though, he brought upon himself. You know that.”

Leigh nodded. “And we freed him from that prison and unleashed him upon the world.”

“As we were apparently destined to do,” Valmont said. “I don’t know how I feel about carrying such a weight on my shoulders,” he sighed, bemused.

“Am I interrupting something?” Leigh and Valmont turned at the sound of the deep, melodious voice of the armored troll who approached. “Tor!” Leigh exclaimed and held out her arms for an embrace. Tor hesitated briefly, as if caught by the demands of rank and formality, then enfolded the sidhe princess in a warm



hug. Valmont stepped up to Tor and clasped him on the shoulder.

“It was a timely intervention,” Valmont assured Tor. “We were on the verge of becoming maudlin.”

“Your presence is never an interruption, or if it is, then it is a welcome one. I am always happy to see you, especially now.” Leigh’s voice dwindled away.

“You mean now that I have a second youth back?” Tor rumbled. Once a grump on the verge of losing his connection to the Dreaming, Tor’s return to Arcadia had granted him renewed youth and vigor. Now, though he was clearly a mature adult in his greybeard years, Tor’s muscular build and dark blond hair, worn in a military cut, revealed him also to be a warrior in top fighting mettle. His horns, the mark of his kith, curled round his head like a protective helmet — or even a crown— while his blue skin shone with the richness of health and vitality. Too experienced and hardened by his mortal years to be a wilder, Tor appeared as if he had just put his wilder years behind him to embrace the wisdom of an elder. Many more years would belong to him in the mortal world, while here in Arcadia, he did not age.

“Something like that,” Leigh said. “Morgan would be thrilled to see you like this.”

“Are you still going on and on about her?” a raspy voice interjected as a youthful redcap in the fullness of his wilder years joined them.

“Hello Edmund,” Leigh said. Valmont and Tor both nodded as the redcap joined them.

“I could hear you all wondering where I was,” he remarked. “My ears were burning.”

Valmont held a hand out for Edmund to take in a warrior’s grasp. “We would have wondered about you,” he said, “but you showed up before we could say anything.”

“Good save, Valmont,” Edmund quipped. “So, who else has been dreaming about going back?”

“You never waste time on small talk, do you?” Leigh chided, amused. Too often, in the mortal world, the young redcap, then an impish childling, had driven her to distraction. Since his arrival in Arcadia, Edmund had blossomed, if growing into his redcap nature constituted blossoming.

Here in Arcadia, his sometimes-grotesque redcap features took on a wildly dangerous attraction, reminding her of the fierceness of animals in the wild. His dark hair hung in tangled ringlets about his sharp-featured face, softening the angles while not entirely disguising his potential for cruelty and violence. Edmund would always need the presence of friends of strong character to keep his feral nature in check. Fortunately, he had found those bonds in both Tor and Valmont. Leigh wondered if she should include herself in her list of positive influences on Edmund. But no; to him, she was still just a girl.

“What?” Edmund asked, staring at Leigh. “You look like I just said something funny.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just thinking of how we’ve all changed since coming here.”

“Yeah, we’ve grown older,” Edmund grunted. His gaze fixed on Tor. “Some of us,” he added.

Tor shrugged.

“So, what about these dreams?” Edmund asked. “Or am I the only one of us who’s been waking up to a voice yelling something about a Cup of Dreams?”

“We’ve all heard the voice,” Valmont said. “And we all know that we need to return to the world we left.”

“So, what are we waiting for?” Edmund looked around at the others.

“We’re still missing someone,” Leigh reminded him.

Edmund looked puzzled for a moment, then nodded his head. “Oh, yeah,” he said, and looked around him expectantly.

After what seemed like hours to impatient Edmund, though was only a few minutes, Rafael appeared over a grassy hillock, walking towards them. The slender rabbit pooka had given his life on the other side of Silver’s Gate when they had entered the Dreaming over twenty years ago. Then known as Rasputin, he had been haunted by a brutal childhood and recurrent nightmares, though he was gentle and kind himself. Brought through the gate by his oath mates, Rasputin had been reborn to his faerie self as Rafael. His time in the Dreaming had since then enabled the pooka to shake off the demons of his past and thrive.

Then he began dreaming of the Cup of Dreams just as his oath mates had. For him, it was a clear call to reenter the Autumn World, a place that had never been kind to him. He didn’t want to go back, but knew the others needed him — and he missed Morgan terribly. Torn between the two desires, to stay or to go, he had delayed making the decision, which would be why he was late meeting his friends. He knew what their choices would be. They would answer the call, fulfilling their destinies whatever their personal reservations might be — even Edmund.

As he crested the hill, he saw them all waiting: Leigh determined, Valmont seeming always to be on his way somewhere even while he stood still. The princess knight and the princely eshu held hands, together as always. Edmund fidgeted as if he were still a child, though he had grown into a canny wilder whose experience with Yrtalien had taught him the value of true friends and loyalty. Waiting patiently while standing guard over them all was the rejuvenated Tor, always true, always protective. Aside from himself, the only missing member of the group was Morgan. He remembered her as a small beauty, serious and dreamy by turns, a good friend to him whenever he had needed one. In the end, his friends, these oath mates, were what tipped the scales for him. Raising his

hand in greeting, he walked down the hill to the people who made his life a joy. He had given his life for them once and he would do so again gladly if needed. He could not ignore the call. That was the Dream he was made from.

As he reached the group, Rafael smiled and said, "Goodbye. Goodbye everybody!"

Edmund snorted. "It's about damn time. So now are we ready?"

Leigh replied, "Almost. I really need to speak to my parents, and I would like you all to come with me. There are some things that need to be said before we go."

Rafael queried, "Why? They can't possibly have anything of import to say to us."

Followed by the rest of her companions, Leigh led the way to the palace.

• • • • •

"This is surprising," Leigh's mother remarked. Beside her, seated in his own elegant chair, her father looked on, his expression one of amused agreement. As monarchs of House Fiona in Arcadia, Leigh's parents had ruled their subjects for many years, though time meant little to the residents of the Dreaming.

"Is it so surprising that your daughter should request an audience with you?" Leigh asked, belatedly aware that her voice held traces of a confrontational belligerence that she had not intended. She had hoped to begin the conversation with a little more grace.

Beside her, Valmont stood quietly, careful not to betray his desire to insert himself into the discussion to try to make things go smoothly between his beloved and her parents. He held his peace, though. Leigh needed to take the lead in this conversation. Too often, she had stood meekly in her parents' august presence, listening to their pronouncements of their expectations for her.

He couldn't help but grin to himself as he kept his eyes averted, thinking of how Leigh had dashed at least one of their expectations with her announcement that she and he were betrothed. He still treasured the memory of the look upon the Fiona rulers' faces when they heard the news.

At the far end of the room, Tor stood with the rest of Leigh and Valmont's companions, present to support their oath mates but reluctant to draw attention to themselves.

"Fortune has apparently dictated this unexpected visit," Leigh's father declared, strong and decisive, recovering the mood of the visit. "Have you or your oath mates received any strong dreams of late?"

"It was one of the reasons I sought to speak with you," Leigh admitted. "It is time for us to return to the Autumn World."

Leigh's mother nodded gravely. Leigh thought she spied a glimmer of wetness in her eyes but decided it must be a trick of the shimmering light in the

room. The fae, she had learned upon her arrival through the newly opened Silver's Gate, rarely showed their emotions once they had attained maturity.

"It is more than that," her mother began. Leigh allowed herself a tentative smile. "The Cup of Dreams," she agreed. "All of us have had this same dream," she said, including her oath mates with a gesture. "We are unsure of what this "cup" is and what it has to do with us."

Her father stood, gesturing to Leigh's oath mates at the rear of the room.

"I invite you all to come forward to join our conversation," he announced. "What we say here concerns you, too."

From nowhere, servants appeared to arrange chairs in a circle that included the Fiona king and queen as equals. One of the chairs, Leigh noted with amusement, stood taller, heavier, and sturdier than the others. She watched as Tor approached his chair and sat uneasily, careful not to break the furniture. "Always the protector," Leigh remarked to him quietly as he settled on the other side of her from Valmont. Tor shrugged. "I'm not used to sitting in such settings," he replied in what, for him, was a whisper, but which carried across the circle to the ears of the king and queen.

"Please be at ease, all of you," the king reassured them carefully. "Sir Torvald, Sir Valmont, Edmund, and —?" His gaze settled on the fifth member of the group, a slender rabbit pooka who perched on the edge of his chair.

"You may call me Rafael, your majestinesses," the pooka murmured, his delicately handsome face a picture of innocence and sincerity, "or not."

The king nodded. "— and Rafael," he finished.

"Your majesties," Valmont's rich voice, that of a practiced storyteller, drew the attention of everyone in the circle. "What can you tell us about the Cup of Dreams?"

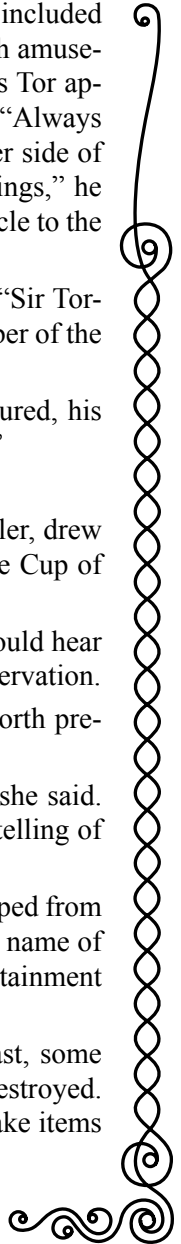
"Sir Valmont," Leigh's mother said, "I was wondering when we would hear from you." Her raised eyebrow added a touch of amusement to her observation.

Valmont inclined his head in acknowledgment. "I sense a story worth preserving is imminent," he murmured.

The queen laughed, sounding like tinkling bells. "You are right," she said. "And I shall attempt to respect the conventions of a good story in my telling of it." She stood to begin, moving into the center of the circle of chairs.

Before Leigh's eyes, the weight of her responsibilities as queen slipped from her mother, and a youthfulness that had long ago been discarded in the name of duty transformed her into a simple wilder intent upon providing entertainment for the edification of her companions.

"Many were the creations of the fae," she began. "In days far past, some were built for war with our greatest enemies. Of those, many were destroyed. But other creations arose from the minds of creators who desired to make items that would serve in times of peace.



Many say that the Cup of Dreams was such an item. Yet such was its power that others claim that the Cup dreamed itself into being.

We know a few things about the Cup. We know that it can move between Arcadia and the Autumn World, either brought by someone or else even moving on its own.

Stories tell of how the Cup has brought worthy folk back to life,” her gaze lit briefly upon Rafael, then focused on the back of the room, “and of how it rewarded the deserving, healed the sick, or fed the hungry.” But then her face grew somber, and a sense of foreboding descended around them all.

“The Cup makes real the dreams of its possessor, be it a noble dream or a dreadful nightmare. In the wrong hands, the Cup can do terrible things.

Because of this, there are many who desire the Cup, yet only a few have dreamt of it. To everyone else, it remains lost.

I tell you this story because you have all dreamed of the Cup, just as your companion Morgania has dreamed of it though she resides in the Autumn World.”

“I also tell you this because we fear that someone else, or something else, has also dreamed of it and will try to claim it first.”

“Who’s *we*?” Edmund interjected. He drew scowls from both Valmont and Tor, but Leigh’s mother was nonplussed by the redcap’s interruption.

“Both of us,” she said, indicating the king with a nod in his direction, “and I believe one of you.” She paused, surveying her small audience. After a few awkward seconds, Rafael wagged one finger in a tiny gesture. “Just the usual sound sleep,” he murmured. He looked away quickly.

Both the king and queen looked on the pooka with compassion. “The Dreaming has apparently chosen you to receive some of its darker portents,” the king said. “Know that you are not alone in carrying this burden. It has been both my gift and my curse for a very long time.”

Rafael shrugged. “I’m not sorry,” he said. The king smiled.

The queen continued to recite her tale, unperturbed by the interruption. “Scholars hold conflicting opinions about many aspects attributed to the Cup. Some say it pronounces a geas upon those who use it. It was once used by someone to save the life of his beloved. In order to grant his wish, he had to swear never to reveal his love to her, remaining unrequited for the rest of his life.”

The queen grew quiet, before continuing.

“There is really no bright end to our conversation.” Looking to her daughter, she added, “We had hoped you — and your friends — could have stayed longer here in the world where you belong.”

Leigh shook her head ruefully. “You both saw fit to send me to the Autumn World to teach me a lesson as well as to administer a punishment for rebelling,” she said, adding quickly as she saw her mother’s cheeks redden and her father’s jaw harden, “and I cannot dispute the wisdom of your decision, knowing what I

know now.”

She took a deep breath. *Be direct*, she told herself. *They need to hear this in a way that may bring some truths home to them.*

Both her parents looked on expectantly.

“I have missed the Autumn World,” Leigh said quietly yet with a firmness that brooked no dispute. “This world, while it is perfect in beauty and form, knows no change. It is the same now as I remember it when I left. It is stagnant.”

“Yeah,” Edmund interrupted. “Even the redcaps here are no fun. They’re all dark and serious and just plain dorky. And everything’s the same, and way too clean. And there’s nothing to eat. I miss the chewy taste of a good Michelin.” Leigh’s parents looked confused. “Tire,” Edmund added. The expressions on the faces of the king and queen remained the same. “Like on a car. A carriage?” He finally saw a glimmer of something approaching recognition.

Leigh’s mother smiled faintly.

“There are many tastes I miss, as well,” Leigh said, coming to Edmund’s rescue. “Ceviche, or a warm, fluffy cheese soufflé...” Leigh’s voice faded as her face reflected the memories of culinary excellence unavailable in Arcadia.

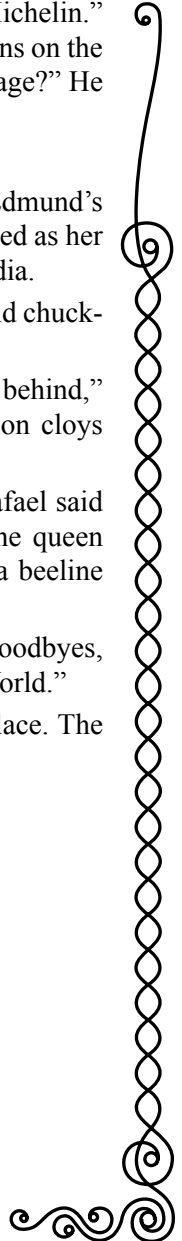
“Nectar’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” mumbled Tor, eliciting a mild chuckle from Valmont.

“It has been enlightening to see what we missed when we were left behind,” the eshu said smoothly, “but I must agree with my beloved. Perfection cloys without anything to offset it.”

“I think we’re saying that we really want to stay here forever,” Rafael said cheerfully. The king’s eyebrows pinched together, perplexed, until the queen mouthed the word “pooka” to him. Enlightened, his eyebrows made a beeline upwards, and he smiled.

“Then, if it is time for you to leave,” he said, “we should make our goodbyes, both public and private, and arrange for your passage to the Autumn World.”

Leigh and her companions rose. All except Leigh departed the palace. The princess knight stayed behind to bid her parents farewell.



chapter Two: Autumn



Duke Aeon's eyes flashed with a dangerous light as he listened to the latest report of break-ins, burglaries, and attacks made on the changelings of Golden Gate. According to Sir Cumulus, the one-eyed night who served as Aeon's champion, it wasn't only happening in Aeon's duchy, either. In most cases, the attackers were stealing Glamour in whatever form they could find it; in some instances, Kithain were just being roughed up.

"This has to stop," Sir Cumulus rumbled, his ramrod posture telegraphing his opinion that the trouble was a personal insult.

"I'm working on it," Aeon replied, "Please summon Lady Alyssa to me. I have some correspondence I'd like her to send out for me."

As the duke's Champion, Cumulus was too well schooled to grimace at Aeon's apparent dismissal of the subject in favor of frivolous greetings to his acquaintances, but he stiffened even further (if such was possible), bowed, and murmured, "I shall summon her immediately, your Grace." Then, he swept from the room.



The always attractive and decorous Lady Alyssa usually relished her duties as the duke's chamberlain but was somewhat miffed at being summoned so abruptly and burdened with writing several dozen invitations — including one to the Queen of Pacifica — to a party she would need to arrange in such a short period of time. It was bound to be a disaster. She said as much to Sir Cumulus as she left Aeon's private office.

"It's all well and good for the duke to plan parties, but the burden of arranging everything and issuing the invitations all fall to me to do. Really, Sir Cumulus, I thought you were speaking to him about these horrendous incursions, not planning celebrations!" she exclaimed. The two walked together down the hall toward Alyssa's office.

Cumulus raised his eyebrows, saying, “We *were* discussing the break-ins, my lady,” he defended himself, “He seemed like he was planning to take action, but then he ordered me to send for you. I know he’s sometimes difficult to read, but I’m at a loss on this one.”

Alyssa nodded, “I wonder why he’s not sharing his thoughts on this with us,” she stopped suddenly, as if a new idea had just occurred to her. “He did tell you he was inviting members of the new houses, did he not?”

“He really didn’t mention it.” Sir Cumulus courteously stopped when she did. “I wonder, why is he doing that? And do I need to increase security even more to protect the Queen from all these unknown Unseelie he’s inviting?”

“They aren’t all Unseelie. They are the newest arrivals to this world, though.” She thought for a moment more and began walking again. “And, all of the representatives are male. He’s either planning to make some new alliances, or he’s meeting with eligible bachelors for the princess. Or both!” she concluded excitedly. “Luckily, the princess is attracted to males. Otherwise his choice of attendees would have to be quite different,” she concluded excitedly.

“Of course!” Sir Cumulus exclaimed, a smile lighting his lean face, “We never should have doubted him.”

“Well, that settles that, but I still have to do most of the work,” she mock grumbled as she stepped into her office, mollified that she would soon be match-making.



Morgan checked her calendar before going to her office, a suite of rooms in a mixed-zoning part of San Francisco. Most of the houses in the neighborhood, which was nearby the Haight-Ashbury district but which lacked the erstwhile reputation of that area, stood two stories high. To her eye, they looked like Victorian-style ladies-in-waiting dressed in pastel colors with sharply contrasting trim. Most of the houses held offices: doctors, dentists, a couple of law firms, and a myriad of counselors.

The building that housed Morgan’s office sported a pale-yellow exterior, accented in deep blue. A sign in front of the house read: *Morgan Daniels, MSCP, Adolescent Counseling*. She shared the building with a family counselor as well as a marriage and couples counseling service. Both her colleagues, changelings like herself, had dedicated themselves to providing help for those children of the Dreaming who had problems coping with the outside world or with their own dual nature.

Morgan had the ground floor of the house to herself. Her comfortable waiting room was full of lived-in chairs and sofas designed to put her clients at ease, as well as a bookshelf that displayed a variety of titles that showcased the tastes of a fantasy aficionado as well as a lover of mysteries and classics. Her artistic choices lent a whimsical air to the space, featuring landscapes of castles, gardens, and fantastic beasts, all executed in colors that breathed spirit and playful-



ness. Morgan smiled every time she saw them, particularly when she noted the small signature in the lower right corner of each painting: *A. Daniels*, her mother. Her mother's paintings had long been a source of Glamour for Morgan, growing up. Now, she hoped they would help her young patients as they struggled to cope with the emotional hurdles they faced from a world unwilling to accept their view of reality.

When she was a childling, Morgan's parents, particularly her logical, no-nonsense father, an Autumn Person so lost to Banality he harmed her connection to the Dreaming, had feared for her sanity and sent her to a child psychologist to "cure" her of her fantastic delusions. Morgan tried her best to hide her true self from her counselor but had failed. When her doctor recommended a period of institutionalization in a hospital specializing in "delusional disorders of children," Morgan narrowly escaped. The hospital was run by Dauntain, changelings who deny their fae heritage and try to rip it out of other fae. Even now, Morgan shuddered to think of that time.

Unknown to everyone, Morgan had switched places with Princess Alieria, the heir to Duke Aeon of Golden Gate, so that the princess could experience life in the mortal world. Using magic borrowed from the duchy's coffers, and abetted by the princess's eshu companion Layla, the young conspirators succeeded in their plan. The switch was undetected. Instead of taking their daughter to the Dauntain-run hospital, Morgan's parents had delivered Alieria into the hands of so-called behavioral experts, nearly costing the childling her faerie soul.

Gordon Daniels' realization of what he had done to his family led him to seek out his estranged father-in-law, Tor, and in so doing had alerted the changeling community to the dangerous situation that had befallen one of their own. Belatedly, Gordon saw for himself the reality in which his daughter lived. While Morgan herself had escaped peril, a group of changelings, accompanied by Gordon, rescued Alieria. Morgan, too, had helped in the rescue, arriving late on the scene.

In the years following her adventures with her now departed oath mates, Morgan had remained close to both Layla and Alieria, who stayed behind in San Francisco. Still, Morgan remembered her early frustration at trying to hide who she was from her doctor and from her parents. She determined to help other young changelings through their difficulties by becoming a counselor herself, one dedicated to identifying young Kithain and easing their journey through both worlds.

She saw that she had only one client today, Meena, a young boggan who only needed minimal help adjusting to her dual nature. Today would be their final meeting, after which Morgan would assure Meena's parents that their daughter's crisis was over. They need worry no longer about her ability to cope with a new school and new friends, and they should encourage her fascination with food preparation. Meena had a strength and resilience of character, typical of her boggan kith that would see her through most situations, and Morgan had eased her introduction to the changeling community so that support would never be far away.

She checked the local news as she prepared to leave. Although the weather would be fine, not much else was. Reports of break-ins, food poisonings, a gun battle at a local hot spot, and a mysterious body found in a gazebo in a park were the highlighted stories of the day. She winced as she heard how baffled the police were as to what had killed the young man in the park. So many ways to kill people, she mused. Probably drugs, such a waste, she thought sadly.

It was time, she thought, for a sabbatical. She would put her professional life on hold to follow her heart and her dreams wherever they might lead. Before she decided where she needed to be, she would attend Duke Aeon's upcoming party. If nothing else, she'd be able to say goodbye to Alera and others at the court before she followed her prophetic dream and reunite with the friends she had missed for twenty years.

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"I won't do it!" Princess Alera exclaimed. She faced her guardian, Duke Aeon, attempting to appear taller than her five-foot five stature. Her usually sweet face now contorted with outrage and fury. Even when she was a young child, she never threw tantrums, but she felt very close to one now. "It's archaic and barbaric and just plain *lame!*"

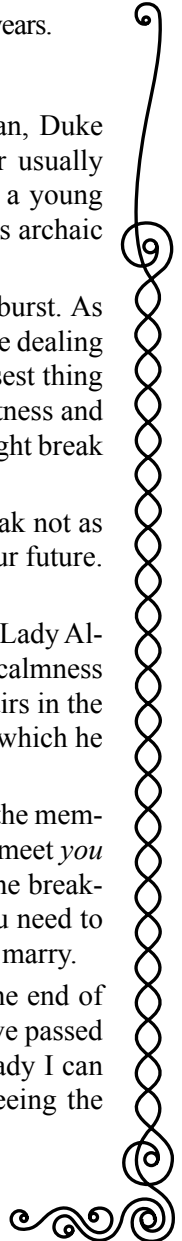
Duke Aeon stood patiently until the princess had finished her outburst. As the ruler of the Duchy of Golden Gate, he had had many years of practice dealing with the moods of his courtiers. Alera, his designated heir and the closest thing he had to a little sister, had always provided him with an oasis of brightness and gaiety, even in his darkest moments. Now, he felt as though his heart might break at the thought of the hurt she felt in the wake of his proclamation.

"Alera, sweetest," he cajoled, "hear me out. Understand that I speak not as your duke and your liege, but as someone who cares about you and your future. Will you grant me leave to explain myself?"

The young sidhe princess took a deep breath, composing herself, as Lady Alyssa would have phrased her action. She reached within for a sense of calmness despite her anger. She seated herself in one of the delicately carved chairs in the duke's private sitting room while the duke occupied his favorite chair, which he pulled closer to Alera.

"This ball is highly important, not only to introduce you to some of the members of the newer houses in a social situation, but also to allow *them* to meet *you* and see your fitness to rule. I've invited the Queen so we can discuss the break-ins and attacks on our people and hammer out a plan to stop them. You need to take on many new duties soon, not just consider who you'll eventually marry.

"I have led the Seelie fae of Golden Gate for many years, since the end of the Accordance War," Duke Aeon reminded her. "Almost fifty years have passed since I first came here from Arcadia with others of House Fiona. Already I can feel the responsibilities I have borne taking their toll." He paused, seeing the expression of incomprehension on Alera's face.



“What are you trying to say?” she asked, a note of concern in her voice.

“I’m growing older,” he said finally, waiting as he watched the truth sink in.

“You’re nowhere near becoming a grump,” Alieria exclaimed vehemently.

“It’s not something measured in years,” Aeon said, “though I have accumulated many years both here and before...” his voice dwindled off as he tried in vain to recall some of his many years in Arcadia.

“But what about your band?” Alieria said, thinking of how the duke’s rock band had served not only himself but the crowds who heard the rich, complex music as a source of inspiration, helping preserve the spirit of the Dreaming. “Can’t your music keep you from aging?”

The duke laughed softly. “Times change, sweet Allie,” he said gently. “In the mortal world, our music now seems dated, pigeon-holed by critics into a time and place that belongs in the past. Glam-rock is their term for what we play.”

“But it’s still wonderful,” she said.

He nodded. “To some, it still is, but those people are becoming fewer and are growing older. Today’s music tells a different story, and fewer people want to hear the old tales.”

Aeon closed his eyes, seeing in his mind’s eye a day not so many years past when crowds would flock to hear the music of the band Aeon, drawn to the majestic music and the tales of past legends. The band’s music told epic stories, faerie legends, an Arthurian cycle, and other momentous myths which aroused the crowds’ sense of wonder and kept the legendary past alive.

His last concert, a few years ago, did not have the same effect. While some stalwart fans filled the modest hall, a vocal contingent threatened the atmosphere of enjoyment by heckling the band, calling out, “Play some real music!” and “Get off the stage!” as well as cruder comments. Crowd security, though admittedly light for a performance that normally had few disturbances, quickly moved the hecklers out of the venue. The show continued for its enthusiastic fans, but for Aeon himself, the outcries signaled the end of an era.

He shook his head, coming back to the present, aware of Alieria’s concern.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, all anger gone from her voice and replaced with worry.

Aeon smiled. His eyes grew soft as he took in Alieria’s quiet beauty and her regal bearing. His heir had grown into a poised sidhe princess, ready to take her place among her peers. She was ready to rule, too — not a duchy yet, but at least a small holding that would prepare her to take his place as ruler of Golden Gate.

“Nothing’s wrong, sweeting,” he said. “I’m not falling into another dark place.” The duke referred to a time, two decades past, when he had fallen under an evil enchantment that drove him to the brink of madness and threw him into an uncharacteristically Unseelie frame of mind. “That’s behind me.” He shook his head, as much to reassure her as to clear his thoughts. His long blond hair fell partly in his eyes and he pushed aside the wayward strands in a familiar gesture.

"I'm thinking of your future, which brings me back to my original suggestion."

"I'm still listening," the princess said. This time, instead of sounding resentful, her voice held an anticipatory note as she waited to hear the duke's proposal.

"Since our return in 1969, we have become settled here in Concordia and throughout the mortal world. There have been several new arrivals since then, and there are more royal houses that have made their presence known. I would dearly love to make certain that we build ties to some of these late arrivals."

"Politics!" Alera exclaimed. "Why is it always about politics?" This time, she sounded less angry, merely disgruntled.

"Everything is always about politics," Aeon replied, though he felt the encroaching cynicism in his voice. He tried to temper the feeling before it transformed into bitterness, a feeling he was becoming more familiar with as he felt the weight of his years encroach upon him. "No matter how hard we try, we cannot escape the burdens of duty and birthright."

"You mean because we are sidhe?" Alera asked, a hint of surprise in her voice. "I thought you were beyond that better-than-the rest nonsense."

"Are you?" countered Aeon, his voice gentle rather than argumentative. "Think about it honestly, sweet one. You have your own retinue of companions, some of them commoners, but are they not also there to serve you or guard you, regardless of your closeness to them?"

Alera thought of her friend and companion in childhood escapades, the eshu Layla, whose wry humor and frank comments often kept her from becoming too full of herself, but who also never transgressed the bounds of rank or politesse. Next, she considered the duke's troll bodyguards, sworn to protect and defend him long ago. Despite their devotion to Duke Aeon, they would never go so far as to consider themselves his friends or intimates.

"You're right," she conceded. "We are who we are, and we can't escape it."

The duke smiled, his face transforming into an ethereal beauty that banished the few lines of age that marked his face in repose.

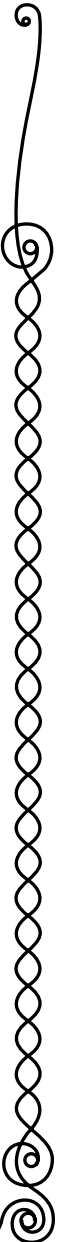
"We are that," he said. "And it does not have to be so unpleasant, this search for a suitable marriage partner. Think of it as dating, with your guardian's approval!"

The princess smiled at the idea, envisioning a faerie version of online dating facilitated by some nocker's computer program. "I'll give it some thought," she acquiesced.

"So will I," the duke replied.



By the time Alera returned to her suite, she had concluded that online dating probably wouldn't work. Eventually, she would have to meet prospective dates face-to-face. She opened the door to her private rooms. Originally decorated to



suit the taste of a young child who was an actual princess, they had recently been redone to reflect the tastes of a young woman coming of age. What had once been ruffled and pink now showed tasteful colors of muted pastels and a more modern décor. She noticed this anew as she entered, thinking how everything changed so quickly. Her friend Layla was waiting for her, seated on her bed. Her puckish face reflected her curiosity and excitement, though she was trying to look innocent.

“Hello, Allie. What are you up to today?” Layla asked in a voice that was far too neutral for her not to know.

Aliera stopped, hands on hips. “I could say nothing and make you pry it out of me, but from the look on your face, you already know the answer.”

Layla clapped her hands once and burst out laughing. “So, dating is it? How very exciting!”

“Exciting?” Aliera echoed, “What’s exciting about being sold on the meat market?”

“Everything!” Layla assured her. “Think about it. You get to meet a whole slew of handsome princes, get gifts from them, and get escorted out to dinner or dancing or a movie. Go to a nightclub or a concert, wear new clothes. And if you don’t like them, send them away. Duke Aeon can request for you to meet and get to know them, but he would never require you to marry anyone you didn’t want. It’s your decision that counts. Just enjoy it. There’s plenty of time to make up your mind.”

Aliera smiled at her wise friend. She was beginning to see the advantages and get excited herself. She crossed the room to enfold Layla in a big hug. “You’re the best. Just promise me if I go on a real date, you’ll come with.”

Layla grinned. “Of course. If you hadn’t invited me, I’d have followed you anyway.”

chapter Three: A gathering

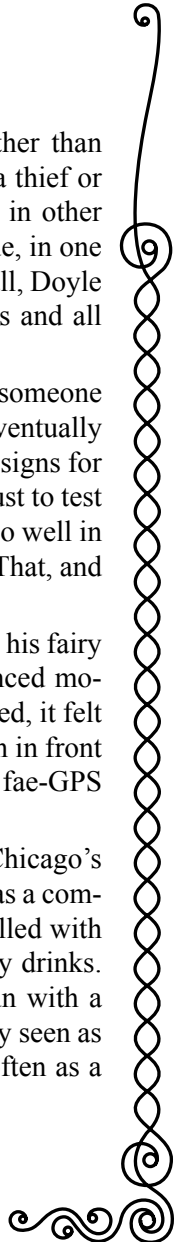


Doyle MacMillan preferred to think of himself as a “finder” rather than some of the other titles he might affix to him. Others considered him a thief or a fixer. Sometimes he told people he worked in “acquisitions,” while in other situations, he might bill himself as a “security consultant.” All were true, in one sense or another, but none of them explained fully what he did. Above all, Doyle was a nocker with an affinity with and an understanding for machines and all mechanical or digital gadgets.

Lately, life had begun to bore him. Even in a big city like Chicago, someone with his high drive for excitement and low tolerance for inactivity eventually ran out of things to do. He had gone through enough security system designs for clients who barely needed them to tempt him to stage a few break-ins just to test the soundness of his technique. The possibility that he might succeed too well in his designs and incur unwanted repercussions kept him from doing so. That, and the feeling that something big was just around the corner.

Although Doyle gathered the Glamour that enabled him to maintain his fairy existence from his work with machines, he also occasionally experienced moments when he seemed to touch the Dreaming itself. When this happened, it felt more like the Dreaming slammed him in the head and threw a large sign in front of him that said, “GO THIS WAY!” Sometimes it was more as if some fae-GPS pointed him in the direction he needed to go.

Lately, that fae inner compass had taken him to a small bar in Chicago’s North Side. Called McRoady’s, presumably after its owner, the place was a comfortable neighborhood watering hole with an old-fashioned juke-box filled with 80s hits, decent draft beer, good bar food, and some excellent specialty drinks. What drew him there, however, was the bartender, a young clurichaun with a real talent for mixing drinks and a temper that told him she had probably seen as many different jobs as he had, her employment probably terminated often as a result of her fighting spirit.



He hadn't yet made her acquaintance, though he'd been to the bar several times and watched her at work. He had a strong feeling that the Dreaming was bound to bring them together. He just didn't know why.



Fiona Murray looked with satisfaction at her opponent, now lying on the ground unconscious from a well-placed left uppercut. The other bar customers still stood, transfixed, not yet certain whether the brief fight was over. As if a bell had sounded, ending the bout, the onlookers broke apart. A few applauded. A strident woman's voice yelled out, "Give it to him, sister!" Laughter and more subdued approval followed. In the back of the fight, money changed hands.

On a nearby barstool, with a good vantage point of the fight but away from any collateral damage, a young, wiry, well-dressed fellow with dark hair and eyes, smiled to himself, and quoted to no one in particular: "And though she be but little, she is fierce." Although his comment went unheard, he added, "Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act Three, Scene Two, to give credit where credit's due."

Doyle kept his attention on the young woman who, to his nocker's faerie sight, manifested as a clurichaun, one of the feisty, carousing, creative kiths. In her mortal form, Fiona stood just five feet tall, with long blond hair in a loose, disheveled pigtail that hung nearly to her waist. He could see her fae essence shine through, revealing her as slightly shorter, her hazel eyes a brilliant green, and her hair a deep honey-blond with red highlights.

The crowd drifted back to their seats and drinks, some cozying up to the bar for refills and others returning to their tables, steering a wide berth around the comatose loser of the all-too-brief brawl. Fiona examined the knuckles of her left hand for scrapes, and, finding none, returned to her place behind the bar.

A quick wash of her hands and an even quicker repair job to her distressed pigtail and she was once again ready for duty.

She had just served up her third Guinness draft when movement from the back of the bar caught her eye. The door to the manager's office opened and McRoady himself made his way toward her.

Fiona took a deep breath and steadied herself for what she feared was coming. McRoady did not look happy. He caught Fiona's eye and gestured with his head toward the end of the bar where fewer people could hear them.

From his seat only a few stools away, Doyle busied himself with his drink and a handful of bar nuts, careful not to call attention to the fact that he was listening intently to the young bartender and her boss.

"I hear there's been a little set-to," McRoady said, getting right to the point.

"Yes, sir." Fiona thought about trying to be meek, hoping he'd cut her some slack, but she knew she was terrible at appearing meek. Maybe it was because she always jutted her chin out just a little too far, betraying her defiance. She

looked over her shoulder to where the loser of the fight had gotten to his feet and was being escorted out of the bar by Dougan, the bar's bouncer.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" McRoady asked.

"There's not much to tell," Fiona said. "He was a few drinks shy of reason and said something to one of our regulars that was pretty offensive to her. I could see she wanted to deck him but didn't know the first thing about how to go about it. I just thought I'd show her how."

"How many fights does that make this month?" the manager wanted to know.

Fiona looked at the ceiling, counting her confrontations in her head. "Four, counting this one."

"And that's four too many for this place," McRoady said. "I can't have my bartenders doubling as bouncers and I don't like fights in my bar."

Fiona nodded glumly, tuning out the words she knew were coming.

"You can pick up your paycheck for the night after closing," McRoady sighed gruffly. "I won't be needing you after tonight. I can keep the bar until I find a replacement, hopefully someone who won't serve more blood than beers."

He turned around and headed back toward his office to write a last check for his now ex-bartender. He stopped at the doorway and called back over his shoulder, "Try to keep your hands busy serving drinks for the rest of the evening."

Fiona winced as McRoady slammed the office door.



As closing time approached, Fiona went through the motions of cleaning up, making sure all the glassware was in place, tying up the trash bag behind the bar for the cleaning crew to deposit in the dumpster out back, and wiping down the bar, erasing the signs of the night's activity.

Finally, she took off her apron and started to fold it neatly, then changed her mind, wadded it up and tossed it across the room.

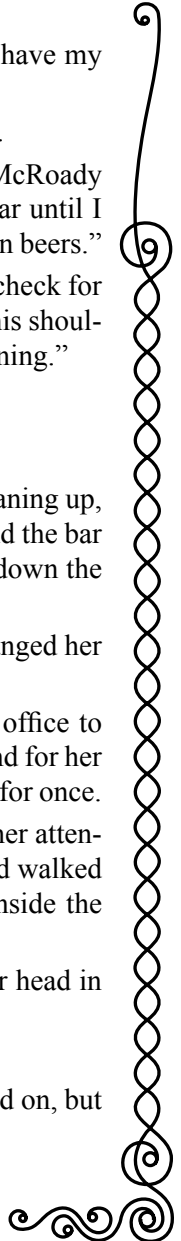
"Let them find it themselves," she muttered as she headed to the office to turn in her key and pick up her paycheck. McRoady had the check in hand for her to pick up, and she left without saying a word, in control of her feelings for once.

As she headed toward the door, the nocker waved at her, catching her attention. He slipped off the bar stool, where he had remained unnoticed, and walked toward the authentic 1950s jukebox that stood against the wall just inside the door of the bar.

"So that didn't go very well," he remarked to Fiona. She shook her head in response.

"What now?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" Fiona countered. "I've seen you here off and on, but I don't know your name."



“The name’s Doyle MacMillan,” he said. “And there’s one thing you know about me.” He focused on his fae self, making certain she could see him clearly for what he was.

She shrugged. “You’re a nocker, I’m a clurichaun.”

He nodded. “That’s right,” he said. “You were fine when you slugged that guy. He deserved it. I woulda put money on you but I’m just a little short right now.”

Fiona snorted. “You look like you’re short most of the time, not unlike me.” She decided she liked this wiry fellow, having heard both his wit and his intelligence over the course of his visits to the bar.

“Do you have any plans?” he asked. “For another job, I mean.”

“I’ve used up all my leads in this town,” she said, putting her hair back in some semblance of order before she faced the bracing wind outside. “I guess I’ll go somewhere else. Why do you want to know?”

Doyle shrugged. “I’m getting pretty tired of this place as well. I’ve run out of things to do and was thinking about hitting the road. I didn’t know if you wanted a traveling companion or not. If you do, we could head out together.”

“You don’t beat around the bush, do you?” Fiona said, feeling her spirits lift. She didn’t know whether her new nocker friend was using some of his faerie magic to spread a little cheer around, but she didn’t care. It felt good to put aside her worries.

Doyle sidled over to the jukebox, checked its song selection for a minute, then leaned over and muttered something to the machine. He rapped it twice sharply, and Fiona heard it come to life, spitting out a disc into the play position.

If you’re going to San Francisco, the melodic voice of Scott McKenzie intoned the words of the oldie, the words from 1967 following the pair out the door. *Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair...*

Fiona and Doyle left together, the lock engaging with a terminal click in their wake.

“I know a diner that’s open all night, if you want some real food,” Doyle suggested. Fiona nodded and let the nocker lead the way. Halfway down the block, she stopped short, puzzled.

“I know all the songs on that jukebox,” she commented, just loud enough for Doyle to hear. “That song’s not on the playlist.”

Doyle looked at Fiona, and a smile lit up his thin face, softening the angles and emphasizing his faerie essence.

“I hear it’s nice there this time of year,” he told her before continuing onward to where food and plans awaited them.

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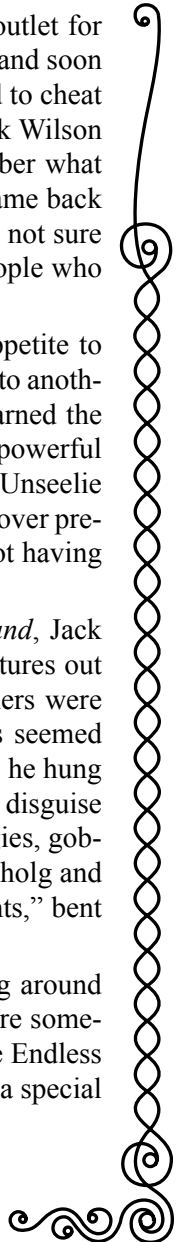
He called himself “Jack October” because he had no idea who he really was — except for the fact that he was a hungry redcap. According to the mercenary band that raised him, his parents dumped him in an alley and left him to die. Jack Wilson, the group’s leader, found the baby and decided to take him in. Young Jack grew up with an abundance of fathers and uncles — and one aunt — who taught him everything he knew. He learned to read and write from road signs, maps, and paperbacks with titles like *Savage Hunters of the Bayou* and *Assassin on Call*. He learned math and geography from maps. Along the way, he picked up a working knowledge of weaponry, stealth, tactical knowledge, and other practical tidbits his mercenary family shared with him.

For Jack, every day offered an opportunity for adventure and an outlet for violence. Wilson did his best to channel young Jack’s bloodthirstiness, and soon Jack became one of their best operatives. Then one of their clients tried to cheat them out of their payment. Negotiations turned into a firefight, and Jack Wilson died in the battle. Jack’s redcap nature took over. He couldn’t remember what happened, because the world was awash in white-hot fury. When he came back to himself, his family was staring at him, aghast with horror. Jack fled, not sure of what he’d done, but knowing for certain that he was not like the people who had raised him.

He spent a few years on the run, trying his best to confine his appetite to inanimate objects, scrounging around junkyards. Occasionally he ran into another changeling who tried to teach him about changeling society. He learned the most from the trolls who were strong enough to beat him and use their powerful personalities to keep him in check. Thus, he discovered the Seelie and Unseelie courts and decided that he valued freedom more than order and honesty over pretense. If that made him Unseelie, then so be it. But even rules about not having rules made him itchy.

In Chicago, or the Kingdom of Grass as they called it in *faerieland*, Jack started seeing violence even he didn’t like. There were some odd creatures out there. Some looked like twisted trolls and scrambled nockers, but others were antlered things like nothing he’d ever seen before. The antlered ones seemed uncomfortable in either the mortal world or the Dreaming. For a while, he hung out on the fringe of their groups, using his learned and innate stealth and disguise abilities to remain unnoticed. They called themselves boggarts and bogies, goblins, beasties, and ghastrs. The antlered creatures called themselves fir-bholg and claimed to serve greater powers. One called his masters “sleeping giants,” bent on reclaiming their place in the world.

That was almost enough for Jack to decide he didn’t need to hang around them. Then he heard some of them talking about finding a great treasure somewhere in San Francisco. That treasure, they said, would bring about the Endless Winter — or the end of the world — and the first to find it would have a special place in the new paradise.



Jack didn't know how he felt about whether these guys were telling the truth about either the treasure or the reward for finding it, but he knew one thing for sure. He was going to be the one to find it, if he could, and then he'd see how much it meant to all concerned. He now knew his destination.



To mortal eyes, the Toybox Coffee Shop appeared as a shabby, derelict building near the Haight-Ashbury crossing, wedged between relics of the counterculture of the 1960s and new, high-end boutiques and trendy bistros. Passers-by rarely noticed the building at all, brighter stars on the horizon drawing their attention away from the flaking paint and cloudy windows. For the city's changeling population, however, the Toybox Coffee Shop held a world of dreams and was a haven from a world intent on promoting disbelief and cynicism.

Feeling a need to visit friends, Morgan sought the cheerful, soothing comfort of the freehold where it all started. Once inside the doors of the shop, she felt at home, though a great sadness filled her as she remembered the friends from whom she had been parted for twenty years.

"Well come, young baroness!"

The voice came from behind the hand-carved mahogany bar as Sir Charles Fizzlewig, the elderly boggan bartender and lord of the freehold paused in his perpetual cleaning of mugs and glasses to greet Morgan. She knew from experience that to Fizzlewig, she would always be just Morgan, and that the title he accorded her was as much an endearment as a formality. As she crossed the threshold, Morgan felt the cares of the mortal world slough from her. Her street clothes transformed into *voile* of midnight blue, a soft, silken blouse and flowing pants of deep velvet, with a vest of iridescent silver, in keeping with the colors of House Eiluned, to which she belonged. Her dark curls trailed down her shoulders and framed her face, a study in elfin planes and angles that turned heads.

Morgan crossed the room beneath the twin chandeliers that granted the coffee house its soft, homey light and took a seat at the bar.

"Something spicy?" Fizzlewig asked, reaching for a delicately carved mug adorned with unicorns.

"That would be nice," Morgan agreed. The boggan filled the mug from a warming pot on the counter behind the bar. Morgan caught an aroma of ginger, cinnamon, and cloves that teased her senses with the promise of warmth and cheer.

"These are fresh," Fizzlewig added, placing a plate of paper-thin wafers next to the mug. "Just the thing to have with my spiced nog."

For a few minutes, Morgan sipped her drink and nibbled on the cookies in silence. She looked around, recognizing many of the patrons as regulars. In one of the back booths sat a mousy woman whose chalky pallor and deep, dark eyes marked her as one of the slough, secretive changelings who collected informa-

tion and secrets and whom many distrusted. Morgan caught the sluagh's eye and gave her a small, barely perceptible wave. Ellen nodded her acknowledgement, and quickly buried her nose deeper into the book she held in front of her on the table, quickly making a note in the volume. Morgan smiled. The years had left little mark on the shy Ellen, and Morgan was one of the few who knew the reason. Not long after Morgan's return from the opening of Silver's Gate, when she was feeling particularly lonely, Ellen had sought her out at the Toybox to thank her for the gift of her diary.

"You gave us hope," Ellen had told her, her tiny voice barely reaching Morgan's ear even though they sat side-by-side. "And I got this," she'd revealed shyly, opening her hand to reveal a tiny chimeric mouse that nestled in her palm.

Morgan had raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Is that one of the creatures from the toy chest?" she'd asked.

Ellen had confirmed, "He came to stay with me when the others escaped from the chest," she said, "and when they all returned, he stayed behind. I thought of returning him, but..."

"I don't think anyone would mind," Morgan had assured the sluagh. "He's found a home."

Ever since then, Ellen and Morgan had shared a bond that only the two of them knew about, one that cheered Morgan whenever she thought of it.

Morgan finished her cider and pushed the empty cup toward Fizzlewig, who refilled it for her. Instead of returning to his interminable wiping of the glassware, he regarded the young sidhe with a quizzical expression. Morgan took a sip of the hot drink, then returned the boggan's solemn gaze.

"I had a dream last night," she said.

Fizzlewig nodded. "A lot of us did." He looked around him at the coffee shop's clientele, most of whom seemed to be deliberately averting their attention from Morgan and their host.

Morgan smiled, though unshed tears shone in her eyes. "I've waited such a long time," she said wistfully.

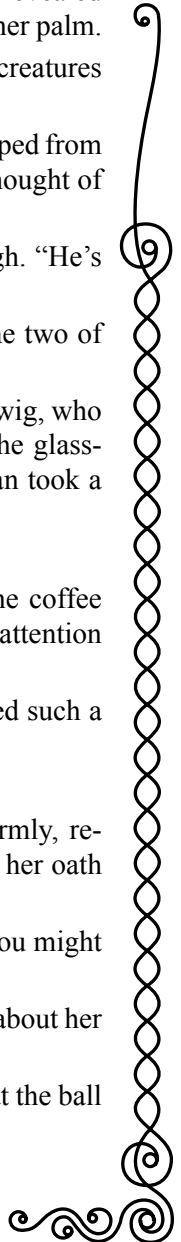
"We all have," rasped a nocker grump with tri-colored, spiky hair.

"Hi, Georgia," Morgan greeted the aging punk-rocker cabbie warmly, remembering the many times Georgia and her cab had provided her and her oath mates with vital, if sometimes surreal transportation.

"Hello, yourself, young lady," Georgia returned. "We all thought you might be coming in today. How can we be of help?"

Now, others were homing in on their conversation. Morgan looked about her at the hopeful faces.

"I will when I know what I'm going to do," she said, "Will you be at the ball tonight?"



Fizzlewig shook his head, “No, I need to stay here. You’ve heard about some attacks on freeholds, haven’t you?”

“No! Are you all right? Have you been attacked?” Morgan’s distress was obvious.

“I’ve managed to keep things quiet here,” he assured her. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll go get ready then, but I’m coming back later to make sure,” Morgan warned. “Maybe I’ll decide what to do next once I’ve talked with Duke Aeon. Take care,” she waved as she left.



“My name is Cameron Solomon, and I’d like to talk to Representative Martinez about a local concern.” The slender young man hoped his directness would gain him access to the office that lay just beyond the middle-aged receptionist with a chilly attitude and forbidding appearance.

The woman’s name tag read “Melba. Ask Me Anything!” but her expression belied the message. “I’m sorry,” she snapped, in a voice that implied anything but that, “the congressman does not see anyone without an appointment.”

Cameron smiled at her, hoping to disarm her with just a hint of Fae magic. “I spoke to the Congressman at yesterday’s rally about halting the gentrification process in the Haight district, and he said that we could come speak with him at any time.”

“Nevertheless, you need an appointment to see him. He’s a very busy man.” She turned to her computer and touched a few keys, opening a calendar. It was filled with bright colors that indicated a full schedule, not only for that day, but for the foreseeable future.

Although Cameron couldn’t read the minuscule writing, he suspected from the similarity of many of the word patterns that most of these appointments were either recurring meetings or placeholders intended to pad the schedule to look busier than it was, at least to those viewing it from a distance.

“I distinctly remember the congressman’s words,” Cameron insisted, allowing his voice to grow loud enough, he hoped, to penetrate through the door that Melba was so zealously guarding. “He didn’t say anything about making an appointment.”

Melba sighed heavily and spoke into her headset. While she spoke, her voice so low Cameron could only detect the occasional word, the Liam sidhe glanced out the broad windows that overlooked the Haight-Ashbury district. What a spectacular view. From this dazzling height, the representative’s visitors could see the businesses that comprised his constituency, the people who patronized those storefronts and businesses, and even the abandoned buildings slated for the gentrification that would force out long-time neighborhood residents.

As he waited for the receptionist to finish her conversation, Cameron picked out the building he had heard was a gathering place for local changelings, a coffee shop called The Toybox. He had intended to pay his respects to whoever ruled the freehold. Now, he noticed a crowd that had gathered in front of the inconspicuous building; a group of individuals was becoming increasingly unruly. His fae sight revealed the true nature of the rough-looking group, and a chill went through his body.

He had expected to see a gathering of Unseelie redcaps, nockers, and perhaps a few trolls, but these creatures, while fae, were like nothing he had seen before, except in nightmares. Among the throng, he could pick out tall, thin, sickly individuals that called to mind distorted versions of the eshu; others resembled warped versions of pooka — wilder and much more feral in appearance than Unseelie pooka; still others appeared as twisted versions of boggans and nockers; while some caused such a wave of horror to wash over him that he could not identify their nature.

“The representative will see you now,” Melba’s clipped, irritated voice brought him back to his surroundings. Without hesitation, he pulled one of his cards from his back pocket, started to hand it to the receptionist, then, thinking better of the action, used a touch of his fae magic to flip the card expertly and swiftly under the door to the representative’s office.

“Tell him I’ll be in touch,” Cameron said, brusquely. “I have an urgent meeting to attend.” He turned his back on the confused receptionist and took the stairs two at a time to the street below. Some things, he reflected, took more than diplomacy to handle. Rubbing his hands together and whistling a traveling song, he flashed from the stairwell to an alcove just a few yards away from the angry, roiling group of strange fae.



Wulf Ragnarson, prince of House Aesin, trudged from his father’s hall. Born to the cold of the northlands, he paid little heed to the deep snow and icy winds. Glancing up, he frowned at the gray-black clouds dominating the white, overcast Norwegian sky. They suited his mood.

How could his father command him to go to San Francisco to marry some snippet of a princess? True, they needed to spread their house’s power to other lands if they were to combat the Thallain wherever they appeared, but... he was a warrior, not some mewling princeling to dance attendance on a spoiled American girl.

He sighed heavily, smelling the snow on the air. Mist rose from the lake as he passed, curling inland. A rustle from the nearby forest caught his attention. A few dozen yards off, a magnificent elk emerged from the snow-laden trees. Wulf crouched and froze. More antlers followed close to the elk and he saw four fir-bholg, servants of the Jotuns — what many called Fomorians — bolt from the forest and attack the elk. His first impulse was to cry out a challenge and attack them. With an effort of will, he curbed his impulse and remained still. He would



tell his father about this threat so near the hall, then track them down as part of a war band properly equipped to take them down.

His heart ached for the death of the noble elk as the fir-bholg tore into it, slashing and tearing chunks of bloody meat from its still-living body. Just as he couldn't stand to watch anymore, they carved off slabs and quickly retreated into the forest. Snow fell more heavily now, threatening blizzard conditions. Wulf would lose the monsters if he didn't track them now. As the last vile invader passed into the trees, he stood, shook the snow from his shoulders, and followed in silent pursuit. He nodded respectfully and offered a short eulogy to the bloodied remains of the elk as he passed.

"Go in peace, bright brother. Your troubles are over, your time done here. The theft of your life will be avenged."

He moved quickly after the evil fir-bholg. As he tracked the antlered foes through the heavy snow, the blizzard tapered off, resolving into heavy fog. The trees he knew faded from sight. He stepped forward and felt a tearing sensation; he'd entered a completely foreign landscape. He'd lost sight of the horrid beasts. He was now in the middle of a busy modern port city, its sights, sounds, and smells totally different from those he knew at home.

Was this a terrible joke? A trod opened here?

He laughed without humor as he caught sight of the sign overhead. In English, it read: *Port of San Francisco*.

Wulf made certain to stand safely away from the rush of cars, vans, buses, and other vehicles reeking of horrid fumes. He was here for a reason which had nothing to do with marriage, political or otherwise. The thought steadied him.

He closed his eyes and opened his heart to sense any pull of Glamour that might tell him where to go. For a few seconds he could detect nothing but the banal reek of steel buildings; the noise of traffic deafened him. Then, he felt it, soft, otherworldly strands of fae magic. Some came from the collection of kiths that called the city home. These traces felt disconnected, spread far and few between throughout the metropolis. As he concentrated, deepening his senses and closing out external stimuli, he noticed a strong pull of Glamour, one that bore some familiarity with the trail that had led him to this accursed place.

A sudden, blaring sound, unlike anything he had ever heard, startled him into opening his eyes. One hand reached for his weapon, then stopped as he beheld a strange purple and yellow vehicle pulled up to the curb alongside him, its rear door open. In the driver's seat was a nocker in a leather jacket, her face pierced in several places, and her spikey hair dyed blue, red, and black, with traces of other, older colors.

"Don't just stand there," she rasped, "get in and I'll take you where you need to go." Wulf hesitated just a moment. The driver made a noise in her throat to catch his attention. "C'mon, we don't have all day!"

Swallowing his doubts, Wulf got into the car.

"Hold on," the driver warned, as the vehicle accelerated, ignoring the traffic altogether.

chapter four: battle begins



They came in twos and threes, shoving and slouching their way down the streets. One even tried to kick a feral cat slinking along, cursing as it ran off. Swearing, the bully followed his companions who laughed at his near-miss. They formed a menacing group gathered outside the decrepit building that housed the Toybox Coffee Shop. An intoxicating thrill of Glamour called to them from the faerie treasure inside, its potency driving them to itchy anticipation as they prepared to storm in and take it.

Mortals walked to the other side of the street to avoid what they perceived as a nasty gang of unkempt toughs, reeking of garbage and excrement. While none of the passersby recognized the faerie nature of the group, they certainly recognized their potential for violence. Oddly, none pulled out their phones to take pictures or alert the police. Even the least imaginative pedestrians sensed something off and ugly about the group, enough that they knew better than to interfere.

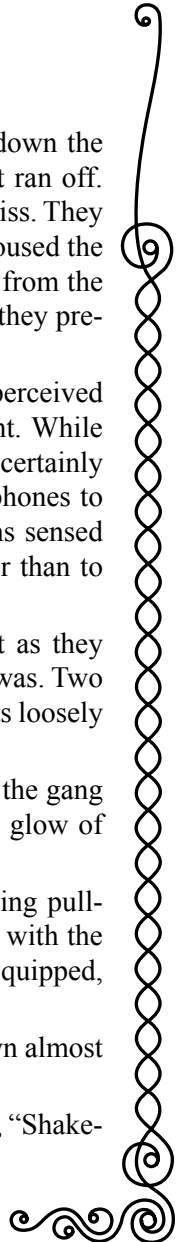
The Thallain kith ignored the few mortals passing nearby, intent as they were on trashing the coffee shop and grabbing its treasure, whatever it was. Two twisted ogres anchored the pack, while exaggerated horrors called ghaists loosely patrolled the outer edges of the pack of boggarts, bogies, and beasts.

“What do ya think of that, then?” Fiona asked Doyle, pointing out the gang as they approached the rundown building that called to them with its glow of Glamour.

“Circus of the Damned?” he suggested. He could feel the Dreaming pulling him into the conflict brewing; he wouldn’t be able to avoid a fight with the brutes. “I guess we’d better get ready to defend the Oulde Shoppe,” he quipped, and Fiona’s face lit with joy.

“Oh good, I thought I’d never feel at home here. We’ve been in town almost ten minutes already,” she laughed.

“Cry ‘Havoc!’, and let slip the dogs of war,” the wiry nocker replied, “Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act Three, Scene One.”



As one of the ghoulies reached for the door, Fiona waded in, calling to her wiry companion, “You take two of the smaller ones. I’ll take the rest.”

Cameron emerged into the street in time to see the clurichaun girl and young nocker attack the pack of horrors straight on. *Wonderful*, he thought, *let’s just jump right in and get yourselves killed. Oh, well. Same old, same old.* Despite recognizing that, even together, they were outnumbered and outclassed in terms of fighting skills, Cameron pulled together his sidhe Glamour and entered the fray.

Fiona punched a boggart, then slapped him sideways to crash heads with a nearby bogie.

“Hey, butt face! Watch it,” the bogie protested, then shoved the addled boggart aside. The boggart’s pack turned at his cry of pain and jumped the bogie and Fiona. With a disgusting *wrp*, the bogie vomited dark ichor on all of them and pulled a short, dirt-encrusted knife.

Doyle lost sight of Fiona as he was confronted with two frothing beasties, rabid seeming, their tongues hanging out of mouths filled with long, horrid teeth. He manifested a short, sturdy metal tube and flicked it out. It transformed into a four-foot long baton sparking with electrical energy – Doyle’s own version of a Taser enhanced with his kith’s talents.

Lurking in the shadow of a nearby building, Jack October watched the battle unfold. He wondered what to do: join the group attacking the Toybox Coffee Shop, help the three battling the Thallain, or try to sneak past them all, get inside, and nab the treasure while everyone was distracted. Judging by the size of the crowd he’d have to skirt, he figured that slipping past was a poor choice. He’d have a better chance if he helped the defenders. Besides, he liked the clurichaun’s spirit. She was punching, kicking, and biting the ears of four of her opponents. When the bogie pulled his darkness stunt, Jack leapt out and took advantage of the confusion to bite him in the back. He surged forward from there, grinning ferociously so his foes could see the teeth they’d face if they didn’t flee.

Careening into the street, Georgia steered her cab straight at the riotous fae spilling over the sidewalk. While she deliberately missed most of the fighters, she ran over one goblin’s foot and opened her car door to smack one of the beasties threatening Doyle in its tailbone.

Doyle called, “Hey, that one was mine!”

“Plenty for all of us,” Georgia laughed, and winked at her fellow nocker. Then, twisting in the driver’s seat to face Wulf, she announced, “This is your stop.”

Her passenger took only a moment to assess the situation. “My thanks for the ride,” he replied, his face breaking into a smile as he slid from the back seat, calling forth his armor and battle axe. He could feel the Glamour radiating from within the building, but also sensed the sickness engendered by his family’s deadly enemies.

Had any witnesses remained in the vicinity, they might have thought a movie was being filmed as the tall, blond warrior raised his axe and called out, “Hold, dark ones, turn and face your destruction. I am Wulf, son of Ragnar, warrior of House Aesin! Stop this assault and meet your doom!”

Both ogres lumbered forward to flank him and bring him down with their sheer strength. Wulf had wanted a target for his wrath since the death of the elk. Elated that at least some Thallain would find punishment here, he swung his axe in a mighty arc, slamming it into one ogre’s chest. The axe, a faerie treasure of House Aesin, bit deeply into the creature’s fae essence. The ogre screamed and fell but pulled Wulf down with it. The other ogre raised a spiked club above the handsome sidhe’s head. A crazed scream almost deafened the ogre as a weight landed on its back, scratching at its face and clawing its arms. The weight resolved into a wild-haired nocker who screeched in his ear, “Nobody messes with my passengers!”

So saying, she covered the ogre’s eyes with her hands and squelched her fingernails in. Blinded, the ogre yelled in pain. Reaching backwards with a grubby fist, he flipped Georgia off his back. She hit the concrete with a bone-jarring crunch, groaning. Her injury, however, had bought Wulf the time he needed.

“Face me, cowardly beater of women.” Wulf stepped forward and swung his axe again.

Doyle had finished off the beasties and caused a handful of Thallain enough pain to send them running. He had turned his attention to two others and was making his way toward Fiona when he saw a redcap help her up from a pile of her own victims. No sooner had he spied her than an angry sidhe caught his attention as he helped one of the remaining boggarts on its way out of the neighborhood with a sharp kick to its derriere, yelling, “And don’t come back!” The sidhe noticed Doyle looking, and gave him a slight smile and brief salute.

“Any of them get inside?” Cameron asked Doyle.

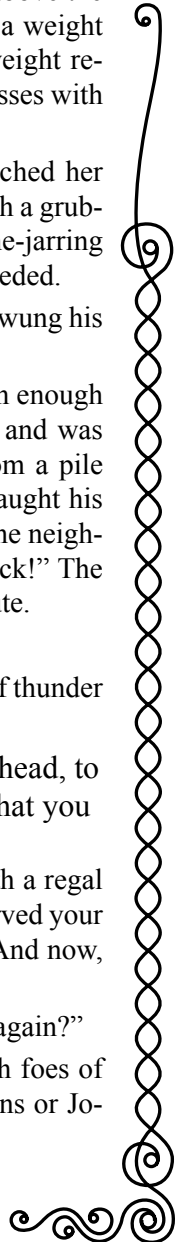
“Don’t think so. Think we should go in and see or wait for the god of thunder over there to finish off the ogre?”

Jack helped Fiona, moaning and bleeding from her nose and forehead, to a seated position on the curb. He slipped toward the door. “Do what you want. I know where I’m going.”

Just then the ogre collapsed. Wulf looked up and greeted them with a regal wave. “You are welcome, fae of this freehold. I am happy to have preserved your lives and this place of refuge in this battle. Thanks are not necessary! And now, I will meet your princess for our nuptials.”

Cameron looked closely at Wulf and asked, “What House are you again?”

“Aesin,” declared Wulf. “We are warriors of the north and staunch foes of the dark-kin, Thallain, and any who ally themselves with the Fomorians or Jotuns. You must be this freehold’s master.”



“Cool,” interjected Doyle, “Good speech, but...um... this isn’t our freehold. At least it isn’t mine or Fiona’s,” he nodded toward the clurichaun, who shrugged, still trying to staunch her bleeding nose.

Georgia introduced herself to Wulf. “I’m Georgia, and I come here a lot. This freehold is the holding of Sir Charles Fizzlewig, but he’s not much for titles.”



Jack had already entered the Toybox without a word. His eyes lit on the Glamour-filled toy chest for which the coffee shop was named, and he moved quietly towards it.

“Then this Sir Charles should determine what we are to do with the unconscious foes on his doorstep.” Wulf flung open the door to the shop and stepped in, proclaiming, “I am Wulf, son of Ragnar, warrior of House Aesin. Along with these good folks, I have delivered this freehold from those who would defile it.” Taking in the interior of the Toybox, he added, “Let these fine warriors with me receive their reward. Your finest ale, barkeep!”

The friendly-looking older boggan behind the service counter replied, “We don’t serve spirits here, son. This is a coffee shop. What’s all this about saving the freehold?”

Fizzlewig cast a sharp eye over at Jack, who was hovering over the toy chest. “And you watch yourself, my friend.”

Jack turned away from the faerie treasure and moved back slightly, rubbing his palms together to relieve his anxiety at getting caught. Facing his host, he turned the gesture into a broad shrug, lifting both of his palms towards the ceiling with a wide grin. Then, he stalked off to secure a table in a dark corner. He found a mousy looking sluagh was seated there, so Jack reversed direction to confront Fizzlewig, his wide, intimidating smile still locked in place. He inquired, “How about a wet cloth for the lady’s bloody nose, pops?”

“Oh, my,” Fizzlewig cried, grabbing a clean cloth, drenching it in clean water, wringing it dry, and rushing to pass it to Fiona. “I’ve lost my manners entirely. Please take this with my apologies.” Fiona took his offering and applied it to her nose, which had stopped bleeding but was already beginning to swell. “It’s all right. I gave a lot better than I got.”

“I suppose we’d better take a look at the losers then,” Fizzlewig wiped his hands on his apron and went to the door. Peeking through, he saw a jumbled pile of limbs on his doorstep – all of them belonging to characters he would never welcome inside.

“Georgia?” he called.

“Right here.”

“Think if we pile them in the cab you could chuck them somewhere else?”

“No problem. Do I get any help loading them in?” she asked, casting a raised eyebrow at the two sidhe.

Cameron immediately came forward. "Sure. Let's get this done." Georgia beamed at the handsome, helpful sidhe.

Befuddled by a request to act as a servant, Wulf followed. "I owe you thanks for the ride here and for coming to my defense in the fight. I will fulfill your request." He bowed slightly to the cabbie, who led them outside to pile the unconscious monsters into her car. Amazingly, they all fit.

She gave them a wave as she drove off, calling, "Thanks! Don't forget the party tonight!"

Fizzlewig ushered everyone back inside. "Well, it certainly seems I owe you a big thank you. Why don't you all take a seat and we'll get to know one another. Coffee all around?"

Wulf sat at a large round table with his back to the wall. The others filled in around him. Each ordered coffee or cider, and Fizzlewig brought the drinks, then sat among them.

"I'll start," the boggan declared, "I'm Chip Fizzlewig, and this is my freehold, open to all fae of good will. Want to introduce yourselves?" he asked, "Except you," he added, nodding toward Wulf, "Guess we all know who you are."

Fiona laughed aloud. Even Ellen, the shy sluagh, giggled silently. Wulf scowled slightly but schooled himself to politeness as a required virtue of his house.

"I'm Fiona," the clurichaun said, "This is my friend Doyle,"

The nocker flourished his knobby hands.

"Jack," mumbled the redcap. The introductions went well until Cameron's turn came around. "Cameron Solomon, House Liam." He eyed them, wondering if he'd be accepted, especially by the other sidhe.

Incredulous, Wulf asked the old boggan, "*You are Sir Charles Fizzlewig?*" He shook his head as if clearing it then turned his attention to Cameron. "And you're a Liam?"

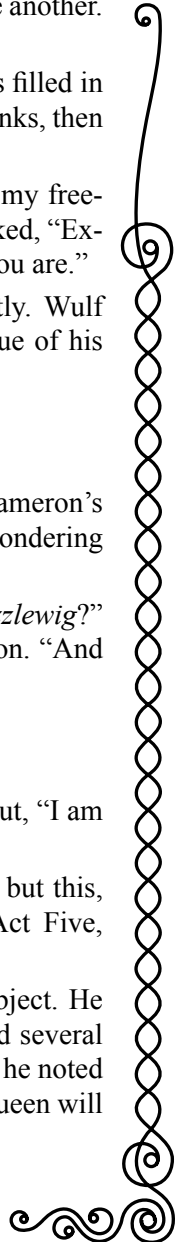
Cameron's features hardened slightly, "Guilty as charged."

"Gonna sneer at all of us, pretty boy?" Jack grated.

"If I have given offense to any of you, I apologize," Wulf gritted out, "I am not accustomed to your ways."

Doyle muttered to himself, "'If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended...' Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act Five, Scene Two."

"Seed cake, anyone?" Fizzlewig offered, trying to change the subject. He ducked briefly into the back and quickly re-emerged with the cake and several plates. "I suppose you're all in town for the big party up at the palace," he noted as he bustled to distribute the plates and cut the cake. "I hear that the Queen will be there."



“Does the princess live there?” asked Wulf.

“Of course,” Fizzlewig answered, refilling drinks here and there.

“Then I will be there,” Wulf declared.

“We all will,” Cameron pointed out, his patience wearing thin from Wulf’s unconscious arrogance.

“Yeah, even us lowly commoners,” Jack added, licking his lips.

“But what were those craven beasts here for? To gain that chest?” asked Wulf, pointing over his shoulder toward the toy chest and the potent treasures within.

“Seems like lately someone’s trying something every other week,” Fizzlewig confirmed.

“What’s inside it?” Fiona piped curiously, sitting up straight to get a better look at the colorful, decorated chest.

The boggan flourished both of his hands with delight. “Toys! Lots of toys, faerie treasures. I’d hate for them to fall into the hands of the Thallain or dark kin. Speaking of which, I’m hoping someone can raise these incursions to the attention of the Duke at the party tonight. Perhaps you could all attend. I need to remain here to protect the freehold, but if you plan on staying in the area, you should know what’s going on, and maybe you could help me out, too.”

“Will there be food?” Jack asked, picking the crumbs from his empty plate.

Fizzlewig leaned one elbow on the table, conspiratorial. “I’ve never known Duke Aeon to skimp on the refreshments at his parties,” he told Jack, deftly snatching his china plate from the table before it could disappear down Jack’s gullet.

“Aww,” Jack groused. “Guess I’ll get a little something at the party then.”

“When does it start?” asked Cameron.

“Call should be coming any time now,” Fizzlewig said over his shoulder as he headed for the kitchen.

• • • • •

Three young men waited in the small jewel-box of a chamber that served as Aeon’s waiting room. One tapped his fingers on his elbow; another resisted the impatient temptation to fiddle with the edge of his sleeve. An hour ago, servants had brought china plates and crystal goblets full of delicacies for them to savor and deposited them on intricately carved mahogany end tables for the men to serve themselves. The rich, thick, creamy carpet and the moiré silk in pale silver on the walls deadened sound in the room. All they had to stare at was a portrait of Aeon, clad in the red and silver Fiona colors. Tiny crystalline lamps twinkled overhead. Despite this illumination, it was hard to stay seated upright, polite and ready for company, instead of nodding off.

All three waiting men were dressed in their respective house colors and devices, denoting each as an ambassador. They had been invited to a ball here in Duke Aeon's home. Each had received the same instructions from their elders: to see if an alliance could be forged between their house and Aeon's own house of Fiona, and to attempt to woo Aeon's ward, the young princess. Despite the similarities of their appearances and their elders' objectives, the three suitors could hardly have been more different.

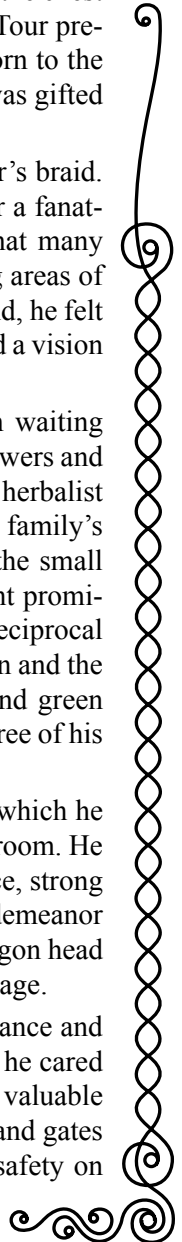
The first of the three seated himself, straight and attentive, in a red velvet chair in the center of the room. He fidgeted the least of them all, waiting instead with military precision. A shining eight-pointed purple star gleamed on the chest of his black surcoat, which he wore over dark armor. Sir Kennevan LaTour preferred his knightly title to the title of a prince of House Beaumayn. Born to the warrior house that claimed many prophets and seers among them, he was gifted with both talents.

He had tied his straight, shining, dark brown hair back in a warrior's braid. In contrast, his dreamy pale blue eyes could be those of a mystic — or a fanatic. His main objective in San Francisco was to investigate rumors that many Thallain and dark-kin had become a plague to the city and surrounding areas of Golden Gate lately. As a junior member of the Knights of the Good Hand, he felt compelled to seek out the dark fae to stop them. He had also experienced a vision about this duchy and the princess which he could not ignore.

Prince Eamon O'Readheigh of House Daireann had given up on waiting politely; instead, he entertained himself by staring down at the many flowers and herbs embroidered into the multicolor carpet beneath his chair. As an herbalist and someone with an interest in providing comforts for visitors to his family's cauldron houses, he appreciated the décor and comforts available in the small salon. A gentle scent perfumed the room; a mixture of herbs, with mint prominent among them. He hoped this boded well for his mission of forging reciprocal binding pacts of hospitality and pledges of mutual aid between Daireann and the Fiona. A marriage would certainly help that along. His silvery hair and green eyes partnered well with his *voile*, which depicted the green and silver tree of his house. He looked his best and couldn't help but know it.

Clad in crimson just a shade lighter than the velvet of the chair on which he sat, Duke Mondrian of House Danaan studied the two other men in the room. He was as handsome as the others, with smoky, hazel eyes, dark brown face, strong chin, and beautiful, multi-braided black hair. Yet his cool, intelligent demeanor belied the unease he felt in the company of the two sidhe. The black dragon head that ornamented the front of his tunic lent him some comfort and courage.

As an ennobled eshu, he hoped that the tales of Duke Aeon's tolerance and championship of commoner Kithain would secure his welcome. While he cared little for the usual intrigues of the noble houses, he recognized how valuable agreements between Danaan and Fiona would be in securing the trods and gates of the Dreaming. As a pathfinder, one who helped lost travelers find safety on



trods, he was more at home in Arcadia than the mortal world. If a wedding was the price of an alliance, however, he would gladly pay it. He had also heard that Duke Aeon's ward, Princess Alieria, was intelligent, gracious, and lovely, so he could only imagine that such a union would be pleasant, at least.

Standing just beyond the far wall and peering through the eyes of Aeon's portrait, Layla surveyed the three in the waiting room. Turning back to Alieria, who was standing behind her, agog to learn that this peephole was available, she whispered, "They're all so handsome. One of them's an eshu!" Alieria wasn't sure if the look on Layla's face was glee or shock. "Let me see," she whispered, and traded places with her eshu friend at the peephole.

Alieria felt guilty, knowing that what she was doing was inappropriate. She could just imagine Lady Alyssa's horrified expression were she to come upon them spying on the prospective suitors. But she had come around to the idea that being courted might be at least a little fun, and she wanted to see the young men vying for her attentions. Layla certainly felt she was justified. Alieria tried to remember the names and basic tenets of each house that had been drilled into her in preparation for the party. "Beaumayn, Darienne, and is that really a Danaan? I almost thought they were just a myth," Alieria murmured. "Shouldn't there be suitors from Houses Varich and Aesin?" she asked.

"I suppose they're late. Do you like any of them better than any other?" Layla bubbled, excitement for Alieria's future courtships causing her to speak more loudly than she had intended. Alieria whipped around, her index finger pressed to her lips. "Shh!" she hissed. "They'll hear us."

She took a step back as the Beaumayn representative got up to examine the portrait. Cringing with exaggerated anxiety, Layla silently, hurriedly slid the panel back in place to cover the peephole. Both young women took a hasty step away, glanced at one another, and scampered further down the hall.

"Well, do you?" Layla pressed, once she felt they were a safe distance away.

"Do I what?"

"Like any of them better than the others." Layla asked again, feeling that Alieria was being deliberately evasive or obtuse.

"I don't know yet." Alieria replied slowly, "Looks aren't everything."

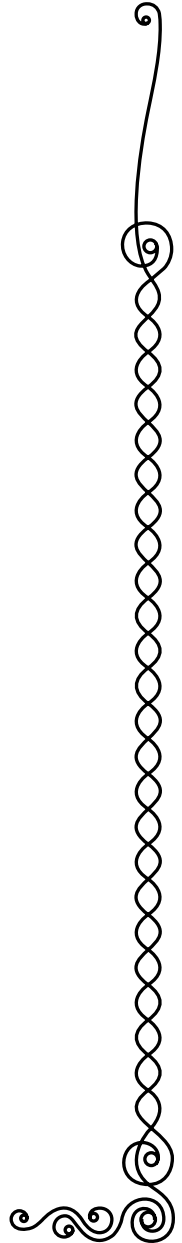
"Yeah, but if you aren't interested in one or two of them, I'd like to know. Maybe I can find a beau of my own," Layla teased.

"Maybe," Alieria retorted, "Maybe you mean you might find a Beaumayn of your own." She laughed and ran down the hall with her friend in pursuit, letting herself forget to be a dignified princess, not a childling hoyden.

Quite soon after the two had scurried from the scene, Aeon, clad in full court garb, knocked gently at the door, and entered the salon. "Gentlemen, I apologize for keeping you waiting. Pressing matters required my attention. Prince Kennivan, Prince Eamon, Duke Mondrian, please allow me to welcome each of you to

my home. Thank you for coming. I hope to become better acquainted in the next few days. Many other houses have sent representatives as well. I hope this will be an opportunity for all of us to make new friendships and alliances.

Meanwhile, let my seneschal, Lady Alyssa, show you to your rooms and attend to anything you need to make your visits pleasant. We will each meet privately after you've refreshed yourselves. Then, we can speak of matters of concern to each of us. Until then, I bid you welcome and extend the hospitality of my house to you all."



chapter five: Awakenings



Maharag dreamed of the ancient past. Its passions and anger flowed through his veins, hotter than blood, fueling his dreams and informing his resolve. Once upon a time, in a past so clouded that only murky visions could penetrate it, his people had ruled the world. They were a proud race of conquerors who mastered the natural world and all that was in it, whose powers stemmed from all they touched, natural and supernatural.

They were the Fomorian, and the world belonged to them. Humans, prolific and puny, with their incessant breeding and their flimsy dreams, served them as laborers, as playthings, and as instruments for their whims, however dark and dangerous those whims might be. The Fomorian delighted in showering favor on some of their vassals, elevating them to positions of power themselves, and then tearing their illusory gains out from under them. They had glutted themselves on human misery and fear for a hundred generations.

But the humans, weak as they were, fought back with their own dreams. They created heroes to stand for them, and these heroes also dreamed. Into the world came enemies of the Fomorian, the primal forces of the very Nature they thought they had mastered. War was inevitable. Driven to desperation, the Fomorian funneled all their magic into a wave of transforming power: the Great Unleashing. The children of the Fomorian, creatures of darkness known as the Thallain, fell in the battle between light and darkness, between Nature and the Fomorian.

Maharag stirred uneasily in his sleep, the icy tree that surrounded him with protections from his enemies responding to the power of his dreams. A cold wind blew through the forest, causing Maharag to shiver and almost awaken. But his dreams continued, unabated, and centuries flashed past in his sleep.

He remembered them all and savored the deliciousness of each. Now, the closer he got to achieving his goal, the more his dreams were jumbled. Each was a crystalline memory, though sometimes their order became skewed. He supposed that didn't really matter. Soon his great work would reach fruition.



Her tribe called her the brown girl. She was brown of hair, with a face browned by the sun and painted with blue swirls. The skins she wore were brown and dirty; she smelled of human musk, leaves, and nature. Wild and free, the chieftain's daughter ran through the woods and teased the warriors with her own skills. None of this mattered to Maharag. What counted was her bloodline.

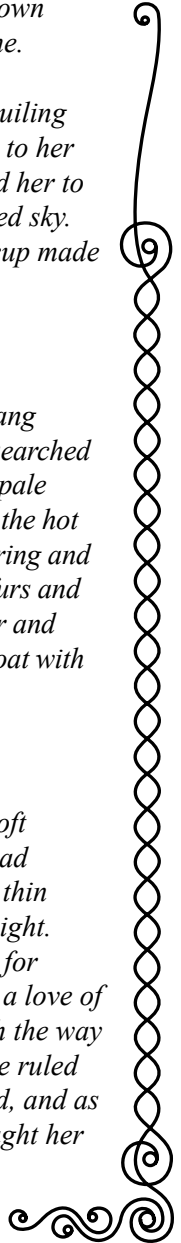
He met her one autumnal day as she bathed in the stream. Singing a beguiling tune, he lured her into a grassy field and revealed himself to her. She fell to her knees, convinced she saw a god. When he beckoned, she followed. He led her to an icy forest where bare trees stretched bone-white fingers to the darkened sky. There he laid her down and slashed her throat, catching her blood in a cup made from weathered, whitened bone.



He could still smell the pale sunlight in her golden hair. She danced and sang when she escaped from her father's longhouse and ran to the woods. She searched for healing herbs and lichen. Looking up, she beheld a beautiful stranger, pale as the moonlight and so handsome it took her breath away. He stood near the hot spring and enthralled her with his silver-bright eyes. He dropped his covering and stepped back into the pool, holding his hand out to her. She threw off her furs and joined him willingly, laughing as she did so. He pulled her under the water and took her to the forest in the Dreaming. And there he cut her milk-white throat with his bone-white blade and dripped her ruby blood into his cup.



The Nubian princess was blessed with her father's proud forehead and soft cheeks, and her mother's strong chin and happy, welcoming smile. She had worked gold beads into her black braids just that morning, and held her thin shoulders back with pride in her own grace as she strolled through the night. Clad in the robes of her people, she moved as fluidly as the night-waters for which she was named. She carried the magic of the fae in her veins and a love of stories in her heart. He lured her with his tales of the Dreaming and with the way he insinuated that he possessed knowledge of a time when the African fae ruled over all. Promising to show her the proof, he led her to his killing ground, and as she bent to see the white bowl of bone etched with African motifs, he caught her ebon hair and opened her throat above the thirsty cup.



The sound of a scream rent the sky and a long, pitiful groan shook the ground. A gong began to sound, slow and sonorous as within the cup, the blood of three young women swirled together to form a bone-white key. His hands shook as he reached forth to take it, turning it three times widdershins into the slot that formed the bottom of the cup.

Around him frozen, bone-white trees split open. The creatures imprisoned within began to stir. Maharag screamed his triumph as he freed the White Court, but his cry changed to a wail of anger as the cup changed before him. It reformed into a tall, red gemstone with a hollow center, then disappeared.

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He traveled everywhere, searching across the Dreaming and the Autumn World. He took on many forms and told many lies, seeking any hint of the lost treasure. Over the centuries he thought he'd found it many times only to taste defeat again and again. Finally, it returned to his possession on the outskirts of Athens, where it had been disguised as part of a carved white pillar, held in the outstretched hands of a reveling satyr. Breaking it from the stone, he had begun his work anew.

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Her green eyes matched the color of her kirtle. Her orange-red hair proclaimed her as a Dane, though she lived on the Green and Blessed Isle. Her ancestors were fierce and strong, her father a king among his people. Celebrated for her beauty and her poetry, she was, nevertheless, dissatisfied. Her father had searched for a husband for her, but failed to find anyone he thought good enough. Then she met the faerie lord. Pale and subtle as the wind, gifted with poetry of his own, he brought her to his home. When they arrived, the crystal castle he had promised was missing. A small, red jewel cup rested in the grass, the centerpiece of a garden of white white flowers. He handed her the cup, then steadied her hand to catch her royal blood as he pierced her jugular with a red stone dirk.

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The royal lady's white robes covered from shoulder to ankle. Delicate feet clad in gold ornamented sandals peeped out from underneath as she walked. Her dark hair was coiled atop her head with tendrils escaping gold and jewel hairpins to fall artfully around her face and neck. Guards and servants accompanied her as she strolled through the agora and made her way toward the theatre. He came to her that night, wearing a mask like the chorus singers, yet he did nothing but talk with her. Each night he told her of more and more fabulous performances that could be seen at a little-known theatre nearby. She took his hand, walking through unfamiliar lands to a field where he fell upon her with a red stone dagger, stabbing her over twenty times until her white robes were red, then squeezing her royal, red blood into the dark, crimson chalice.



Her red cape would, in later years, spawn the story of the red-hooded girl and a wolf. She was the grand-daughter of the country's ruler, cherished and beloved. She skipped her way through her grandparents' garden, stopping to pick flowers here and there. She intended to take them to her grandmother. A funny man met her there, offering a crown of white roses for her auburn hair. Her eyes sparkled and she laughed at his funny antics as he bowed to her and offered to fix the crown atop her head for her. Using that action to stand behind her, he grabbed her up as he covered her small mouth. His captive held firmly, he ran from the garden, leaving the trampled crown in his wake. He had intended to take the mother, but the child's blood would do equally as well.

For the second time, the ground roiled and trembled as lightning split the sky. Blood swirled and mingled, and a great, cracking sound rode the air. Three bloods crawled together to form a blood-red key, which he turned clockwise to splinter open the mountains and awaken the prisoners beneath them. He laughed to the shrilling winds as the Red Court lived again. This time he was ready when the cup changed into a green jade vase and faded from his sight.

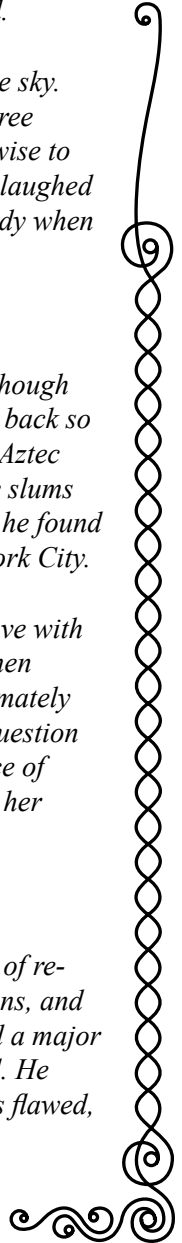


The first of what he thought of as the final three was a surprise to him. Though she was a princess, he found her as a slave girl. Her bloodline stretched back so far into the past that he had to laugh. Daughter of Moctezuma's ancient Aztec line, her family had long ago been all but erased. She had risen from the slums of Mexico City because of her beautiful voice and her lovely face. When he found her, she was singing the part of Aida in the opera of that name in New York City.

Despite the caution learned in the hard streets of her youth, she fell in love with the handsome opera buff who escorted her to dinners and parties, and then disappeared with her one night. The investigation lasted months but ultimately became a cold case. Her disappearance was never solved. The lady in question rested under the ground in the Dreaming, laid beside six others in a place of green and white and red, her throat opened with a green stone knife and her blood caught in a grass-lined, wooden bowl.



The Highlands of Scotland boasted gorgeous scenery and a long history of rebellion and glory. Proud clans still wore their tartans on special occasions, and the pipes skirled out across the evening air. House Dougal had long held a major stronghold in those mountains as well as elsewhere in the Autumn World. He considered them lackeys of the Gwydions, and though he saw them all as flawed, he relished using one of their daughters to accomplish his great work.



The Dougal princess welcomed the supposed Gwydion ally to her father's holdings and gladly consented to study her family's records alongside him. He found it amusing that she always whispered when in the library as though she might disturb someone else. Given how deserted the room was, he almost laughed aloud.

He wasted little time taking her, since he had recently found the cup again, hiding in an old Chinese alchemist's shop. Showing her a "secret trod," he hunted her through the Dreaming, shooting her with green wooden arrows until he brought her down. Smiling, he strained her blood into a porcelain egg cup painted willow-green



The years ran down; seasons came and went as he once again sought the Cup of Dreams. The worlds wheeled about him; time moved on. He switched from body to body, his names and lies keeping step with the world. The Cup escaped him, yet he pursued it with feverish passion. He traveled in realms never seen and racked his brain to find still more. He had worked for so long. In the end, he would free the Green Court, and all his myriad people would again walk the worlds they rightfully ruled. At last his searches and studies and sacrifices led him to the west. He needed only one more princess as he tracked the Cup of Dreams to a city called San Francisco in a duchy called Golden Gate.



The ancient woman stood atop the rock-strewn hill, her long, gray hair showing signs that it had once been red, flowing in wisps across her lined face. She watched the slow, painful progress of the ruined creature as it clawed its way toward the top where she waited. It had taken years to make it this far. She heard its anguished cries only with her mind. It had no mouth to utter its screams. No nose, ears, or eyes defined a face. Its blackened, blistered body spasmed and shook as it crawled with truncated arms and legs across the sharp rocks, forcing itself onward despite pools of blood left in its wake.

She could feel the searing heat which bled from its wounds along with dark mahogany blood. She could smell the brimstone effluvia of the liquid that had once coated it. She stifled her pity. Was anything left of the intelligence or personality that had informed this creature in its past? Was there sanity within it still? She would soon have her answer.

The twisted wreck finally gained the summit and lay at her feet. Its labored movements ceased, as if it had died. Sighing, she knelt next to its ruined form. "Hush now, and we will see," she crooned. Taking its head in her lap she gathered her long hair into one hand, brushing it gently across the creature's body.

As she worked, black ash flaked off, and puckered skin reappeared. Slowly, the skin lost its ruddy appearance and returned to a pale color, healed. Bones that had contracted from the searing fire straightened and elongated, cracking and popping. Within its body, its cooked internal organs healed themselves of their damage and blood flow within them resumed.

At last she cleaned its face and skull. Bone and skin returned to their former appearance. Lips filled out, and the ears returned, as did the nose. Long, wavy hair grew in. Sharp, strong cheekbones emerged, and a mouth formed, its lips set in a determined scowl. The silent scream, which had dwindled to a moan, stilled.

The elf-lord, newly restored to youth and wholeness, opened wide eyes and gazed at the beautiful woman who held him. Her form seemed to waver from that of an ancient crone to that of a vibrant girl in the first bloom of womanhood. He knew her.

“Pele?” he asked, though he was sure.

“Indeed, Cyprian Ryder,” she replied, “And it is time for you to arise. Time to help those you once harmed.”

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The scent of beer, reeking cigarettes, and pipe smoke hung thick in the air of O’Casey’s, the old-fashioned pub the changeling brothers frequented. Low conversation punctuated by laughter and a few arguments provided the basis for the ambiance of the place. Like many older pubs throughout the British Isles, O’Casey’s featured a few booths and dark wooden tables, a long, matching bar, a couple of dart boards on the far wall, which was riddled with holes from drunken patrons with poor aim, and a stage in the corner elevated by just one step where local bands played on weekends.

Four empty beer bottles teetered on the ledge next to Tadd’s dart board. Despite his glazed expression, Tadd tossed one dart after another into the high scoring areas of the board. His dexterity was remarkable. Of indeterminate age, with dark hair streaked with a few strands of gray, the slender figure was a familiar sight at the pub. When he’d first started showing up, he’d been able to make a tidy sum beating challengers at the dart board. Nowadays only strangers challenged him. The locals called him Tadd the Lad.

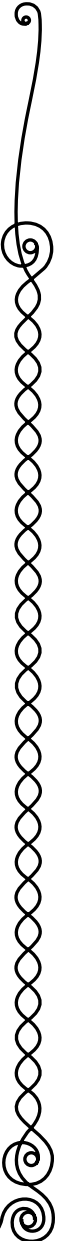
The two brothers, each with a foot up on the bar’s foot rail and leaning an elbow on the bar top, watched the darts phenom as he practiced. The first twin, Donal, asked, “Are you as bored as I am, brother?”

“You know I am,” griped the second twin, Dougal.

“D’ya know what this reminds me of,” Donal asked, “That play where Hamlet’s friends keep tossing a coin, and it comes up heads every time. Same boredom.”

“Never knew that was in *Hamlet*,” Dougal remarked.

“It wasn’t, and I never said it was,” Donal’s voice took on a brittle edge.



“Ya surely did,” Dougal fired back.

“I never did. I said they were *friends* of Hamlet, not in the play.”

“You lie. You *said*, ‘that play where’ they were,” Dougal huffed.

“Alright then, but not the Shakespeare play. I meant the one where they’re the title characters, Rosenburg and Gildersomething. Have ya no culture at all?” Donal said forcefully, thinking he’d proved his point.

“And yer a great idiot!” Dougal laughed outright at his brother. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Still boring,” Donal concluded. “Existential stuff.”

“That would be *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, by some bloke named Stoppard,” the bartender muttered, half to himself.

The brothers turned back to watch Tadd the Lad.

“I’m tired of watchin’ him.” Dougal grouched.

“Then we should never have let ourselves get mixed up with the great loon, should we?” Donal returned, “Besides, the Riders bring us payments every now and then. They could have just knocked us in the head and left us to forget who we are too. We’re lucky that king had a use for us.”

“If ya call this lucky.” Dougal remarked, “Hangin’ about with his Forsworn majesty and keeping him from remembering himself... like I said, boring.”

Donal sighed. “Just drink your beer and shut it.”

They drank in silence for several moments except for Donal occasionally mumbling “heads, heads, heads” to the rhythm of the darts.

Tadd the Lad just kept lobbing darts at the board.

Dougal suddenly straightened up, muttering as though he were talking to someone who wasn’t there. Then he shook his head like a dog shaking off water and turned to his brother. “Boredom’s over. Himself has called for the lad. Maybe he wants to play darts with ‘im.”

“Himself?” Donal asked.

“The hidden fella, king ‘o’ the grove or whatever. He wants to see him. We’re to take him up there. Can’t say I’m happy they’re goin’ to reawaken him. Cruel bastard, weren’t he?”

“Don’t really care, brother, so long as we get paid, and he’s not mad at us. When do we leave?”

“His majestic hiddenness says now.” Dougal cast a weary glance at their charge. “Let’s go get *Tadd* and tell him he has another contest coming up.”

“Sounds good to me.” Donal dug in his pocket for a coin. “Shall we toss for who gets to go roust him out?”

Dougal retrieved one from his own pocket first. With a twinkle in his eye, he told his brother, “I get heads.”

chapter six: The Ball



Loud, clear, beautifully sweet and compelling, the clarion call rang out over San Francisco, calling all fae who heard it to Aeon's palace. None could say if it was a bell or chimes or a lingering trumpet call or all of them in one unforgettable sound. In each listener, the sound evoked feelings of hope and joy, longing and sadness, merriment, playfulness, and passion; yet is also held within determination and resolve, protection, comfort, and a measure of the terrifying beauty that wholly defined every aspect of the fae. It tolled out a message of welcome and a summons that was almost irresistible to Golden Gate's Kithain. All who heard it felt its Glamour course through them and lighten their hearts. All except the dark fae who preyed upon Duke Aeon's people.

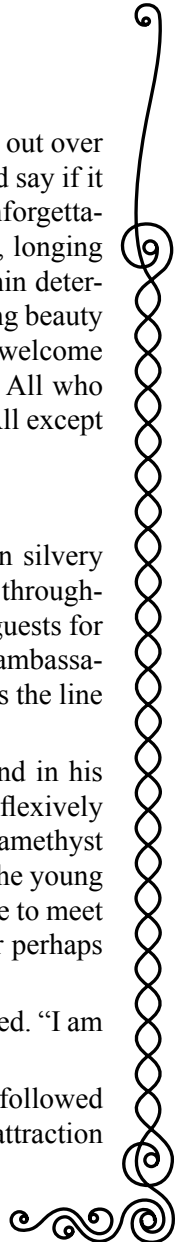


Alera felt positively incandescent in her scarlet gown trimmed in silvery lace. She had successfully maintained a welcoming, dignified demeanor throughout her time standing next to Aeon in the reception line, greeting their guests for the ball. It seemed to her to go on for hours. She must have met every ambassador from each noble house and hundreds of commoners as well. Now as the line of visitors dropped off, her attention could finally begin to wander.

She was startled back to attention when someone grasped her hand in his cool palm and brushed the back of it with his lips. Alera might have reflexively drawn back, were it not for the exceptionally handsome face with large amethyst colored eyes that looked back at her. Blue-black hair framed his face. The young man smiled gently and murmured, "Princess Alera, it is a great pleasure to meet you. I am Yvgeny Varich. I look forward to speaking with you later, or perhaps sharing a dance."

She responded with a smile as well, reciting the line she had practiced. "I am so pleased to meet one of our new neighbors."

He gave her a slight bow and moved on down the line. Her eyes followed him. Aeon noticed her interest in the Varich prince and teased, "Any attraction there, heartling?"



“Aeon!” she protested, then added, “He’s very handsome, though his dressing all in black bothers me some. I remember your dark days too well.”

“No worries on that point, sweet one.” He assured her. “Black is his house color, and he was wearing a medallion of the golden sun emblem of the Varich. The house is considered Unseeleie, but they are our closest noble neighbors. I’d be more concerned by their reputation.”

“What reputation?” Alera asked.

“It is widely reported that they cannot love, nor can they make an oath of true love to anyone. I would hate to see you bound to someone with such a cold, uncaring heart.”

“I see.” She looked after the young sidhe lord, watching as he made pleasantries to others in the line. Rather than being frightened by his flaw, she felt sorry for him. She also remembered many a love song and story in which the heroine’s love and loyalty broke through witch’s curses and other reasons why the hero felt no love. In those tales, the hero was rescued and fell deeply in love with the woman whose care and devotion had saved him. “I wonder,” she murmured aloud.

“What was that?” Aeon leaned toward her to hear better as the chatter of guests and the music that had just begun drowned out her comment.

“Nothing! Nothing,” she whispered, but she had made up her mind to get closer to the raven-haired Varich lord at her first opportunity.

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The Kithain who had defended the Toybox Coffee Shop earlier in the day arrived in style, brought to the Nob Hill mansion by Georgia. As they had piled in to the cab yet still found room left over for more, Fiona asked, “Have you ever tried to figure out how many will fit in this thing before it explodes?”

Georgia just snorted. “I’ve never measured it, but if it exploded, I’d refund my passengers’ fares.” Doyle grinned at her from his perch in the front seat and asked, “What fares? Didn’t you kidnap us and whisk us away?”

“Girl’s gotta eat,” Georgia cackled in appreciation. “Besides, I need some money to buy all my hair dye treatments.” Looking at her pink, purple, red, green and blue hairdo, Jack spoke up asking, “Are we paying?”

“Not today,” the nocker cabbie replied, “Special rate since you’re new in town. Tomorrow, though...”

Wulf surprised them all by joking. “Lucky I arrived today, then.”

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To the outside world, the Nob Hill mansion that served as Duke Aeon’s home and the center for Golden Gate’s changeling affairs looked outdated and shabby. Perhaps, thought those who noticed it at all, the owners couldn’t afford to keep it up anymore. Maybe they had even died and the house had been left to

fall into ruin. Strangely, though, the property never came on the market for sale, nor could potential buyers track down an owner to enquire about it.

Tonight, no mortal gaze could penetrate past the Glamour of decrepitude to see the lovely mansion ablaze with lights or hear the music and conversation. Only the magically endowed guests could behold the extensive lawn and gardens illuminated with hundreds of tiny chimerical lights and smell the bowls of heavenly scented flowers lining the walkway to the front door.

Jack October couldn't remember a time when he had approached any place as grand as this that his old gang wasn't preparing to rob. Being a guest would be a new experience. The wily redcap donned his most fashionable black and red *voile*, hoping that he'd make a favorable impression. If nothing else, a good word from the duke might position him to better find and make off with the promised treasure he was seeking. There might be two or three small valuables displayed about the duke's home as well.

As he approached the grand foyer, though, he suddenly felt something he had never encountered before. The magic of the glittering building was keeping him from acting on his usual impulses to pocket small valuables he saw on his way to the reception line. *This must be what some trolls told me about*, he thought, now recognizing the duke's ability to compel decorous behavior within his holding. Taking rude actions within it. On the heels of this discovery came a more startling realization: he had a chance to start over here. He didn't have to steal, be a tough guy, a thug, or a mercenary to live. Companions he'd just met had accepted him as one of them, and he could have a place here. His past wasn't an issue anymore.

Well, he thought, as he caught sight of the long line of tables holding a smorgasbord of every conceivable type of food, drink, and delicacy he could have imagined, *I know at least one thing I can take here without being rude at all — a fabulous feast!* His mouth watered. He would have started for the tables right away, but instead felt himself steered toward a line of well-dressed hosts greeting the arriving guests. *Guess I can get through that as the price of admission*, he thought, and surrendered to the magically enforced etiquette of the gathering. He shuffled forward in line with Georgia, Fiona, Doyle, Cameron, and Wulf.

Fiona had carefully coiled her long hair to surround a small emerald green cap. She made certain her deep green *voile* was adorned with a golden Irish harp — just in case nobody noticed she was a clurichaun. She looked forward to meeting others of her kind as the music coming from the house hinted that an Irish folk band was currently playing. There might be some good beer or ale on tap too, and if so, the evening might end in a rollicking fight. She quickly shifted gears, scolding herself for even thinking about fighting in a duke's home. It was easily the classiest place she'd ever been. As she crossed the threshold, she too felt the constraining feeling calling for appropriate behavior while there. *Hmm, maybe an after party on the lawn then*, she mused. She headed for the line of people waiting to meet them, thinking, *wow, pretty egalitarian for a noble.*

Doyle had contented himself during the cab ride by noticing all the bells and whistles in Georgia's cab. He had dressed himself all in black this evening, with a cape held together by a small gold cloak pin shaped like a wheel with spinning cogs surrounding it. He took Fiona's arm as they entered, lending her an escort to the grand ball. He thought she looked quite pretty tonight, and he was proud to be with her. He thought again of how fierce and bright the clurichaun's personality was and considered what it might mean that the Dreaming had urged him to get to know her. As they approached the receiving line, Doyle quickly picked out the duke, the princess, and what was probably the duke's champion, who wore armor rather than finery. He placed the others in line as minor nobles or members of the household. Remembering that someone had mentioned that the Queen of Pacifica was supposed to attend, his quick assessment told him she certainly wasn't in the line. *She'll no doubt be fashionably late*, he thought.

Wulf, like the warrior standing in line, had donned his chimeric armor adorned with the owl symbol of his house. He'd combed his long, golden blond hair back into a neat warrior's knot. His gleaming axe, an heirloom of his house and a faerie treasure, remained affixed to his back. He wondered at the trust shown by the duke. Not many nobles would allow visitors to remain armed, yet nobody seemed interested in taking his weapon from him.

With his well over six-foot height, Wulf could see most of the foyer and ballroom. His height, along with his strength, were about the only things he liked about his body. He knew most people, both mortal and fae, found him quite handsome. His golden blond hair, deep blue eyes, and movie star features attracted more than his share of attention.

Others had compared him to the thunder god Thor in the past. Such comparisons just annoyed him. He hated the attention his mortal shell attracted. But endure it, he would. Summoned from the Dreaming to meet the threat of the Jotun's lackeys, he knew his duty was to guard the Autumn World from their incursions. He just wasn't sure how marrying some spoiled American princess was supposed to further that goal. Steeling himself to fight a battle of romance he felt ill prepared to wage, he entered the residence.

Cameron was looking forward to the ball. His silvery blond hair matched complimented his pale blue *voile* and its blasted silver tree emblem of House Liam. As a member of the house that championed the cause of commoners in the sidhe-ruled Autumn World, he happily entered the mansion with the wild-haired Georgia by his side. He approved the many commoner kith intermingled among the sidhe guests. His command of the politics involved in most such occasions often allowed him to pick up on subtle undercurrents not readily discerned by most people. While he looked forward to meeting the duke, his reason for placing himself last among his group was to see how the others — especially the proud Aesin warrior — fared in this setting.

Georgia had been to the mansion several times before, delivering visitors, picking up passengers, or just visiting the princess and Layla. She occasionally

also brought information to Aeon or his seneschal or champion. She knew most of the household and the layout of the interior as well. In fact, most members of the changeling community of Golden Gate knew Georgia. She knew, better than most, that a number of the Kithain attending the ball tonight were strangers like the young kith she'd met earlier.

Tonight, she had bowed to propriety far enough to make certain all her piercings were shiny, and her hair was freshly dyed. She had donned a multi-colored skirt and high brown boots to pair with her red leather jacket. She anticipated good food, good friends, and a look at Pacifica's queen, in that order. She wondered if the queen's visit coincided with the recent Thallain problems plaguing the duchy. She hoped so, especially given the attack on the Toybox earlier.

The group shuffled forward to the receiving line. Just before they made their first introductions, Georgia disengaged her arm from Cameron's. "Let me go first," she insisted. "I know the duke and princess, and I'll introduce you."

The others let her proceed. "Hello, Duke Aeon, how are you tonight?" Georgia asked.

Aeon took her rough hands into his, holding them in his left palm and patting her gently with his right. "Wonderful, Georgia. You're always welcome. I hope you know that by now."

"I do indeed. I know you'd like me to be your one and only, Aeon, but we both know it would never work out between us," she cackled. "You're fine, but you just don't know enough about cars!" Aeon laughed.

"Thank you, Georgia, I needed that. You're quite good at putting people at ease, you know. Have you ever considered becoming a counselor?"

"Already am. People talk to cabbies all the time... I won't repeat what some of them say, though, such language isn't for noble ears." Georgia winked sassily and got another laugh for her trouble. "I wanted to introduce you to some newcomers I brought tonight. Don't know that much about them, but they defended the Toybox from some trouble this afternoon." The cabbie stepped down the line to say hello to Alieria, leaving the coast clear for her companions.

Jack October shuffled up to the Duke and muttered his name, making an awkward half bow. Aeon smiled and leaned a little closer, "Jack, was it?" Jack nodded. "Are you new to Golden Gate?"

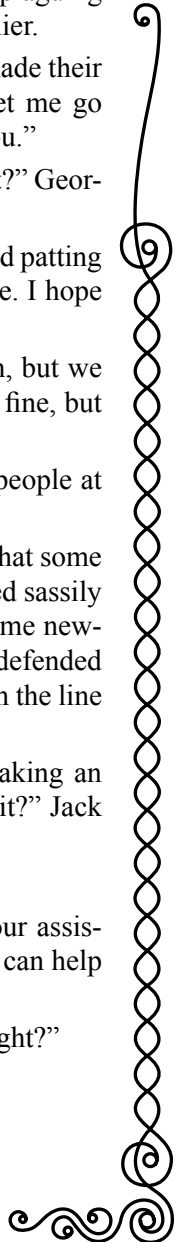
"Uh, yeah."

"All the more reason for us to thank you for your bravery and your assistance to Sir Charles. I hope you'll let us know if you need anything we can help with while you're here."

Jack stared at the duke quizzically. "You *do* know I'm a redcap. Right?"

"I had noticed that," Aeon smiled.

"And you don't want to kick me out of town?"



Aeon affected a studied look, “Why should we? Have you done anything that harms our people?”

Jack looked confused for a moment, then got a calculating look on his face. “So, you really don’t look down on commoners, even redcaps.”

“I try not to,” replied Aeon, “Does that disappoint you? Would you like me to harass you?” he asked, with the tiniest of smiles.

“Guess not,” Jack answered, “Guess you’re okay.”

“I’m pleased that you think so, Jack. Please meet my ward, Princess Alieria.” Aeon deftly focused the redcap’s attention on Alieria, who had been listening to the exchange, then turned to meet the next guest in line.

Fiona had been waiting a little impatiently for the duke to finish talking with Jack. She rarely felt tongue-tied around nobles, but this one was the definite exception. She knew who Aeon was, not as the duke, but as the leader of the band called Aeon. From the time she first heard them, she felt entranced by their complex music. The hall where they had played was enormous, and she hadn’t been close to the stage, but she had reveled in the Glamour the band brought forth, and she drank deeply of it. She had also noted how attractive Aeon was. Her hopes of speaking with the band members didn’t happen though. As she waited outside after the concert, the crowd grew larger and larger, and she realized her good feelings were being eroded. For once in her life, she wanted to avoid a fight and cling to the euphoria she’d achieved, so she walked away. But she never forgot.

Up close, Aeon was even more stunning than she remembered. “Don’t tell me such a lovely lady chased off thugs this afternoon,” Aeon commented. Fiona intended to assure him that she was, indeed capable of such a feat, but what came out of her mouth was, “Will you be playing sometime tonight?”

Aeon nodded, amused, “Of course, we inflict ourselves on all my parties.”

Fiona’s face lit with joy. “I’ve waited a long time to hear you again. I’m so glad! Thank you for inviting us.”

“You are most welcome, dear lady. Might I know your name?”

“Fiona.”

“Then I will dedicate one of our songs to you, Fiona. I hope you’ll enjoy it.”

Doyle snorted softly, watching Fiona meet the duke. I like her better feisty, he thought. Moving into place before Aeon, he extended his hand.

“Name’s Doyle,” he said. “Glad to attend your party. Couldn’t help but overhear some other people talking about your celebrating when Thallain are attacking your duchy’s freeholds.”

“Direct, aren’t you?” Aeon asked, “but yes, we’re aware of the attacks. That’s one of the reasons we’re meeting here tonight. You don’t live in Golden Gate, do you? I don’t think we’ve met before.”

“Nope, just got to town,” the dapper nocker replied, “but I was thinking of moving here.”

“Good, we always welcome those who are honest and direct, Doyle, and those who defend their neighbors. Please stay awhile and hear what we’re doing to meet the threats against us all.”

“Looking forward to it,” Doyle answered.

Wulf followed his companions, feeling constricted and nervous. He had no qualms about meeting the duke, though in his father’s hall, they didn’t bother with receiving lines. Like most of his encounters since coming to San Francisco, this was outside his experience. He fell back on House Aesin’s virtues: courage, truth, honor, fidelity, hospitality, discipline, industry, self-reliance, and perseverance. Whatever happened here, he would face it with those virtues as his guide. He stepped forward and sketched a short bow to Aeon.

“I am Wulf Ragnarson, House Aesin,” he declared.

Aeon bowed in return. “I am Duke Aeon of Golden Gate. You are welcome to my freehold,” he replied formally.

On more familiar ground, Wulf unbent a little.

“Thank you for your greeting and offer of hospitality,” he answered. “Is this lady beside you the princess I am to wed?”

Aeon’s lip twitched. In that instant, Alera — who had overheard — jumped in. “Now just a minute, what makes you think you’re the only applicant? There are *a lot* of suitors here, and most of them aren’t rude enough to assume I’d take them just because they crooked their finger at me.”

Wulf wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong, but he bowed stiffly to the princess. “I meant no offense, princess. All my father said to me was that I was to come here and marry you. If it is your custom to disobey your guardian, then so be it. I’m afraid I am a warrior, not a courtier — or a lapdog,” he could not stop himself from adding.

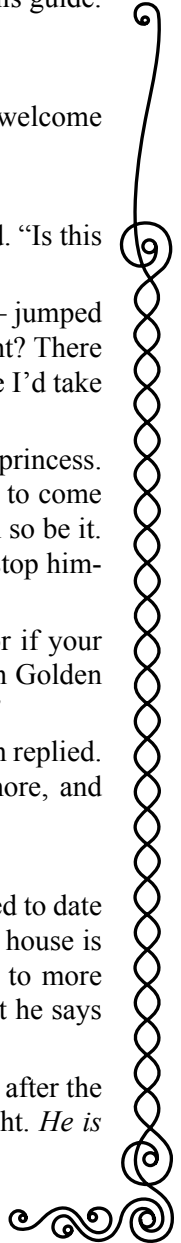
He turned back to Aeon, “Duke Aeon, if I am not wanted here, or if your ward finds me unsuitable, then I will not press my suit. I ask to stay in Golden Gate to battle the Thallain, as was my second purpose in coming here.”

“Yes, you are very welcome, and we thank you for your help,” Aeon replied. Wulf gave him a short nod, bowed to the princess without saying more, and moved down the line.

“How rude,” Alera commented to Aeon.

He looked at his beloved ward, then shook his head, “You don’t need to date him, but you *do* need to accord him some respect,” he answered. “His house is full of people who are stern and bellicose, and he’s probably unused to more upscale court functions. Also, English is *not* his first language, so what he says could come out worse than intended. Try to have patience, sweetling.”

Alera’s cheeks turned pink even at this gentle rebuke. She glanced after the tall, armored sidhe lord. *Maybe he’s not always so clueless*, she thought. *He is*



handsome. Now she felt badly for being rude. Perhaps an apology later would mend the misunderstanding.

Cameron was impressed with Duke Aeon. As he moved forward to meet the duke, the Liam sidhe noted that Golden Gate's ruler took equal amounts of time with nobles and commoners alike, saying a few words to each, smiling and nodding, sometimes even laughing at what was said to him. It was much like the members of his own house acted. He was hoping *his* welcome would be so cordial.

Next to the duke stood a young woman who could only be the princess. Her actions echoed her guardian's, giving Cameron great hope that Golden Gate's rulers truly cared about the changelings dependent on their leadership. He'd certainly been in enough other areas where the nobility seemed distant at best. He had watched the interplay with Wulf, both amused and feeling a little sorry for the proud Aesin. His turn came, and he stepped forward.

"Cameron Solomon, House Liam," he introduced himself to the duke. "This is quite a gathering."

"Are you also one of those that Georgia is calling the heroes of the Battle for the Toybox?" the duke queried. "I am," Cameron answered. "Thank you for your invitation."

"I'm afraid this isn't simply a social occasion," Aeon began.

Cameron finished for him, "but there's clearly a dangerous situation going on that needs to be countered."

Aeon nodded. "We appreciate whatever any good folk can do to meet the threat," he continued.

"I'll be around," Cameron replied. He moved on to speak with Alieria.

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Soon after the companions left the receiving line, those who had greeted them moved off in different directions to mingle. The crowd moved through the ballroom, eating and drinking, chating and laughing, and dancing with several different partners.

Finished with her duties as a hostess, Alieria caught up with Layla and the two flitted from group to group, speaking with friends, accepting dance invitations, and nibbling on a few of the delicacies. Layla brought a small plate to Alieria. It had two of Alieria's favorite treats from the Toybox, Fizzlewig's famous sweet rolls, which the pair gobbled down as one of their guilty pleasures. After her treat, the princess dutifully visited each of her erstwhile suitors, Count Tanneray of House Balor and his partner Gerhardt, friends who had taught her many dance steps in her youth, approached Alieria, each requesting a dance. Both were renowned dancers, and Alieria whirled through a few turns with them, glad to miss out on having her toes stepped upon for a few minutes.

Count Tanneray teased her, “Now, princess, you know we aren’t suitors, but we needed to see if our dance lessons had paid off. Good news!”

She laughed giddily. “I could dance to the stars with both of you.” A little out of breath, Alera found an unoccupied seat and flumped into the chair, moaning to Layla, “There’s no way this dating thing is easy. Please, dear friend, save me from dating and politics!”

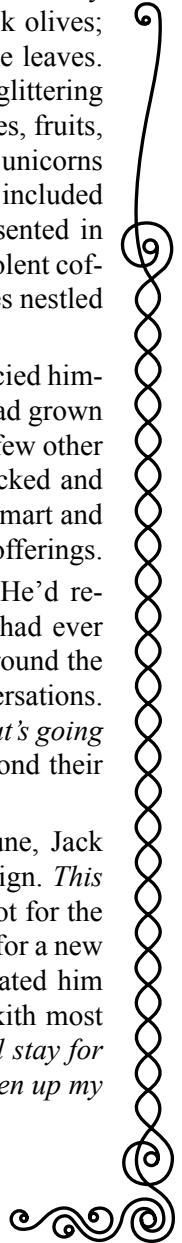


Jack avoided the crowd and headed for the generous buffet arrayed on tables along one side of the room. The centerpiece was a life-sized swan carved entirely from creamy white goat cheese. Its eyes were a pair of gleaming black olives; its beak, thin slices of carrot; its black feet, carefully painted artichoke leaves. It “swam” atop the blue table cloth, anchoring a staggering array of glittering dishes filled with fanciful forms created from the meats, fresh vegetables, fruits, and sweets provided. He was particularly impressed by two rearing unicorns carved from a perfectly roasted pair of chickens. Beverage selections included all sorts of fragrant wines in multi-colored carafes, beer and ale presented in frosted steins, and several types of alcohol and liqueurs. Spicy teas, redolent coffees, and mulled cider competed with fruit juices served in silver glasses nestled in bowls of ice.

Despite his redcap ability to consume just about anything, Jack fancied himself isomething of a connoisseur of fine beverages and finer food. He had grown up being denied such pleasures, so he enjoyed them even more now. A few other guests, including other redcaps, were piling their plates high. Jack picked and chose what he wanted most. Let others act like pigs; he would play it smart and return for seconds once the staff replenished the buffet with fresh, hot offerings.

He’d been surprised by Duke Aeon’s quick acceptance of him. He’d received quite a different welcome than any of the Duke’s snooty kin had ever offered him. Taking his plate and a goblet of pinot grigio, he moved around the ballroom, stopping here and there to listen in on other people’s conversations. *How can so many of these fae be either indifferent to or unaware of what’s going on here?* But he knew. These folks didn’t want to know anything beyond their pampered lives.

As someone who’d been raised by professional soldiers of fortune, Jack could read the undercurrents in the city as easily as reading a street sign. *This place is already under siege and they don’t even know it,* he mused. Not for the first time, he wondered if he ought to just slide on out of town and look for a new home elsewhere. Then he thought about the group who had incorporated him into their midst and the duke’s kindness to an unknown redcap — a kith most nobles thought of as shock troops or marauding nightmares. *Guess I’ll stay for a while and see which way the wind blows. If nothing else, I can sharpen up my knife skills against these Thallain bastards. Might even be fun.*





Cameron made the rounds, meeting many of the fae of Golden Gate. Through these conversations, he discovered a lot about the recent break-ins as well as what the local fae thought about Aeon throwing a party while they were under attack. Many seemed confused, but it didn't stop them from attending the ball and partaking of Aeon's largesse.

Typical, he thought, *complain about the problems but make no move to help solve them*. He wasn't really surprised by most of the sidhe, but he had expected a little more from the commoners. They had had to fight for themselves before, and there was still very little equality. Had any of them even considered what an incursion of Thallain meant for the mortals here?

Taking the initiative, the usually reticent Cameron approached a tall eshu clad in a deep, jewel-toned blue dashiki with metallic gold and silver patterns adorning the neck and sleeves. His aura shone almost as brightly as the duke's, and communicated rulership and power.

Cameron bowed formally, and the eshu returned his bow.

"Greetings, I am Count Elias of the County of Oakhold." He paused to see if Cameron recognized the freehold by name. When the sidhe made no response, he added, "You probably know it as Oakland."

Cameron nodded his recognition. "Cameron Solomon, House Liam, Lord Elias I admit I am trying to understand the various social and political undercurrents here."

The count raised an eyebrow and half-smiled.

"So, it seems you have an interest in political matters?"

Cameron nodded.

"What do you think of our duke?" Elias asked. He watched Cameron's face intently as the sidhe gave his answer.

"I believe that, for all his fame as a rock star, or at least I've heard him called that, the duke seems an astute judge of his duchy's people."

Elias clasped his hands behind his back and assumed an easy, comfortable posture. "Go on, please."

Cameron needed no encouragement. "Duke Aeon is playing a very smart card in holding this affair where he can bring together all these fae, put them in a good mood, and then bring in their queen to appeal for their support."

Elias smiled. "I agree," he said. "This also allows him to tally how much support he is likely to receive here among his subjects. I have also noted a number Oakhold's residents here as well. We are undergoing the same plague of unfamiliar and hostile fae causing problems of every kind, from minor vandalism to bodily harm."

It was Cameron's turn to signal agreement. He clasped his hands together earnestly as he answered the count.

"My friends and I have run into such a group outside a freehold in the Haight district," he said.

Elias' expression changed from one of polite interest to one of keen observation. "I believe I have heard of you and your friends — the Defenders of the Toybox?"

Cameron laughed softly, a hint of embarrassment coloring his cheeks. "Have you been talking to Georgia?"

Elias guffawed, a bright, loud sound that caused a few heads to turn momentarily in their direction.

"Among others," he agreed, "though I admit her voice was one of the loudest to sing your praises."

The two stood silently for a moment, watching the party unfold around them. Finally, Elias broke the silence.

"I have come here to speak with the duke to see if we might form a united front against these marauders."

"I would like to offer you my own help, and most likely that of my friends. Fiona, the clurichaun standing near the bar, seems eager to do battle, and the others are not bad in a fight, either."

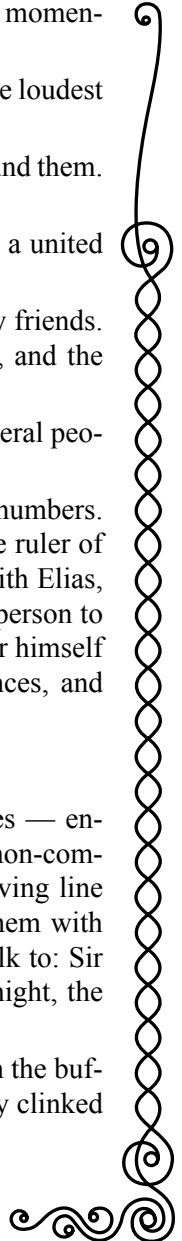
Elias smiled. "Your Aesin warrior seemed to make that clear to several people," he remarked.

Elias thanked Cameron for his offer, and the two exchanged phone numbers. The count also wanted assurances of assistance from Queen Aeron, the ruler of the Kingdom of Pacifica. *Well good*, Cameron thought, after talking with Elias, *here's someone else in charge who can get things done*. Moving from person to person, Cameron drank in all the information and opinions, building for himself a much greater understanding of the area's problems, political alliances, and hostilities. He'd need those insights in the coming battles.



Wulf traversed the ballroom, taking in the room's general features — entrances and exits, possible defensive positions, and escape routes for non-combatants — just as he would in any place under siege. When the receiving line broke up, he scooped up two silvery tankards of strong ale. Taking them with him, he crossed the room to talk greet the person he really cared to talk to: Sir Cumulus. He extended one of the tankards as he reached the older knight, the only other person in the room wearing armor rather than fancy *voile*.

Cumulus, who had parked himself in a sturdy armchair across from the buffet, stood to greet Wulf. "Thank you, young warrior," he growled. They clinked tankards, and he took a long pull off the ale.



Here, at last, Wulf had found someone following etiquette familiar to him. In the company of the elder sidhe, his posture became less stiff, and he let out a breath he'd unconsciously been holding. "I do not mean to give offense," Wulf began, "but you are both a warrior and among the household. Is this correct?"

Sir Cumulus nodded, "Yes, I am. Is there some way I may help you?"

"Please, I wish to know if there is a plan in place to combat the Thallain like those my companions and I battled earlier today. The greater part of my intent in coming here was to deal harshly with these minions of the Jotun, what you call Fomorian. I don't know what you know of my house, but we returned from the Dreaming to do just that."

Sir Cumulus unbent enough to give Wulf a brief smile. "The duke is moving to put a plan in place tonight," he rumbled, "I see no other reason to request the presence of Queen Aeron here."

"Then, if you would, please inform me when such discussions occur. I have some experience with these creatures and would offer you what help I can."

Cumulus nodded his acquiescence. "I will do so. I am afraid I do not know your rank, young sir, so I am unable to give you the proper address. My apologies."

Wulf's eyebrows rose in surprise. Then he said, "I am a prince of House Aesin, but such titles do not concern me overmuch. My house values worthy actions, not titles. A man earns the respect of others by his words and deeds, and I would that mine speak of my worth more than an honorific given me by birth."

"Well spoken. How would you be known, then?" Cumulus asked.

"I am Wulf, son of Ragnar. That is enough for me."

"Then I shall let that be known in the court, if you like."

Wulf smiled and gave Cumulus a small bow. As he excused himself from the company of the duke's champion, Wulf noticed Alera headed in his direction, her face showing her determination in the set of her chin. Another young woman, an eshu, followed her. He dreaded a continuation of the disagreement they had experienced earlier. He pivoted away and headed in the other direction, though he mentally scolded himself for being impolite or cowardly.

The first person he laid eyes upon as he sought to busy himself and thus avoid the company of the princess was a female sidhe in the midnight blue and silver colors of House Eiluned. She turned at his approach, and he beheld a fine-featured, porcelain face with the dreaming eyes of a sorceress. Her raven black hair was artfully arranged in an upward sweep with dangling coils gracing her neck. She smiled as she saw him, looking inquiringly at him.

"Good evening, my lady," Wulf found himself saying, "I saw that you have no drink and wondered if you would like me to fetch you one."

What am I doing? He wondered, *I sound like an idiot.* He had spent little time practicing his courting skills and felt somewhat inadequate speaking to such a lovely lady.

The lovely lady's dark eyes crinkled as she looked beyond him, seeing Alera standing behind him with a frown on her face.

"Yes, I see," she answered, "though as a resident of Golden Gate, I should be offering that to you." She held out her hand to shake his firmly, "I'm Morgan. Or Baroness Morgania, if you prefer."

"I am most happy to meet you, Baroness. I am Wulf Ragnarson from the Kingdom of Dalarna."

"Please, call me Morgan."

"Morgan, then. Call me Wulf." He stood there feeling dumb as a rock, unable to think of anything else to say to her.

She smiled. "Perhaps we could fetch drinks and a bite to eat with one another," Morgan suggested, "Then, if you still want to avoid Alera, we might try a dance," she laughingly added.

"Was it that obvious?" he inquired.

"I'm afraid so, but she's a friend of mine. I'll just explain to her later that you're shy." Morgan teased.

The bark of laughter Wulf gave at that thought turned heads as others looked their way to see what was so amusing.

Morgan took his hand. "Never mind, Wulf, I'll stop teasing you. Oh, look the band's about to play. Let's grab that food so we can get a good seat."



Doyle and Fiona weren't sure what to do with themselves once they were through the greeting gauntlet. "Do you feel like dancing?" Fiona could hardly resist; already, her foot tapped in time with the music.

"Do you mind if we don't?" Doyle asked. "I'd rather your feet remain unflattened by mine."

Fiona laughed. "I take it you don't dance very often," she teased. "I'd hate to cause you the embarrassment of my screams if you *did* smash my foot with your clumsiness," she chuckled heartily. Seriously, I'll dance with someone else later. Wanna get something to eat, then?"

"Why not?"

The two headed for the buffet where Georgia was adding a couple of small finger sandwiches to her plate already heaped with fruit and cheese.

"If I wasn't driving, I'd want a drink," she commented, as the two approached. "Guess I'd better settle for some sweet cider for now."

Doyle piped up, "If you'd like something with a little more kick, I could drive."

Georgia's face showed her horror at the thought. "That's nice of you, Doyle. But I'm not sure if I've ever thought of anyone else driving Maggie the Monster. She's a little touchy."



“Things done well and with a care, exempt themselves from fear.” William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, Act One, Scene Two,” Doyle quoted, solemn. “I know how you feel; I’m not crazy about other people using my tools either. I just found... Maggie, was it? a very interesting vehicle.”

“Thanks,” the cabbie beamed. “I try.”

Meanwhile, Fiona was lost in her own disbelief over the setup of the bar.

They’re just set out. Nobody’s here to mix and match? Wow, a nice party like this and no bartender? As an avid collector of drink recipes with a background in bartending, she felt let down. Well, nobody’s here to stop me from making a few of my own.

She pulled the table away from the wall far enough to slide in behind it and set to work. At first, she just mixed drinks she knew from recipes. Soon, though, she started trying different combos; vodka, sweet agave, and a pickle got as many compliments from the people who tried it as the “ewws” she got from others for even thinking to make it. She handed several different combinations out to the people who came by, urging them to try them. Each time someone complimented her on a delicious drink, she drew in a bit of Glamour from her success. Her final concoction was something she called an Aeon Sunrise. It was based on a Tequila or Midori Sunrise but she added red clover honey and Meyer lemon to the mix.

She was fully occupied for a while, paying little attention to the rest of the people swirling around her except to make them drinks. She looked up to see the band Aeon setting up on stage and tuning their instruments. Coming out of her focus, she realized that Doyle had moved on some time ago. She shoved the table back to its original position and hurried toward the area in front of the stage, so she’d get a good view of the band. She took one of her Aeon Sunrises with her.

Not stopping to claim a seat, she moved right up to the stage and called, “Aeon! Aeon!”

He caught sight of her. Leaning down, he smiled at her. “I haven’t forgotten I owe you a dedication.”

She grinned back and lifted the fragile glass to him, saying, “I’ve created a drink in your band’s honor, an Aeon Sunrise. It’s for you. There’s honey in it to soothe your throat.”

The look he gave her almost stopped her heart. “Thank you, Fiona.” He tipped the cup up and took a small sip “Just the thing,” he assured her. “Which song is your favorite?”

“The Gossamer Forest,” she breathed.

“Great. That’s one of my favorites too. Tonight, that song belongs to you.”

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Doyle and Georgia chatted for a while, comparing notes on various projects they’d worked on, but focusing a lot of their talk on Maggie, the cab. Then Georgia confessed that Maggie sometimes stalled out during moments of stress, dumping her passengers out, then taking off again without them.

Doyle laughed, “Maybe she thinks she should have been a garbage truck!” he crowed.

“I suppose nothing of *yours* ever goes wrong,” Georgia rasped, fixing him with a sideways scowl.

“You know how it is,” Doyle grouched. “You work and you work on the damn thing and it still screws up on you. Speaking of which...” He pulled out the shock baton he’d made from a flashlight, PVC pipe, some batteries, and a few other parts, “This fool thing malfunctions at the worst possible times. The batteries overcharge and release the shock back at *me*. Oh, I’ve changed them out and rewired it twenty times a day. Does it help? Of course not.” His diatribe stopped suddenly as he heard the whine of feedback from the amplifiers onstage and smelled a faint whiff of smoke coming from one of them

Aeon’s band was setting up on the stage set into one corner of the ballroom. One of the amplifiers was throwing off sparks and buzzing. Clearly, something wasn’t right. Doyle’s eyes lit up with glee as he moved toward the stage. Rubbing his knobby knuckled hands together in anticipation he asked, “What seems to be the trouble?”

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Doyle finished the repairs on the amplifier in just a few minutes — a record for him. As the members of Aeon tuned instruments or stood around him watching him work, the audience began to clap impatiently for the band to start. Doyle mumbled half the swear words he knew, then commanded, “Stand back from it and let it breathe!”

“Nockers,” the drummer half-laughed.

Doyle really wasn’t happy with the results. It certainly wasn’t perfect, but he could hear and see the restlessness of the crowd, so he settled. When he plugged the amp back in and it failed to function, he gave it a swift kick and banged on the top with a wrench he manifested. Luckily for its continued existence, the amp dutifully came on, humming to life as if it had never had a problem. Doyle wiped his hands and jumped down from the stage, looking for Fiona. As he’d hoped, she had saved him a seat, and he settled in beside her.

As more fae drifted toward the stage, servants brought chairs for them. The band moved back onto the stage, and a velvet curtain tumbled down from the ceiling to shield them from sight. Lady Alyssa walked up the stairs and stood before the crowd. “Thank you all for attending tonight. I hope you’re enjoying yourselves. Please remain after the concert to hear Queen Aeron speak. And now, the band Aeon.” She left the stage as cheers and applause broke out.

The lights dimmed until the ballroom lay in darkness. A single, high, sustained note from Aeon’s electric harp vibrated through the air, followed closely by a harmonizing tone from a guitar, then another, from the bass. As the curtain rose, lights danced overhead, resolving into swirling stars and a glowing moon.



Wisps of alabaster and cerulean clouds hid and revealed the stars at intervals, and misty, silvery trees with white, waxen leaves and tiny golden flowers made a pathway from the entrance of the ballroom to the stage. The path took on a silvery hue as the band appeared amid the trees, moving forward, instruments in hand. Duke Aeon leaned forward looking directly at Fiona. He crooned, "This is the Gossamer Forest, one of my few memories from Arcadia. Tonight, I dedicate it to Fiona. May she always use it to find her way home, wherever that may be."

The band came together into the song's first chorus. Though the song was an older one, the fervor with which the band played gave it a new lyricism. A wave of Glamour touched all who heard it.

Fiona clutched Doyle's hand and whispered, "He's doing it. He's raising the Glamour for us!"

Others sighed, basking in the magic that had sustained the band's followers for almost fifty years. When the song's last beautiful note sounded, the band went directly into their next song, "The Gold and the Glory," keeping the Glamour elevated and the audience enthralled. Lights and scenes changed to fit the various themes as Aeon moved from his harp to guitar and the band led the audience through ancient tales and sagas of love, heroism, poetry, magic, and honor. Each song had been chosen to influence the crowd to act against those who had been attacking the changeling community. As the band finished their last song, "Arcadian Sun," the crowd rose to their feet to give them the ovation they deserved. Aeon swept aside to introduce the guest of honor. "Fae of Golden Gate and most welcome visitors, may I present to you Queen Aeron, ruler of Pacifica."

The applause grew even wilder as the stately queen appeared on stage to greet her subjects. Some there had never seen the queen. Her dark eyes and cloud of fiery hair were set off by her graceful, erect posture. A few cheers from the crowd were especially loud. Many couldn't specify that her beadwork identified her Muwekma Ohlone Native American ancestry, but they pumped their fists in solidarity and support to see a tribal member leading them all.

"I give you good greetings," The queen's voice settled the crowd; they shushed one another and fell silent for her. "Thank you, Duke Aeon, for the hospitality of your house. We have enjoyed your music and your feast; yet, we have also met to discuss the recent incursions here and throughout Pacifica. Those who have reported these attacks, thefts, and vandalism have, as yet, not agreed on who is perpetrating these crimes..."

"Queen Aeron," Wulf called. "I know who is doing it. My companions and I fought them only today outside the Toybox Coffee Shop, a freehold held by Sir Charles Fizzlewig."

The queen turned to face him as he stood. A couple of fae tried to shush him, one even hissing that he was being extremely rude to speak out of turn. Another questioned how he could do it while under the ban on disrespect. Someone else murmured, "Perhaps it isn't as disrespectful as we might think."

Queen Aeron raised her hand to restore silence. “Friends, please. If the young sidhe has answers, let us hear him.”

Wulf pushed forward until he was close to the stage. “I am Wulf Ragnarson, warrior of House Aesin and sworn enemy to the Jotun and their minions. This day we fought many Thallain and dark-kin, their servants. Further, I arrived here by tracking fir-bholg through the Dreaming. These villains are here and are the ones behind your troubles.”

Sounds of surprise and fear traveled throughout the crowd, slowly fading to silence as the listeners waited for a response from the queen.

Queen Aeron nodded gravely. “Thank you for your information. I had suspected as much but had received no confirmation. Is it your intent to remain here to battle them?”

“It is.” Wulf returned. Aeron looked at Aeon as if to ask if the tall sidhe lord was welcome. Aeon nodded.

“Then we thank you for your help. Have you others who will assist you?”

Jack October, Doyle, Fiona, and Cameron rose from their seats.

“May I know your companions’ names?” she asked. Each introduced himself or herself, with Cameron adding that he was House Liam. The queen acknowledged each of them. “You are deserving of our regard and reward. Please consider yourselves officers of the court of Pacifica. Keep us informed of your progress in rooting out these fiends.”

Although Queen Aeron still spoke to the assembled crowd, Wulf waved his new companions over to a far corner of the room. They bowed to the Queen and slipped from the audience to put heads together. Once assembled, Cameron blurted out, finally putting it all together in his head. “Wait a minute. If these marauders are targeting places with Glamour they can steal, they aren’t going to give up as easily as they did this afternoon. They’re going to wait until the defenders are gone, then try again.”

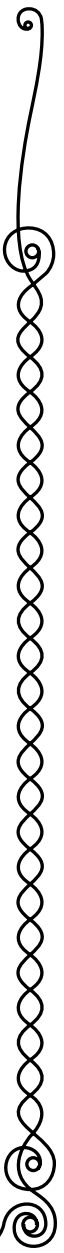
Morgan had walked over to the group to thank Wulf and company for their help. She arrived just in time to hear Wulf say, “We need to get to the Toybox. It may be under attack.” Looking around, he spotted Georgia nearby, talking with another nocker.

“Georgia!” he called loudly, waving her over to their part of the room. She looked up, then came over to the group.

“We need to get to the Toy Box immediately,” Wulf urged, “We think Fizzlewig is in trouble.”

“Why are you just standing around then?” Georgia snapped, heading for the door. The group rushed after her, with Morgan following closely behind.

“Morgan?” Wulf blocked her way, frowning. What was a Baroness doing following them into possible danger? “What?” she answered, “Fizzlewig is an old friend. If he needs help, I’m there.”





Georgia careened down the streets as if Maggie the Monster was on fire. The passengers lurched from one side of the cab to the other as Georgia skidded from left to right, jumped curbs, and flew through lights that changed just in time as she raced from Nob Hill to the Haight.

At first glance, things seemed quiet. The street was almost deserted. One slouching figure dressed all in black, sat on the concrete sidewalk across the street from the coffee shop, back against the building, apparently asleep. The group disembarked from the cab and jay-walked across the street to make it to the Toybox.

Morgan, who had been keeping a close eye on the sleeping figure, suddenly cried out and changed direction, running to the slumped-over figure. “Ellen?” she queried, then lowered her voice hoping not to hurt the slough’s delicate ears. As she turned Ellen over, she saw a nasty lump and a gash on the back of her head. A trickle of blood led from the lump down her neck. Morgan checked to make certain her friend was breathing, tears clouding her vision. Blood leaked from Ellen’s left ear and her eyes were more sunken than usual.

Wulf took Morgan by the arm, pulling her back from her injured friend. “I can fix this.” To the rest of the group he said, “You need to get inside and see what’s happening. I will be there to help as soon as I can.”

He asked Morgan, “Is there anywhere nearby that is a park or woods? Even a lawn or yard with trees? Or a pool or fountain?”

Thinking quickly, Morgan answered, “There’s a newly renovated area just down the street. It has a small lawn with a pond and a couple of trees. But we need to get her to a hospital.”

“If you will trust me, I swear to you I can help her.” So saying, he leaned down and picked up the slough very carefully, making certain not to unbalance her and cause any more damage. “Take me to this lawn.”

Morgan nodded and led off down the street at a fast walking pace.

The rest of the group moved across the street and tried to peer through the windows of the Toybox. The lighting inside was too dim for them to see anything within. “That’s a bad sign,” noted Jack. “Cameron, why don’t you and I go in like we’re stopping by for coffee. If it’s under attack or things are bad, we can signal the others by yelling, *what’s going on?*” Their plan established, the others took cover nearby.

Cameron opened the door.

Jack and Cameron had barely made their way inside when Jack yelled, “What’s going on!” The other Kithain rushed to the door, including Georgia, wielding a wrench. Inside, they could see a dog pooka, an eshu, and Fizzlewig defending the freehold from a small army of vicious, Thallain. The eshu was backed into a corner by two ghastrs that attempted to take her head with their

machetes as she defended herself with a curved sabre and a piece of a destroyed table as a shield. The pooka was running and dodging under tables, keeping just ahead of the boggarts chasing him and trying to skewer him with long knives.

A hulking ogre guarded the door, blocking the entrance. Cameron and Jack had practically run into him when they tried to enter. Atop the toy chest stood Fizzlewig, sword in hand. He bravely confronted an antlered foe most fae believed was firmly the providence of legend: a fir-bholg.

Jack carved into the ogre, trying to damage its leg and throw it off balance. Cameron pulled his sword and just managed to dodge the club that whistled through the air, narrowly missing Jack's head.

Behind him he heard Fiona chanting something. He thought it might be in Gaelic, but it sounded like she reversed the words. What astonished and amused him, however, was when the ogre he and Jack were facing shrank. One minute it was enormous, then it was half its size, and finally, it stood no taller than a hulking, enraged child. Cameron and Jack renewed their attacks, pushing the tiny ogre back and away from the door. Satisfied that Jack could neutralize this threat on his own now, Cameron broke off his attack on the diminutive ogre and raced to help Fizzlewig.

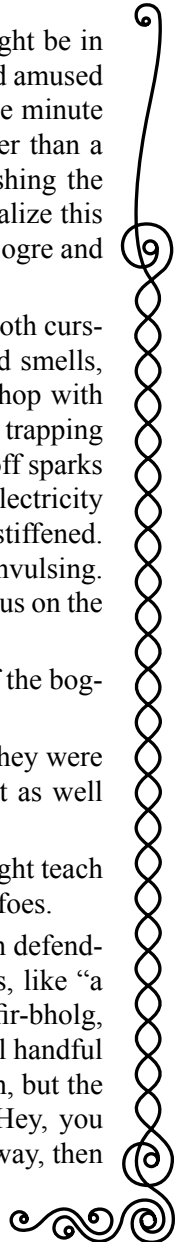
Doyle and Georgia seemed to be working on something together, both cursing their tools and each other. After a minute or two of clangings, odd smells, and wild lights illuminating the street, they rushed inside the coffee shop with a car battery attached to several wires. They ran toward the two ghaists trapping the eshu and extended the wires toward them. Each set of leads threw off sparks as the two nockers connected with the ghaists, releasing a surge of electricity into each that was powerful enough to illuminate the room. The ghaists stiffened. They were momentarily held transfixed by the current, their limbs convulsing. When Doyle and Georgia removed the wires, they collapsed, unconscious on the floor, still twitching.

The eshu pushed away from the wall and moved to confront one of the boggarts chasing the hapless pooka.

Georgia gave a measuring glance to the ghaists. "Humph, thought they were made of sterner stuff. While we have Maggie's battery in here, might as well give them one more hit, don'tcha think?"

Doyle looked at the two horrors writhing on the floor and said, "Might teach them something, might kill them. Let's not." They turned to find other foes.

Cameron had never really thought about the stereotype of a boggan defending their home. He'd always just assumed it was one of those sayings, like "a sidhe only trips with aplomb." Watching Fizzlewig face off against the fir-bholg, he could see why they made him "Sir" Charles Fizzlewig. He was a real handful when you get him riled up. Cameron was reluctant to take over for him, but the older boggan was noticeably tiring. He called out to the fir-bholg, "Hey, you need to fight someone more your own size." The creature glanced his way, then



tried to impale Fizzlewig on his antlers. The boggan barely escaped the attack, lunging to one side. The fir-bholg used Fizzlewig's precarious balance to grab the toy chest and shove it into Cameron's gut.

Fiona, Doyle, and Georgia flushed out a trio of boggarts trying to get behind the steamer-trunk-sized toy chest. They attacked the sneaky Thallain, beginning a six-way battle that was as confusing as it was frenzied. Doyle wielded his shock stick, while Georgia put her wrench to good use. Fiona stepped right in, fists raised, and helped the boggart understand why she was the fight queen of six cities across Concordia.

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Wulf and Morgan moved as quickly as they could, given the fragile state of Morgan's friend. Wulf gently laid the sluagh down on the grass near the water and told Morgan to stand back. The tall sidhe strode toward a small tree and pulled off several green leaves. These he washed in the water, wringing the droplets over Ellen's head and muttering in a language full of sharp syllables that were unfamiliar to Morgan. She assumed it was Norse, but it sounded somehow older and more powerful. As Wulf chanted, the greenery around them and underfoot took on a more vibrant hue, and the fountain spread beyond its confined shape into a more natural-looking pool.

Wulf himself became wilder than before, his hair growing unkempt and ragged, his eyes a blazing blue that seemed to capture the moonlight and reflect it back. Morgan wasn't sure if she was afraid of him or afraid for him.

Whatever Glamour he was using moved from his hands, which he used to caressed Ellen's head injury. The cut stopped bleeding as Ellen's head reshaped itself, the indentation in her forehead knitting back to wholeness. Wulf's veins stood out like ropey vines along his arms. A smell like new-mown grass filled the air as Ellen took her first unlabored breath.

"You... you healed her." Morgan breathed, "Will she be alright now? I've seen Valmont heal, but not like that."

"She should be fine, but she may need some rest."

Morgan helped Ellen sit up. The sluagh looked from Morgan to Wulf and back again. Then she felt in her pocket, sighing happily when she found the small chimerical mouse she had adopted.

"Thank you," she whispered so quietly the fountain nearly drowned out her words. "But you must get help to Fizzlewig. The awful things that hurt me attacked us."

Morgan took off sprinting toward the Toybox arms pumping at her sides. Wulf followed behind just as soon as Ellen indicated she would look for more help.

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Back in the Toybox, Fizzlewig confronted two boggarts even as he tried to recover his equilibrium. Where could they all be coming from? Although he was tiring from the attack, the reinforcements of brave Kithain gave him hope he had not had when the Thallain first attacked.

He had seen the ogre grab Ellen as she was leaving and sling her across the street. He hoped she was alright. The lightning fast attack that followed on that cruel action had taken the few changelings in the coffee house by surprise. He felt the worst for Dinko, the pooka, who had just changed to dog form to better enjoy the roast beef Fizzlewig had served him. He'd been running ever since, trying to escape or find a place to change form so he could fight more effectively.

Salizska, the eshu, had just arrived from the Chicago area and hadn't felt like attending the ball. Fizzlewig had to wonder if she regretted that decision now. He saw her gliding across the room in pursuit of a boggart menacing Dinko. The tide of the fight had turned in their favor, at last.

The feisty boggart was having a difficult time of it now that he was surrounded on three sides by the boggarts. Cameron's attention was wholly taken up by the fir-bholg. Fizzlewig recalled a bit of lore he had learned about the horned monsters when he was younger. It seemed that wherever they appeared, they brought chaos in their wake. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that effect in action when Cameron's sword turned a strange flip in the air then dropped to the floor. The Liam sidhe barely ducked the slash of the fir-bholg's battle axe, rolling to recover his weapon.

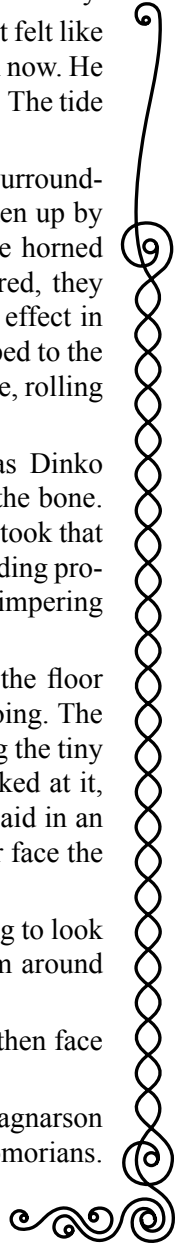
A boggart scratched a shallow wound in Fizzlewig's calf just as Dinko flashed out from under a table and bit into its leg, tearing it almost to the bone. The boggart screamed and turned to confront the dog pooka. Fizzlewig took that opportunity to slice into its shoulder blade. The boggart went down bleeding profusely. Dinko continued harrying it until it threw its weapon aside whimpering piteously, "I surrender, I surrender!"

Salizska, the eshu, took down her opponent and left it lying on the floor barely breathing. She looked up to take stock of how the battle was going. The door to the Toybox burst open as Morgan and Wulf rushed in, bypassing the tiny ogre who sat on the floor blubbering at its loss of stature. Morgan looked at it, manifesting a tiara on her head and, slapping a glove through the air, said in an angry voice, "Get out all of you who are not friends of this freehold, or face the wrath of the Eiluned!"

The ogre and boggarts beat a hasty retreat out the door, barely daring to look at Morgan who stood like a queen, her Glamour crackling like a storm around her. The fir-bholg was not so easily routed as its minions.

It spoke to Morgan. "If you are the ranking warrior here, Eiluned, then face me and prove which of us deserves to rule."

Wulf called out, "She is not the ranking warrior. I am. I am Wulf Ragnarson of House Aesin, ancient foe to your kind and sworn enemy of the Fomorians.



I stand as her champion in this battle. If I win, you will quit this place and not come back on pain of the true death.”

The fir-bholg cocked its antlered head for a moment, then replied, “I am commanded not to risk myself further in this confrontation. We will meet at some later time, Aesin. For now, I take my leave.”

The pooka growled at the fir-bholg as it made its way from the building.

Cameron looked around, “Is everyone alright?” he asked, then “How is the sluagh girl?”

“She will recover,” Morgan replied. She moved over to hug Fizzlewig and used a bar towel to bind his wound.

Salizska spoke, “I was planning to go to the castle after the ball and ask for hospitality. May I instead ask for yours?” she inquired of Fizzlewig.

“Of course, I grant it,” he replied.

“Then I will remain here for the evening and tell this tale to Duke Aeon’s court on the morrow,” she said.

“Agreed,” said Fizzlewig, beginning to put himself back together. “Let’s get this mess cleaned up, then have a nice pot of tea. Will you all be staying?”

Georgia and Morgan declined, and the cabbie offered to get Morgan home. The rest really had nowhere else to go and so accepted the invitation. Each went to their own small room that Fizzlewig kept for overnight visitors, except for Dinko. The dog pooka settled in front of the now-locked door, guarding his friends and his half-eaten roast, and promptly fell asleep.

chapter seven: suitors



Sir Kennevan LaTour was the first suitor Alera accepted for a date. He won a few points with the princess and her eshu friend when he graciously permitted Laya to join them over dinner. The princess had accepted his invitation to dine at the Franciscan Crab Restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf, since she loved seafood. She hoped there was more to him than good taste. As the three sat at their table looking out over the water, he opened the conversation with a compliment,

"Princess Alera, I was most impressed by your grace and handling of so many guests when we met in the receiving line at the ball. I regretted then that we did not have more time to talk together."

"Yes," Alera replied simply, and waited for him to continue.

"I hope you also extend your abilities to encompass the problems facing the fae in the modern world."

"That's very kind of you to say," Alera replied. "You're right, also. I do want to help ease the difficulties many of us face, including commoners. She glanced fondly at Layla, then turned back to her date.

"Tell me what it is you do, Sir Kennevan."

"I am a warrior and mystic of House Beaumayne," he stated.

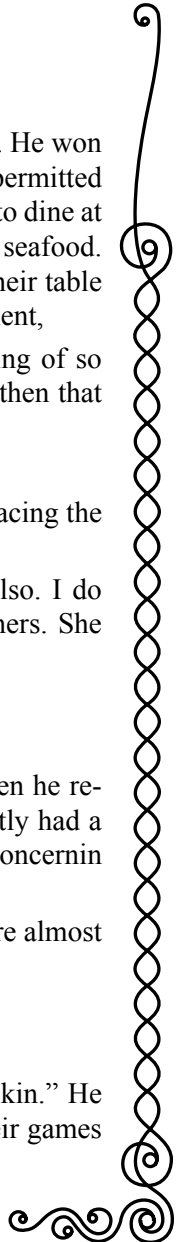
He looked past Alera and Layla, his eyes slightly unfocused. When he returned his gaze to his dinner companions, he continued, "I have recently had a vision involving the Duchy of Golden Gate and a feeling of forboding concernin your safety, Princess."

Alera's eyes opened widely, while Layla's narrowed until they were almost slits in her delicate-featured face.

"Oh?" Alera responded, not sure what else to say.

"Can you be more specific?" Layla asked.

"Only that I fear you have somehow become a target of the dark-kin." He looked directly at Alera. "I'm not yet sure if you are but a pawn in their games or if you play a larger role in their plans whatever those may be."



"I see. Are you interested in me as a prospective match?" Alera asked. "Or is your primary interest in your vision and its interpretation?"

"I'm afraid I can't separate the one concern from the other at present."

"Then, until you can better interpret your vision, perhaps you should concern yourself with its study and leave your role as suitor for a later time. Thank you for the dinner, we shall see ourselves home. You are welcome to stay at the palace as long as you need to."

The Prince of House Daireann, Eamon O'Readheigh, was pretty, but had no head for history. The two young sidhe had strolled through a museum together, Alera listening while Eamon expounded upon the various artists and movements in art over the centuries. She had countered by asking why, if these artists were so amazing, the Kithain had not protected them from notoriety and therefore preserved their Glamour. Eamon didn't know the answer to that. So, he'd made one up.

"Well," he said, "Back when most of these artists were producing their great works, the sidhe had left for Arcadia. The only ones left were mostly commoners and they didn't know how to conserve artists and Dreamers. They needed us to lead them."

"Uh-huh," she had replied in disgust and disbelief.

Eamon had insisted on a carriage ride home because it was so romantic. He only tried once to claim a kiss, and Alera had managed to put her hand on his chin to stop him. His score in the Husband Sweepstakes? Zero, as far as Alera was concerned.

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Duke Mondrian of House Danaan, Alera's third suitor, had heard that the attempts to pair off Princess Alera with sidhe from other noble houses was not going well. He thought he knew why. The young sidhe lords he had met before the ball were nice enough, but each was only interested in his own concerns. They, and a few others like them, were here to win the princess and secure an alliance, not to meet someone with whom they would spend a life and find love. In short, few of them extended the effort to learn about Alera, the person.

He knew that he was supposed to gain Duke Aeon's help in controlling the gates and trods of the Dreaming. Rather than lie to Alera, then, he decided to come right out and explain the situation. Perhaps he could gain her help without the need to become more than friends. If it came down to it, he could offer to marry her, if that was what she wanted. Then, he would treat her as an honored wife. He hoped it would be enough.

He waited, in a small salon, gift in hand, to meet with the princess. The door opened, not on the princess, but on her friend Layla. He stood and gave her a short bow. "Layla, what a surprise!"

She looked him over, then said, "I am here with apologies, Duke Mondrian. Alieria sends her regards, but she has been detained and will be a few moments late. I hope that you can excuse her."

"Thank you for letting me know. It's no problem to wait a short while. I understand she has many duties. But if something serious detains her or if she has taken ill, we need not meet today."

Layla nodded, impressed that he considered Alieria's needs.

"Hm. Thank you."

"You're a good friend of hers, no?" the Danaan duke confirmed. "I've seen you together, and from the way you make her laugh, you seem close. For that reason, I would ask you to tell the princess that I am not primarily here as a suitor, but as an ambassador who hopes to make friends here in Golden Gate. She need not see me at all, if that is her preference."

"Seriously, she's just late," Layla replied firmly. "She isn't just blowing you off."

"I understand, dear lady. That was not my thought. It was simply an offer to spare her any matchmaking she doesn't want."

The door opened again, and Alieria entered, saying, "Good. I'm feeling frazzled today."

"Ah, Princess Alieria, I am happy to see you are plain spoken. Am I to take it that you were listening?"

"Absolutely not!" Layla cried, "Lady Alyssa would never forgive either of us for listening at doors."

Mondrian chuckled, "Then we understand one another," he replied. "Whether we are to woo one another or not, I brought you a gift. I hope you'll accept it in the spirit of friendship."

He held out to her a small box wrapped in a colorful red scarf and tied with a silver ribbon.

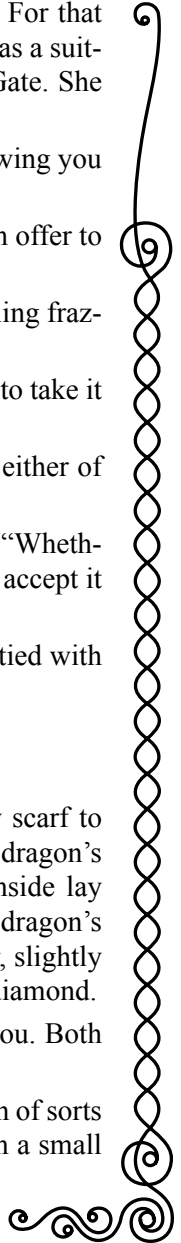
The princess smiled. "Thank you. Should I open it now?"

"Please do," Mondrian replied.

She unwound the ribbon and laid it aside, then opened the gauzy scarf to reveal a black box etched with the emblem of House Danaan, a black dragon's head. "It's lovely," Alieria commented, opening the small package. Inside lay a silver chain with a silver medallion decorated with a cutout of the dragon's head she had just seen. Beside it lay a second silver chain with another, slightly smaller medallion, this one a matching dragon's head carved of black diamond.

Layla oohed, her eyes wide. Alieria looked at Mondrian, "Thank you. Both necklaces are beautiful, but why two of them?"

"Because they are not both for you, princess. The silver one is a twin of sorts to the first. It is for Lady Layla. The black one is for you. Both contain a small



infusion of Glamour special to my house. We are called Pathfinders because we travel the trods and guide others along them. With these two items, one of you can always find the other, even when within the Dreaming. Further, while worn, it will allow you to find a guide from House Danaan should you ever become lost in the Dreaming. I hope you will both accept them.”

Aliera beamed, an expression that transformed her into an ethereal beauty. “How can we thank you?” she exclaimed. “This is a marvelous gift for both of us.”

“I hope you never need it,” he said. Then he too smiled and said, “I hear you like video games. Would the two of you like to play some at the arcade?”

“Rather than get all dressed up and pretend to like escargot?” Aliera laughed.

“Assuredly,” Mondrian chuckled, green-brown eyes lighting in pleasure.

“What are we waiting for then?” Layla asked, “Are we making bets on who wins?”

“Don’t you dare, Layla, he’s too nice for you to fleece. Last one out the door buys the treats,” Aliera called as she made for the hall.

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Morgan came to say goodbye to Aliera and Layla before she left for the coast to begin her journey to meet her oathmates. She found Aliera in a tizzy. “Oh, Morgan, I’m so glad you’re here,” the princess cried.

Uh oh, what’s wrong now? Morgan wondered. Aloud, she asked, “What’s up?”

“She has another date,” Layla interjected.

“Oh dear, not that!” Morgan teased.

“I don’t want to go out with this fellow at all,” Aliera confessed, “But Aeon says I must at least meet with all my potential suitors. It’s just not fair!”

“Does he frighten you or disgust you?” Morgan queried.

“He’s not bad looking...” Aliera began.

“Well, that’s no surprise,” Layla added, “He’s a sidhe.”

“I’m supposed to meet him in the park. Could you go with me? He’s so rough and mean.”

“Naturally I’ll go with you, but if he is so bad, why go at all? Who is it that you don’t want to see?”

“That boorish one from Norway. He’s Aesin, and they’re all about fighting. They’re also Unseelie.”

Morgan couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing. “You two really did get off on the wrong foot, didn’t you?” she asked.

“You weren’t there, Morgan. First, he claimed me for his wife, never mind what I wanted. Then when I objected to being traded like a sack of grain, he told me he didn’t want me anyway. He came to fight. He’s rude and crude.”

“Okay, come with me. We’ll clear this up. And the good news is, if you still don’t like him, you’ve done your duty and can safely write him off.”

The two sidhe walked together to the park, a small area that had recently been reclaimed from the slum it had threatened to become. It covered three blocks that had been occupied by a liquor store with barred windows, a corner grocery and deli, an e-cig shop, and a couple of storefronts for beauty products and knockoff purses. As they arrived, they saw a few people strolling around, a couple throwing frisbees for their dogs, and a group of four teens sitting on a blanket, studying. Though there were a few trees, none were large enough to hide Wulf had he been there.

“Hm, well he isn’t here, let’s go home,” Alieria declared.

Morgan laughed. “Oh stop. Let’s at least give him a few minutes. You’re early.”

They walked about looking at the bushes and late flowers for a few minutes. Morgan assured Alieria, “He isn’t as bad as you think. I spent a time in his company at the ball and he’s actually quite sweet.”

“I hope you’re right,” Alieria groaned.

A minute later, they spotted Wulf ambling down the street toward the park. The tall sidhe lord wore worn jeans and scuffed boots with a pale blue shirt and a denim jacket. He looked completely different from the armored knight Alieria had met the night of the ball. Several people turned to stare after him as he passed.

Morgan waved and Wulf smiled, his serious expression transformed into Hollywood screen star glory.

“Good day to both of you, Princess and Morgan,” he greeted them as he came up to them.

“Hi, Wulf,” Morgan replied. Alieria still seemed a little cowed. Wulf towered over her.

Alieria finally blurted out, “You look different.”

“So do you,” he returned, “I apologize again for my mistakes when we met. I was not prepared to meet you in the manner you deserved.”

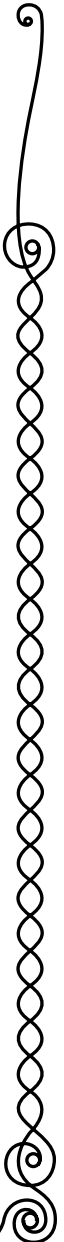
Surprised by his apology, she returned, “No. *I’m* sorry I was rude to *you*. I suppose I was unprepared for you as well.”

“Would you like to go somewhere for this date we are supposed to be having, or shall we just talk?”

“Would you mind just talking?” the princess asked.

“Not at all. Morgan, would you like to stay with us?”

Morgan appraised Alieria to see if she still wanted backup. She gave Morgan no sign, so Morgan said, “I was just on my way out of town. I’m meeting some old friends.”



“Should you be going alone?” Wulf asked.

“I think I’ll be fine,” Morgan said, “I often visit my friends on the coast for weekends or a quick vacation.”

“I’d like to escort you, nonetheless. Those dark-kin might know you visit Fizzlewig and try to harm you or your friends somehow.”

Aliera remembered Sir Kennevan’s vision and though it seemed to involve her, she was suddenly concerned for Morgan.

“Yes, please take an escort, Morgan. Who knows where these Thallain might strike?”

“If you insist,” Morgan smiled.

The sound of screeching, tires making impact, and an animal’s sharp cry cut all three of them short. The car that had hit the dog revved and sped away from the scene. A few people ran toward the animal, one trying to use her phone to take a picture of the reckless driver’s license plate. Wulf joined the small crowd kneeling beside the suffering animal. He checked over the scraped and bloodied parts and did a quick assessment. Then he carefully picked the dog up and started back toward Morgan and Aliera. Someone shouted, “Don’t do that!” Another yelled, “Hey! That dog needs a vet.”

Wulf stopped only for a moment, then answered “I *am* a vet.”

He told Morgan, “You’d better call Georgia. I have nothing here to treat him. Do you know any vets nearby?”

Morgan looked at him, “Can’t you just, you know, fix him up?”

“Too many mortals,” he whispered.

Aliera finished texting, thrust her phone back into her pocket, and said, “She’s on her way. It’ll only take a moment.”

“Thank you,” Wulf said.

“We can get ourselves home,” Morgan offered.

“Yes, I’ll need to go with him,” he said, indicating the dog in his arms. “Be careful, both of you. And Morgan, please let me know what’s going on with you.”

The cab arrived, and Georgia helped him settle the dog comfortably.

“Princess Aliera, please forgive me for such a short date. Perhaps we can meet another time,” Wulf offered as he climbed into the cab.

“No problem,” she answered hastily.

Aliera and Morgan returned to Nob Hill. “He does seem nicer than I thought,” Aliera commented. “But I still got no vibes that he wanted to date me. *You* on the other hand...” Morgan laughed aloud

“Oh, I’m sure I don’t want to date you, silly.”

Aliera gave her an arch look, “You know very well what I’m saying, Morgan Daniels. He seems interested in *you!*” “Don’t be silly,” Morgan replied quickly. “He’s just friendly. And I’m leaving town.”

“Maybe not, but I’d keep it in mind if I were you. Do what you need to do and come back to us quickly. I have the feeling we’re all going to need you.”



Yvgeny Varich, the Unseelie who Aeon had cautioned Alieria might be unable to love, had been watching how Alieria’s various dates went and was certain she would pick him over any of the others. He approached her with a small bouquet of white roses set among deep green leaves and tied with a red bow. He had asked around at the court trying to find out what Alieria liked to do. His intent was to let her choose one activity from a list of three that she’d like best for their date.

His only regret thus far was his failure to get Layla firmly on his side. He had quickly identified the eshu as Alieria’s confidante whom he would need on his side in order for the princess to choose him over of the others. Intent upon impressing both of the young women, he tried to discover what they each wanted most. He suspected the princess just wanted to be treated like an adult who could and should make her own decisions. But Layla: did she crave more respect? A title of her own? Once he figured that out, he knew he’d win.

Layla entered the salon where Yvgeny waited. “Hello. The princess will be here in a moment. Did you require anything while we wait?”

“No, indeed Lady Layla, I’m happy to wait for her. You are a great friend of hers, aren’t you? Do you know what the princess prefers to do with her time?”

Layla cocked her head, looking him over and saying, “She likes many activities. Which did you have in mind?”

Yvgeny shrugged, “Perhaps we should keep it simple to start

Layla kept her thoughts to herself, giving him a small smile as Alieria entered the room.

Yvgeny stood for the first time, hardly noticing that he had not stood for Layla, an almost certain clue that he thought of her as a servant.

“Princess, how delightful to see you again. Layla and I were just discussing where you might like to go. Have you any preferences?”

“I’d actually like to get some lunch,” she added. “I missed mine, and I’m famished.”

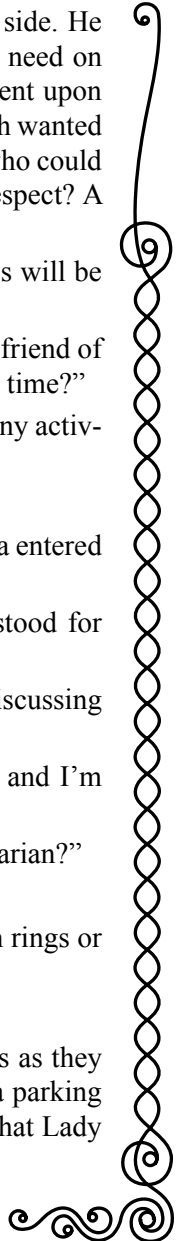
“Say no more. Your wish is my command. Foul, fish, beef or vegetarian?”

Alieria laughed, “How about a hamburger some place quiet?”

“That sounds amazing,” he returned, “But only if we can get onion rings or fries with it.”

“Sounds like a plan. I know a good place.” She offered.

He drove them further downtown, talking back to the other drivers as they traveled. Alieria made a few gestures and an odd coughing sound and a parking space opened for them right ahead. She laughed, secretly wondering what Lady Alyssa would think of her mastery of Layla’s Wayfaring talents.



Aliera sighed happily as she ate her burger. "This is wonderful, but shouldn't we be terrified?" she asked conspiratorially.

"Um, maybe. But why? Yvgeny questioned.

She giggled, "Because we're tempting fate, being in a Banal joint and savoring the food and atmosphere here."

He laughed. They polished off their meal, and Aliera felt she needed to go, so they did so.

Yvgeny drove them around and listened attentively as Aliera talked about how the dating was going, her reluctance to put herself on display, and how she just felt out of step with them all.

Yvgeny assured her, "I understand exactly how you feel, and I heartily decry the customs that would make you go through so much. I value someone who is intelligent and willing to reach for change to keep their lives from becoming stagnant.

"For example," he confided, "I do not understand why I must be doomed to live without love just because a long-ago ancestor had his heart broken. I am certain that if I found the right woman, she could elicit those feelings in me, and I could be free to love her back."

"Can you do that, though?" Aliera asked.

"I don't see why not," he replied, "The curse came into being from the actions of fae. It seems to me that fae dedicated to breaking it could do so. I just need to find the right woman."

"Does it have to be a Varich?"

"I don't know, princess. I can only wait and hope."

"I feel that we are alike in our hopes and dreams for the future. I hope I may tell you that without sounding foolish," Aliera confessed.

Her heart went out to him. *What a terrible fate*, she thought. *He's not at all like the others. He wants love, and he needs my help. I feel a closeness between us already.*

Resolving to spend more time in private with Yvgeny, she enjoyed the drive back to Nob Hill. She was truly touched when he offered, "Thank you, Aliera. Nobody ever listens to me. You've made this a very special time for me and I can't wait to see you again."

Walking on clouds and moon dreams wrapped around with romantic fancies and a sense of challenge, she returned to her rooms.

chapter eight: Travels



She awoke to find herself in a verdant forest. Though she was alone and miles from any landscape she knew, she was not afraid. Looking down at herself, she saw a small body, her dainty bare feet peeking out from the hem of her pink and white nightgown. Her long, black hair was rumped from sleep. Morgan had just celebrated her fifth birthday and held in her arms her favorite present: a stuffed rabbit wearing a bright blue bow around its neck.

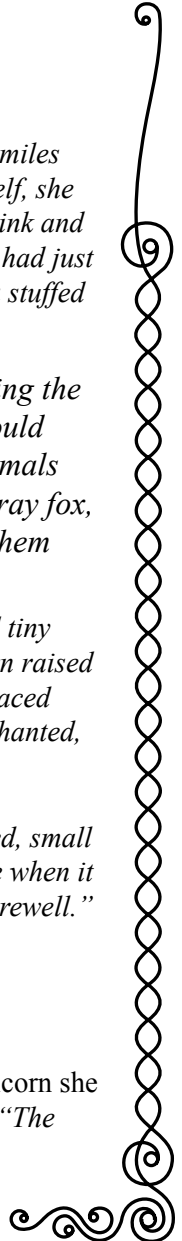
Looking up, she saw a crescent moon, its beams barely illuminating the forest floor through the lush foliage. It seemed to her that she should follow the moon, so she set off through the quiet forest. Small animals peeked out at her: a spotted fawn, a waddling porcupine, a shy gray fox, and a nimble raccoon each walked with her for a time. She told them stories as they walked.

At last she came to a clearing, a green space filled with wild flowers and tiny mushroom circles. In the center stood an amazing sight. A silvery unicorn raised its head at her approach and shook out its rippling mane. The unicorn paced over the grass until it was only a few inches away from her. She was enchanted, so she gasped aloud, "You are so beautiful! May I touch you?"

"You may," the wondrous beast replied. "But you must return to your bed, small one. It is not yet time for you to find me. Your dreams will lead you to me when it is time. For now, we cannot know one another. I bid you welcome and farewell." Morgan called out, "Wait..."

But she found herself once again in her bed, now in the present.

She remembered her trip to Ireland when she was a childling and the unicorn she had followed to the Rider's Glen. "It must be time," she said to herself. "The Hidden King is calling."





“Hi, mom,” Morgan happily answered her door. “What’s the occasion?” she asked as she hugged her mother, a highly creative artist. “Do I need a reason to visit?” Alicia Daniels asked. Though not of the fae, she and Morgan’s father were enchanted so they could share this part of their daughter’s life.

“Actually,” she revealed, “I brought you a present.” She offered Morgan a small box. “Since you told us you’d be off traveling for a while I thought I’d bring over a going-away present to remind you of us while you’re gone.”

Morgan scoffed. “As if I’d need a reminder. May I open it?”

“Of course!” Alicia encouraged her.

Morgan opened the little box and found a dainty charm bracelet inside. The charms were silver, and each was delicately enameled with small artworks Morgan was certain were originals by her mother. The first charm was shaped like a woman. Her dark hair and black and silver gown clearly depicted Morgan. The next might have been mistaken for a lumberjack by mortals but was to fae eyes clearly a troll. “Grandfather!” Morgan breathed, clearly pleased. The third figurine was a small silver moon, symbolic of Morgan’s House of Eiluned. Next came Leigh, a red-haired lady knight wielding a silvery sword, and after her, a handsome black man clad in traveling clothes, but depicted with a subtle silver crown, his face unmistakable as Valmont. Almost seeming to leer at her from his panel, which came next, a smiling redcap stood with arms crossed as if daring anyone to judge him. He seemed to be caught between childhood and the half-grown look of a teen. The next to last figure showed a brown rabbit with long ears. “Rasputin!” Morgan cried. The last charm was shaped like a silver-white unicorn whose eyes gleamed with tiny sapphires.

Morgan was overwhelmed by her mother’s love and thoughtfulness. “Thank you so much,” she cried, “You’ve filled it with Glamour, and you even remembered Rasputin. Oh Mom, do you think he could really be alive?”

“I hope so, love. But you know that so long as you remember him, he’s not really dead.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m leaving later today,” Morgan said, “Is dad coming to see me before then?”

“He was hoping we’d meet him for breakfast before you go.”

“Then I’d better grab what I’m taking so we can go eat. Just both of you remember how much I love you.”

“We’ve never forgotten.”



As they had agreed, Morgan picked up Wulf to accompany her to Point Reyes to meet the selkies. He had insisted she not go alone, and she had relented not just because he emphasized the danger from Dark-kin but also because he

argued that he could be a go-between for the selkies while she was gone. She liked the idea that her selkie friends would have another protector.

The day was brisk, but sunny.

Wulf offered, "This scenery is unlike anything I've seen before. The ocean is so close, yet seems to go on forever. In my homeland, many fjords crowd our coast, breaking up the view of the sea. And," he added, "the weather is so much warmer here."

Morgan mused, "I'd like to visit your home someday." A thought occurred to her, "You can drive, right? I mean, you can take my car back to San Francisco?"

Wulf laughed, "Yes, baroness, I can drive. I even have an international driver's license. Does that surprise you?"

"Actually, yes," Morgan replied truthfully. "From the way you looked and the way you came on, I thought you might have stepped directly from ancient times."

"I supposed I tend to act like that so other people won't dismiss me as some silly wilder playing dress-up," he smiled. "My house *is* ancient, and we take our duty to overcome the Jotun very seriously. They are the greatest threat to both the Autumn World and the Dreaming, and we returned from Arcadia specifically to oppose them. Those beings you have encountered so far are only their cats' paws and lapdogs."

"Jotuns. Do you mean the Fomorian?" she asked.

"Differing names for different cultures," he answered, "But, yes, they are the same."

"That's quite a large undertaking."

"It is why my father sent me here. I had no great desire to marry, but he thought if we were to ask for an alliance, we should anchor it by wedlock. That is usually the way with my people. Family holds to family. Speaking of which, I finally got hold of my father to let him know I have arrived."

"So, what you really want in Golden Gate is an alliance to battle the danger?"

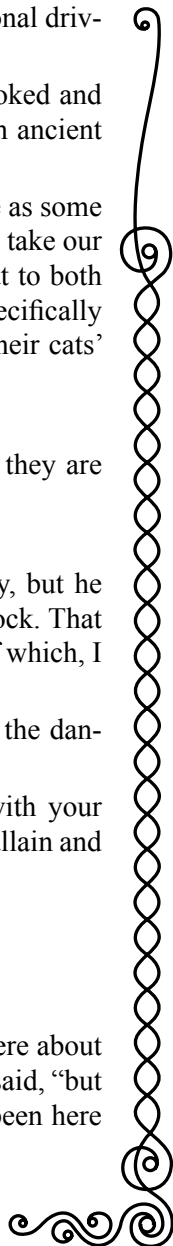
"Yes. And it seems as though we have partially achieved that with your Queen Aeron appointing me and the group I am with to root out the Thallain and dark-kin here."

"I see. They aren't your friends?" she queried thoughtfully.

"No, not yet. I suppose I'll come to know them better."

"It's always best to have friends at your back."

Morgan turned off onto an area that just fit her car and parked. "Were about an hour's hike to Point Reyes and the selkies' freehold from here," she said, "but it's not too taxing. I first came here when I was a childling, and I've been here several times since, visiting and hiking. We're expected."



“Good.” Wulf helped rearrange greenery until her car was covered, then followed her up a path. She handed him the car keys, saying, “Oops, almost forgot.”

They traveled in silence for a time until the trail opened out onto the top of a cliff looking over the Pacific Ocean. Wulf looked toward the roiling waves for a long time, then turned to her, smiling.

“Now we walk on air?” he kidded.

“Now we go down to the beach,” she answered.

“And me without my longboat...” he quipped. This time she laughed.

Step by careful step, they made their way down the face of the cliff, utilizing handholds worn smooth with time. As she climbed, Morgan thought back to the first time she’d come here with her oath mates. The rocky crags reminded her of her grandfather. She missed Tor so much and couldn’t wait to see him again. Beginning this journey was the first step to doing just that, so she descended with a lighter heart at the thought of their reunion.

Once they reached the beach, she motioned for Wulf to walk with her along its length for a quarter mile before coming to a separate cliff.

“Don’t tell me,” Wulf asked, attempting to keep himself from groaning. “We go up?”

Morgan laughed. “Yes, oh Viking prince. I thought you were made of sterner stuff.”

“I am put to shame by an athletic sorceress, I see,” he returned with enthusiasm. “Are you an Olympian in your spare time?”

“Hah. Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teased. “Did I hear you claim you were a vet when you picked up the injured dog?”

“Yes. I am a wildlife and large animal veterinarian in Norway. My house is very close to nature. Many of us claim to get along better with animals than with most people.”

“You ought to get along famously with the selkies then.”

She showed him the hand and footholds to use to climb the cliff to the top.

“The clifftop is the front porch of their freehold. If they want us to wait there, I hope that won’t offend you.”

“It will not, but I have just realized that you must have given them your pledge that I am trustworthy. Thank you for that honor. In return I give you my pledge that I shall remain worthy of your trust, and the trust of your friends. You have my sworn oath on that.”

Morgan turned to him as she felt the wind pick up, sweeping her hair off her neck and swirling around them both. She heard what sounded like a clear chime and she knew that the Dreaming had just witnessed his oath to her. Humbled, she reached out her hand for him to grasp and replied, “And you have mine.”

They reached the top of the cliff together. There, Morgan's old friend Ondine, leader of the freehold, greeted them. The graceful selkie had barely changed in the twenty years since Morgan had first met her. Her brown hair boasted a few grey ones here and there, but her green eyes were still bright and inquisitive.

She called out, "What people are these who approach my freehold with oaths on their lips and the sound of the Dreaming in their hearts? Ah, I see an old friend and a new one standing before me. Welcome to the freehold of Rocky Shore. You are welcome here. Come in and tell us how we may help you."

Ondine led the way inside the spacious, many-chambered cave that had long served the selkies of Point Reyes as a freehold. Morgan followed her friend, extending a hand to Wulf to lead him inside as well. The gesture seemed so natural to Morgan that it was only when she felt Wulf stumble uncharacteristically as he entered the cave that she realized he might not be used to such casual gestures. She quickly dropped his hand, deciding that she had made her intention of ensuring he felt welcome clear.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable while I let the others know you are here and bring you some refreshments," Ondine said. "There are some sea moss cushions in the baskets that might accommodate you nicely." Wulf retrieved a few of the large cushions, appreciating the natural materials they were made from, while Morgan wandered around the large room, admiring the intricate hangings on the walls, beautifully complex combinations of knotted twine, seaweed, shells, and other materials from the nearby beach.

Her fingers lingered over one of the newest hangings, tracing some of the delicate patterns that had drawn her attention.

"Do you like it?" The young selkie who entered the room came up to Morgan and hugged her warmly.

"Very much, Otter," Morgan replied, ruffling her hair. "Is this your latest?"

Otter laughed, her voice containing the sound of rain on the ocean. "I'm afraid it is. I'm trying some different types of knots that I just learned." Her voice grew silent abruptly as she realized someone else was in the room.

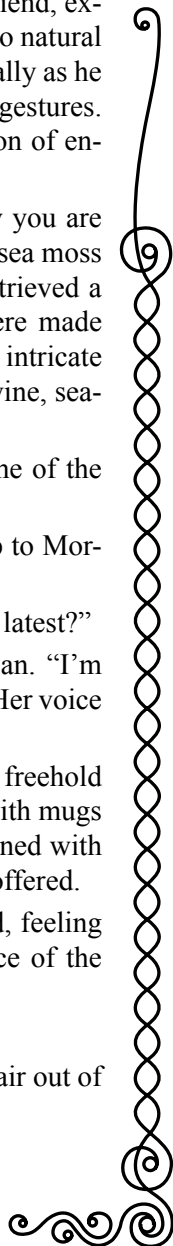
Morgan introduced her to Wulf as, one by one, other members of the freehold drifted into the main chamber. Ondine came last, bearing a large tray with mugs of spicy tea and a platter of thin cakes made from seaweed and sweetened with honey. "The local beekeepers supply us with seasonal honey," Ondine offered.

Wulf picked up a small carving of a dolphin made from driftwood, feeling the smoothness of the wood and the fine lines that delineated the face of the creature, caught in mid-leap, its body an arc of wild joyfulness.

"Whose is this?" he asked.

"I made that," a selkie wilder said, pushing his damp sea-colored hair out of his eyes and sitting down beside Wulf. "I'm Drifter."

"This is very fine," Wulf praised.



Drifter smiled. "I just started doing statues," he said. "I'm more used to making surfboards and riding them."

"I should like to learn to surf," Wulf said. "Where I live, the waves are not so good for riding."

"I guess you're not from around here," Drifter observed.

"I came here at my father's request to help fight the Jotuns and their lackeys."

Morgan started to explain, "He means the—"

"Fomorians," Ondine finished, then added, seeing how Morgan's cheeks turned pink, "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's okay," said Morgan. "I just assumed that because I had to be told who they were, everyone else did, too. My bad."

Ondine laughed. "We selkies know and remember many things. We just don't always know when something we know will be useful."

"Unless we dream about it," Otter said. "We knew you were coming before you told us."

Morgan nodded. She had discovered on one of her previous visits that Otter, who had become a good friend of hers, was also a true dreamer.

"I've been having a lot of dreams, lately," she said.

"About the Cup," Otter added.

"It seems that many of us have had dreams of the Cup," Morgan observed wryly. "I don't suppose you know any stories about it, do you?"

"I know of at least one that you've probably heard in another form," Ondine said. "The Cup can be whimsical in its demands when it is used," she said. "Often it exacts a price that is costly to the user." She took a sip of her tea before continuing. "The story I'm talking about is one that you know as *The Little Mermaid*."

"I suppose this is not the happy-ending version of the animated film," Morgan said. "I actually read Hans Christian Andersen's version when I was a child. My mother gave me a book of fairy tales that she illustrated, and it was one of the stories. I only read it once, because it scared me. I cried for days after I read it," she remembered.

Wulf looked puzzled. "I don't know this story," he said. "I think it must have been before my time." He gave his hosts an apologetic, self-deprecating smile.

"I think I remember enough of the story to tell it," said Morgan, "though I don't pretend to be as accomplished a storyteller as Ondine or my eshu friend Valmont." She grew quiet for a moment, as the thought of seeing Valmont and her other friends overwhelmed her.

"Nonsense," dismissed Ondine. "I've heard you tell stories to our childlings, and you have a way with words."

Morgan turned away, her blush creeping up to her ears. She took a sip of tea and a deep breath.

“A young mermaid lived with her father, the Sea King, and her sisters, in a castle far beneath the sea. Each of her sisters, when they turned fifteen, was able to swim to the surface once a year to see the world of the air. When each would return, the young mermaid would listen to their stories of what they saw, drinking in every detail and desiring more and more to see this strange world. When she turned fifteen, she could hardly contain her excitement as she swam to the surface.

As her head broke the surface of the water, she saw a large ship not far from her. On board, a young man in fine clothes was celebrating a feast in his honor, a birthday party, she learned from the conversation around him. She watched, enthralled, and in watching, fell in love with the young man.

But a great storm blew up, and the ocean swallowed the ship. The young man fell into the water and was near to drowning. The little mermaid swam to him, put her arms around him, and dragged him to a seaside temple on the shore. She waited nearby until some women from the temple found the unconscious young man and rushed to help him.

She returned to her home beneath the sea but could not forget the young man. She desperately sought a way to be with him, to have legs like a human, and to have a human soul. In her desperation, she turned to the Sea Witch and begged her for a way to join the young man on the land.

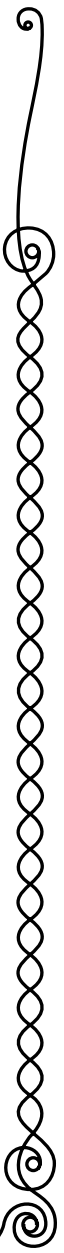
The Sea Witch told her she had a potion that could do that, but to gain her legs, she would have to give up her voice. In addition, her new legs would cause her excruciating pain. Each step she took would feel as if she walked on sharp pieces of glass. She would be able to dance with incredible grace, however, if she could stand the pain.

The little mermaid knew she could stand anything to have a chance to win the love of the young man. The Sea Witch warned her that once she got her legs, she could never again return to the sea. Furthermore, she would only have a human soul if she won the love of her young man and married him. If he married someone else, on the dawn of the first day after the marriage, the mermaid’s heart would break, and she would die, her body turning into sea foam.

The little mermaid was determined to find her true love, so she swam to the surface and drank the potion. Immediately, she felt as if someone had torn her in two with a sword. Her beautiful tail ripped into two long pieces and transformed into legs. She stood shakily on her new feet and felt pain like never before.

Her young man discovered her on the shore and, mesmerized by her beauty, took her to his home, a palace, for his father was the king of the realm.

Although she could not speak to him, she could dance. Every step sent shooting pain through her feet, yet she hid the pain from him, and the shoes she wore hid the blood that leaked from her wounded feet.



The prince considered her his best friend. She accompanied him everywhere and grew more and more in love with him. Her happiness was short-lived, however, for the king wanted his son to marry a princess from a neighboring realm. The prince explained to his father that he could only love and marry the woman who rescued him from drowning. The mermaid's hopes soared, for she knew she was the one who saved him. The prince, however, did not recognize her, for he had been unconscious when she left him at the temple, and he had never seen her as his rescuer.

The prince found out that the woman at the temple, whom he thought had rescued him, was the princess his father wanted him to marry. The prince declared his love for her and announced that the two would be wed.

Unable to declare her love or correct the prince's error, the mermaid watched helplessly as the prince and princess married at sea on a ship not unlike the one upon which she first saw him. She even danced at his wedding at his request. That night, she waited by the sea for the dawn, when she knew that her heart would break. Before dawn, however, her sisters came to her. They had seen the Sea Witch and had given up their long luxurious hair in exchange for a magical knife. The mermaid had only to kill the prince with the knife and let some of his blood drip onto her feet to restore her to her original form and allow her to return to the sea, to live out her life with her family.

The little mermaid thought about what she would have to do to regain her life. She could not bring herself to kill the prince she loved despite his rejection of her. As dawn broke, she threw herself overboard along with the evil blade. As her body hit the water, she dissolved into sea foam. For some days afterward, the prince wondered what had happened to his silent friend whose dancing brought him so much pleasure. Eventually he forgot about her, leaving only the family of the little mermaid to mourn her passing."

Morgan paused in her telling, before adding, "Later on, Andersen himself substituted a happier ending in which the mermaid, instead of dying, found herself transformed into a daughter of the air because her love and self-sacrifice had earned her an immortal soul. Some people preferred the new ending because it had more in common with other tales in which the heroes earned their salvation or success through sacrifices and good works. Others preferred the original ending. Though it was grimmer, it taught a different moral: people were happiest only when they did not stray beyond the confines of their social class."

"Neither ending is exactly satisfying," Drifter murmured, and several of the listening selkies nodded.

"That was a wonderful retelling of the tale," Ondine praised Morgan.

"Thank you," Morgan replied, "but I don't think I have the storyteller's flair. My versions of stories always sound like the papers I wrote for my psychology courses."

Ondine laughed. "I'm sure that your papers were quite interesting."

Ondine accepted another cup of tea from Otter, who had brought more food and drink for all. Morgan also took more tea, for the story had left her mouth dry. *An odd feeling to have after a story with such a watery heroine*, she thought.

“There is yet another version of the story,” Ondine said. “One which has special meaning for the fae. In this version, there is no Sea Witch. Instead, the little mermaid finds a beautiful seashell, and she realizes that she holds in her hands something made directly from the Dreaming.”

“You mean the Cup of Dreams?” Morgan guessed.

Ondine’s face lit up. “Exactly, except in this case it could be called the Dream Shell. She could use it to grant her wish, but she knew that there would be a price, one which she was willing to pay.”

“The rest of the story continues as the version you told, with one exception. The little mermaid realizes that she has gotten her wish, though she could not make the prince love her. In the end, she accepts her fate, but as her body becomes one with the foam of the sea, her spirit returns to the Dreaming, where it joins with the dreams of all merfolk. She returns the Shell to the sea, where it disappears, to reappear somewhere else where it might be needed.”

“That is a much better ending. Are other such tales as dark?” Wulf asked.

Morgan nodded somberly. “Many of them are because they were meant as cautionary tales, to impress upon people the need to stay away from dangerous circumstances, or not to trust strangers. Others are happier, or at least more satisfying. And many fairy tales have at least one version made for young children. Those versions were not so grim, which is one reason that mortal children become enamored with the idea of fairy tales.”

“Little do they know,” Drifter murmured.

“I know that my visit here today is because you agreed to open a trod to take me to Hibernia and Silver’s Gate, but I also think it was really important for Wulf and me to hear the story of the little mermaid — every version of it.”

Ondine gestured her agreement. “It seems that in one way or another, the Cup of Dreams is meant to come into your hands, at least for a time. I think the tale of the mermaid who did not consider all aspects of her wish is meant as a warning to you about how and when to use it.”

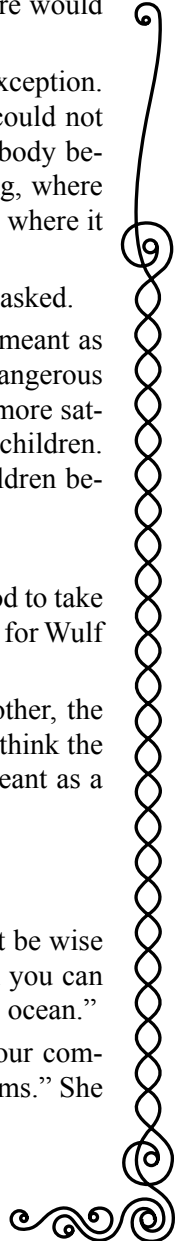
“Or whether to use it,” Wulf interjected.

Ondine looked outside the door to the freehold.

“It is a bit later in the day than I had expected,” she said. “It might be wise for both of you to spend the rest of the day and tonight with us. Then you can set out in the morning, when the Dreaming is particularly strong by the ocean.”

“I always enjoy spending time here,” Morgan said. “I find that your company and your exquisite works of art are food for my soul and my dreams.” She looked toward Wulf. “Do you mind staying here overnight?”

“I would enjoy some time with the natural world,” said Wulf.



"I can see if the surf is up in the evening," Drifter said. "Morgan's been learning, and I'm always happy to give lessons." His eyes sparkled with anticipation. Morgan saw that Wulf brightened with the prospect of learning a new skill, too.

"Why don't I show you the rest of the freehold," Ondine said to Wulf, "and we'll find a place for you to sleep tonight. Then Morgan can take you back down the rock to the beach. You might even see some seals."

"You can keep your eyes open for any interesting pieces of driftwood," Drifter said. "I'll see if I can find enough surfboards that are the right size for each of us, then meet you on the beach!"



Later that evening, Morgan and Wulf settled down for what Morgan feared would be a restless night of anticipation. Ondine insisted her two visitors sleep near the freehold's balefire, to draw upon its font of Glamour for their future travails: Morgan, for her trip to Hibernia and the Hidden King, and Wulf, for his return to San Francisco to take up the defense of Golden Gate.

All night long, Morgan could hear the relentless crashing of the waves upon the shore below. The sound brought her thoughts back to an afternoon spent in laughter as both she and Wulf tried their hand at surfing. Morgan had practiced a few times before when she had visited the selkies, but although Drifter had proven to be a patient teacher, their lessons most often ended with Morgan in deep water and Drifter changing to his seal shape to play in the waves nearby.

Wulf was a quick learner and soon mastered the basics of the surfboard, his serious face transforming into a beatific expression of joy as he met wind and water on their own terms.

As her thoughts drifted from surfing lessons to their sumptuous meal with the selkies, as they savored many of the sea's gifts, she found her thoughts lulled by Wulf's slow, steady breathing. She let her mind grow still and slipped into slumber.



Morgan stood at the top of a cliff looking down into the foaming water below. Farther out, the breakers of the ocean formed and curled on their journey toward the rocky shore. Rushing in to the rocks, the white caps rose and smashed apart against the cliff, the spray from the foamy water magically seeming to crawl up the towering stone to wet Morgan's face with its salty spray. She wiped her face with cold, wet fingers, closing her eyes against the briny liquid.

Unsure why she had come, she took a tiny step forward to peer down. But the cliff crumbled beneath her, and she began to fall.

Before she had time to cry out or try to save herself, she was borne up on a frothing wave. The wave transformed, and became what she had come to think

of as “her” unicorn. “You must be more careful, child of the Dreaming. I can protect you only so far,” he warned. “I know you well, but you do not yet see where I am leading you. Dream and learn, daughter of the Eiluned, and you will find what you seek.”

The unicorn turned to mist as Morgan awoke to the dawning sun.



Morgan and Wulf joined the selkies for a light breakfast before making the trek down to the beach and the hidden cove that Morgan remembered as the years rolled back for her. In her memory, the childling she had been once again watched with awe as Ondine and two other selkies performed a stately dance, as if they had come to life from paintings on an ancient vase. Once again, she stood by her grandfather, as she and the aging troll felt a wave of Glamour as earth, sea, and sky opened before them to reveal a small harbor. Instinctively, the young Morgan reached out to take Tor’s hand, only to find her fingers entwined with the unfamiliar ones belonging to Wulf. Quickly she withdrew her hand, wondering if the Aesin sidhe even noticed, as he seemed caught up in the splendor of the dance that opened the selkies’ trod. Its conclusion revealed a luminescent white swan boat, waiting to take her on the next leg of her journey.



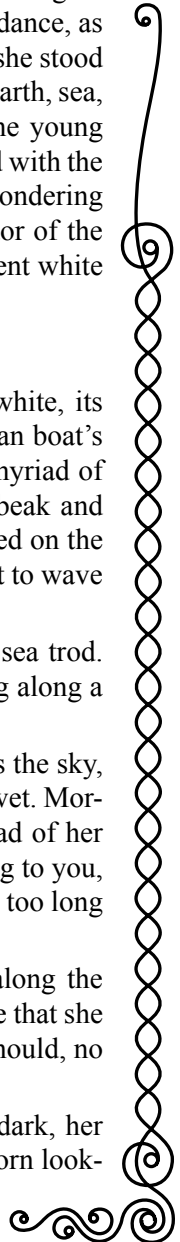
The sun rose in a glorious display of pink, salmon, and yellow-white, its rays spreading across the waves like an opening fan. The beautiful swan boat’s white feathers gleamed in the morning light, which splintered into a myriad of reflections on the water below. Morgan caressed the vessel’s golden beak and gracefully carved neck as she stepped down into the narrow boat. Seated on the white velvet cushions, she faced east, but turned back for just a moment to wave goodbye. On shore, the selkies and Wulf watched her depart.

Putting Golden Gate behind her, she sped forward on the silvery sea trod. She chased the day across sky, skipping from cloud to cloud, skimming along a watery path of tumbled aqua and silver.

It seemed to her that the sun rose and fell and stars careened across the sky, while clouds rained down silvery sparkles that left her neither cold nor wet. Morgan dreamed, and in those dreams, she sent scores of small birds ahead of her to her old friends. As the tiny messengers flew, they called, “I’m coming to you, I’m on my way! I’ll see you soon. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you, too long since I’ve heard your voices.”

The young sidhe felt neither hunger nor thirst. Simply moving along the path provided everything she needed to live, and oddly, she felt no sense that she needed to hurry. She would arrive at the place and the time when she should, no sooner or later. The Dreaming guided her journey.

Once, when Morgan awoke from a rest, she found herself in the dark, her swan boat drifting in circles. Sitting up, she saw the sea goat of Capricorn look-



ing into the boat at her. It stood on the water and stared at her with dreamy eyes.

“Leave this sea lane and come frolic with me across the ocean waves,” it invited her. “Here there is no cold bite and drear futility of Banality to age and ruin your beauty. You will remain a child of the moon and the sea. We can play together for an age and a day.”

She felt a clear temptation to be a part of what it desired. If she went with it, the Dream creature would keep her safe from all that was yet to come — and she saw a dark horizon awaiting her if she did not accept. Almost, she climbed from the boat, but she came fully awake. If she left the boat, she would never again see her friends or search for the Cup that called to her.

“I cannot,” she refused the sea goat sadly.

Awakening for real this time, she found the boat had gently landed. Waves lapped at her feet as she stepped out onto the Isle of Dreams. It was no longer underwater. Merala, the Selkie Queen, must have taken her people elsewhere to protect them once Silver’s Gate was opened. The trod still ended here, but the freehold was gone. Stretching herself to hike to Silver’s Gate, Morgan moved forward to reunite with her friends.

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Leaving the selkies with promises of aid and friendship, Wulf trekked back to the spot where he and Morgan had left her car. He cleared it of greenery, unlocked it, and folded himself into the driver’s seat. He nearly hit his head on the way in, and once he was crammed in, he had to slide the seat all the way back just so he could fit his long legs inside. Thankfully, the car started up immediately. He could just picture himself trying to get a tow truck to come help him so far from town.

He drove back to San Francisco, stopping for gas along the way so it would be full when Morgan used it next. During the trip he thought about why he was in Pacifica. He knew he needed to concentrate on foiling the plans of the Jotun, but he kept getting distracted by thoughts of Morgan.

You are all kinds of fool, he told himself. You were supposed to woo a princess, not a baroness. She isn’t even here anymore. She’s gone to meet her friends. And she’s given you no sign at all that she sees you anything more than a new friend.

Except: what about those two times she took your hand?

It was an accident. Don’t be a fool. Just stop it, Wulf. Pay attention to the fight.

Kicking himself, he returned Morgan’s car to her home, then made for the Toybox to make plans with the Kithain who’d been put in his path by the Dreaming.

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At the Toybox, Cameron, Jack, Doyle, and Fiona were holding a meeting. They expected Wulf back in a couple of hours. That would just give them time to hammer out a new plan and have a leisurely brunch.

Fizzlewig waved off any attempt to pay him, saying, “No, no! I’m here and alive and the Toybox is still here because of you. There is no way you’re paying for anything here.”

Cameron shrugged and put away his wallet. “Thank you, Fizzlewig, but since you’re providing us with a meeting place and allowing us to stay here, it seems imbalanced somehow.”

The old boggan went back to wiping the counter and cleaning mugs, cups, and glasses. “He raised a quizzical eyebrow and asked, “Any of you have a preference for which mug you use? I’m something of a collector and like to match particular ones with the person it’s for.”

Jack looked over the array, spotting a shiny black mug depicting a smiling mouth. “I’ll take that one,” he said

“Do I see an Irish harp on that green one?” Fiona inquired.

“You do, young lady, and it has shamrocks decorating the rim,” Fizzlewig noted, passing the cup to the clurichaun.

One bright blue mug was decorated with wheels and gears in brilliant red. Fizzlewig passed it to Doyle, asking, “Will this do?” “You bet,” the nocker chorled.

Cameron reached across and snagged a silver mug with green trees circling its middle. “I like this one,” he commented.

“Great,” Fizzlewig nodded. “You Protectors have your mugs now, except...”

“Protectors?” asked Jack.

“Well, yes, you need some sort of group name.”

“Cool! We’re superheroes!” Fiona grinned.

Doyle jumped in, “I’m more interested in hearing what you meant by “except.”

“Oh, that,” answered Fizzlewig, “I was given a joke mug a while back and I wonder if Wulf would be offended. He drew out a box and took out a mug that looked like a Hollywood-style Viking helmet, with two big horns sticking out from it.

Doyle took a look, crowing, “He might not be offended, but it would be hard for him to use it without putting an eye out.”

“Very true,” Cameron agreed. “We’d have to stop calling him Thor and call him Odin instead.”

The old boggan shook his head as the Protectors complimented him on the delicious meal and thanked him for their mugs.

Jack shouted, “Heads up!”



The door burst open. Three Thallain rampaged in, making a beeline for the colorful toy chest.

“Again?” groaned Jack and rose to his feet. Cameron and Fiona joined him, ready to battle the interlopers.

“Wait!” Doyle commanded. They hesitated. As the Thallain laid hands on the toy chest, a weighted net fell from a hidden position on the ceiling and enveloped them, dragging them to the floor, where a second net popped up from a trapdoor. The nets drew up around the Thallain, entangling them and dragging them upward. Now suspended a few feet above the floor, the Thallain yelled and struggled. Doyle ambled over to them, a content, catlike smile on his face. He looked at them from several angles.

“‘By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.’ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act Four, Scene One. Or, for those of you with a superstitious bent, “*that Scottish play.*”

He pulled out his shock stick, greeting his unwelcome guests with wicked glee. “Hello, irksome beings, have you noticed that these nets are metallic?” He pressed the control button on his stick, showing them the electrical sparks that flew from it. A more violent struggle ensued from within the net.

“Now, now,” he admonished as the other Protectors gathered around to watch, weapons at the ready just in case. “Keep struggling, and I’ll have to use this. Behave, and you may get out of this. But first, a few questions.”

“Yeah,” Jack pushed forward, “Why are you so interested in this chest?”

Nobody answered him. Doyle waved his shock stick toward them. One of the smaller thieves squeaked, “It’s full of Glamour, nitwit.” He grunted as one of his companions hit him in the cheek with an elbow.

“Cut it out,” Cameron commanded, “or you really might get hurt. Now answer our questions, or we’ll take you down and dump you someplace unpleasant for your kind.”

“Fine,” squeaked the smallest. “That’s the answer. It’s hard to get Glamour, and we wanted this because it has a lot.”

“I see,” Cam replied, “I suppose so many different Thallain have all attacked because they all selfishly want it for themselves. It must be difficult deciding who gets to try next. None of you are working together. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you aren’t working for someone else?”

“Nope.”

Fiona murmured to Doyle, “Is there a pooka in that net, or are they just terrible liars?”

Jack snickered. Cameron motioned for the group to move far enough away from the captives that they’d have a hard time hearing, then said, “I have a plan, but it will need a little time to set up. Can you keep them occupied?”

“Sure,” Fiona replied, “Want me to fight them one at a time or all together?” Doyle laughed.

Jack walked back over to the net and pulled out a serrated, sharp knife. “First one who shows any sign of casting a cantrip gets this in a soft, uncomfortable place.” He started going around the net, poking the knife at each of them in turn. He didn’t draw blood, but the pokes nevertheless made his hapless captives twitch and squeak.

Doyle started setting up some equipment around them, strange contraptions that even another nocker might have had trouble identifying. He swore creatively and continuously as he did so. He wasn’t really annoyed, since he wasn’t really creating anything, but he hoped it would cover any noises Cameron might make.

Meanwhile, Cameron spoke quietly to Fizzlewig. The two of them left for a few minutes, then came back carrying some items covered with bedsheets. They stacked the items and fastened them together to create a cube shaped item about two feet on all sides. Fizzlewig grunted as they hefted it onto a table close to the net. Cameron moved around the table several times, unwinding a ball of string as he went. He moved near the net and managed to tie a small piece of the string around one of the Thallain’s fingertips that protruded through the net.

He recited something that sounded like “rorrim, rorrim” and stared into the face of the Thallain whose finger he had captured.

“Who sent you?” he growled quietly, then barked out, “Speak! Show and Tell time.”

Fizzlewig whisked the cover off the object they had brought out, revealing a crazed array of mirrors. The startled captive thought the answer, though he still didn’t speak. The thought was enough. As Cameron watched the mirror, a moving image appeared in it. The Thallain group met outside a place with a sign overhead that read Tricksters. They waited for only a few minutes before a figure clad in a dark hooded cloak approached them, gesturing and speaking to them. The figure took a few small pieces of crystal out of a pocket concealed by the cloak and distributed them to the group. The Thallain departed the area in a different direction than the cloaked figure did, and the vision ended.

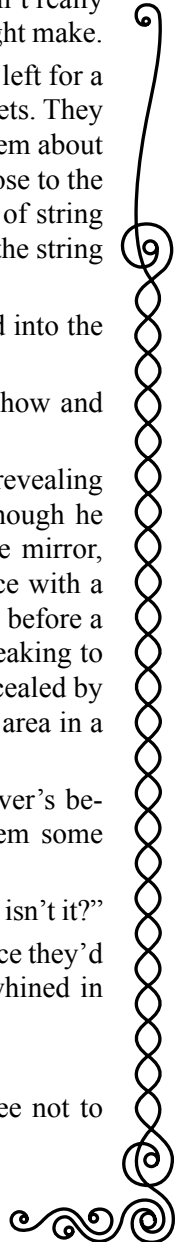
“Well,” Cameron joked, “That was enlightening. They met whoever’s behind this outside some place called Tricksters. He probably gave them some dross and sent them off, apparently to come here.”

He shook the net and the prisoners within. “That’s pretty much right, isn’t it?”

As if the proof shown in the mirrors had deflated whatever confidence they’d had, eroding their resistance to the Protectors’ questions, the group whined in unanimous agreement with Cameron’s assessment.

The leader offered, “Let us go and we’ll tell you all we know.”

Jack stepped forward and said, “No deal. You’ve got to also agree not to attack any of us or come against this freehold again.”



“That sounds good,” Fiona added. “But we need some way to hold them to their promises.”

“Very true.” Fizzlewig raised an index finger, volunteering. “I’ll see what I can do about that. Seeing as I’m presumably the injured party here, I’ll accept their binding oaths and attach a nasty penalty should they renege.”

“Sounds fair to me,” agreed Doyle. “Shall I undo the traps now?”

As he asked, the bell above the door to the Toybox jingled, and Wulf entered.

“What traps?” he asked, having only just overheard Doyle.

“The one you’re about to step into if you don’t *stop*,” the clever nocker replied. Wulf stopped and looked around at the netted Thallain. “Ah,” was his assessment of what was happening.

Doyle fooled around with the control box, then motioned Wulf over to where the rest of them stood around the prisoners. “They came in here thinking they could just grab the toy chest. We figured out where they went to get their orders, and we’re about to get a few more answers,” Doyle told him. He pressed another button and wound a small crank, loosening the nets and dropping the Thallain to the floor.

As the other Kithain encircled the three Thallain, Fizzlewig administered the oaths to them. “Should you break your oaths,” he intoned ominously, “any Glamour you obtain for the next year, will turn to dust in your mouths.” The Thallain squeaked and shuffled their feet, completely cowed. Each swore to keep the oath.

Their leader spoke quickly. “Okay, here it is. There’s a guy our people are calling the Pale Lord. He always wears a black cloak and keeps his face mostly hidden. He’s been hiring us to attack your kind and steal Glamour whenever we can, beat you up, and wreck whatever gets in our way. We just figure he’s some high-up in the Shadow Court. He pays us in cash and dross. We usually meet him outside Tricksters. I don’t know where he meets other groups. Usually, the work isn’t too hard. That’s all we know.”

Wulf crossed his muscled arms over his chest, dissatisfied with the explanation. “What is his connection with the Jotun?” he barked at them.

“What the hell is a Yotan?” the leader asked blankly.

“He means the Fomorians,” Jack supplied

The Thallain leader laughed. “What? Aren’t they all dead or sleeping or something?”

“So I’ve heard,” Jack answered. Turning to Fizzlewig he asked, “Are we through with them?”

The boggan nodded and added, “Go on, get out, and don’t come back. Stop working for the Pale Lord and go elsewhere if you want to prosper from here on.”

The Thallain wasted no time in vacating the Toybox, too spooked by the oath they'd sworn to linger or talk smack back.

"Can you really do that to them?" Fiona asked, looking at Fizzlewig with admiration and a little fear after they left.

"Nope," he answered, "Nobody could do that to anyone from the Dreaming. But they don't know that. Their oath to me was genuine, but my penalty for failing to keep that oath was just theatrics."

Doyle hooted and slapped his knee "You're a wily bugger, aren't you?"

Jack laughed aloud. "That's *boggan*, that's why they pay him the big bucks, and why they made him a noble."

"That actually wasn't the reason they saddled me with this title," Fizzlewig sighed. "But it probably helped."

"What do we do with this information?" Wulf asked, "Where is this Tricksters place?"

"It's a bar in Oakland, across the bay," the boggan told him. "It doesn't have a savory reputation, but I know changelings used to go there. I suppose the next move is to go see what you can find in Oakland. I'll call a couple of others to come in to help defend this place while you're gone."

Cameron spoke up, "I met a Count Elias at the ball. I think he was from Oakland. Maybe we can go talk to him about all this. Why don't you come with me, Wulf? The bar sounds more like Fiona, Doyle, and Jack's kind of place."

"Was that a slap at commoners?" Fiona asked, her hackles raised.

"Not at all, dear lady, but Jack and Doyle know a lot about security, and you were a bartender. Plus, you can more than handle yourself in a fight. I figured you'd be as perfect a group to investigate a bar as we could hope for. I doubt they'd respond favorably to either Wulf or me. On the other hand, I've talked with Count Elias. Introducing him to Wulf is a good excuse for our visit to him.

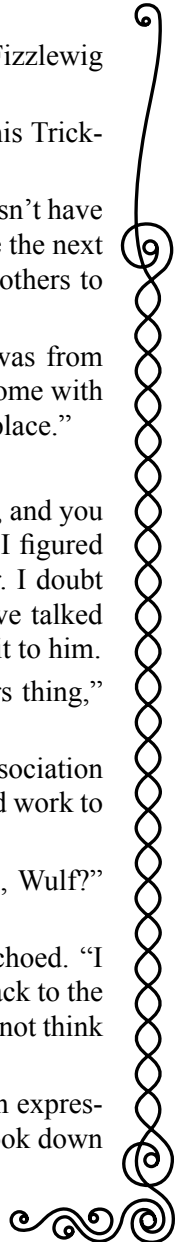
"Okay, as long as it wasn't a noble lording it over the commoners thing," Fiona grumbled suspiciously.

"Speaking of that," Wulf said, "I believe it is time we made our association a formal one. We should swear oaths to help and defend one another and work to accomplish the tasks we've been assigned."

"Are you sure you can unbend enough to accept us all as equals, Wulf?" asked Cameron.

Wulf's mouth dropped open as he considered it. "Equals?" he echoed. "I am unused to the way you organize yourselves here. My house came back to the Autumn World to warn you of danger and to defend you all, but we did not think of everyone as equals."

Fiona tapped her foot and folded her arms across her chest. A mean expression was forming in her eyebrows and the set of her mouth. "So, you look down on us and think you're better?"



Unhappily, Wulf admitted, “I suppose, in a way. I wish I had the words. Not that you are not equals each in your way, but that you are different. I am the dream I was born to be, and so are all of you. I was born as a dream of being a warrior and a leader. It is not something I can readily change. This does not mean I have no respect or liking for all of you, nor does it mean I cannot try to learn new ways.”

“Good enough for me,” Doyle shrugged. “Let’s do it. And we’ll try not to get after you too much in return.”

The group sat together at one of the tables. They each contributed ideas to the oath they finally took. Cameron administered it, saying, “By the light of the Dreaming, we swear, one to another, to help, defend, and respect one another and out differences. We swear to protect each other and other fae who need our help. We exact no penalties for failing to keep this oath except the loss of one another’s company and support. May we keep our oath and strengthen it in times ahead.” Each swore to the terms, and as each made the oath, they felt the flexing of the Dreaming as it accepted their words and made them oathmates. As a newly formed oathbound group, they left the Toybox with a renewed sense of purpose.



Tricksters had been around for almost as long as the Toybox. Some twenty years before, it too had been a coffee shop, but one that served beer, screwdrivers, and Irish whiskeys as often as coffee and pastries.

Though not a freehold, it provided an alternative for the Kithain who had no desire to frequent the Toybox. They considered Fizzlewig’s place to be a tame little tea party for Seelie weaklings, and Fizzlewig himself a sellout for accepting a title. In the past, its clientele had consisted of bikers, goths, and changelings — especially the Unseelie variety. Though most were commoners, a few sidhe disaffected from Aeon’s court met at Tricksters too. Sometimes, one of its back rooms had even hosted a few meetings of the Shadow Court.

These days, Tricksters had given up any pretense and just called itself a bar. They still had a coffeepot, but almost all its custom was in selling beer and liquor. A few crackers and pre-packaged sandwiches were available along with the ever-present pretzels and bar nuts. The bar and tables were worn and stained, and only a fool would ask what those stains were from.

Those who met there were different, too. Hardcore bikers packed the bar and started fights with anyone they didn’t like. Gangsta wannabes strutted in with their “crews,” sporting gang colors they probably had no business wearing.

Ladies of the night, mortal and Kithain, hung out or frequented the place a few times a night. Some leftover goths still turned up. A few slumming millennials could be found there from time to time, but usually got robbed, beaten up, or chased out. Unseelie changelings still considered it their hangout as well, and Thallain who could “pass” as regular Unseelie came and went. If the Shadow Court met there anymore, no one talked about it.



Doyle, Jack, and Fiona made a concerted effort to look as Unseelie as possible, soaking their hair in gel to make it look messier and greasy, adding a few rips in their clothing, and giving Doyle a fake tattoo. As a former mercenary, Jack was the most successful in adopting his look. They rode to the bar on motorcycles that Doyle acquired and “improved.”

The three entered the bar like they owned the place and took over a small table.

“That’s saved for somebody,” a biker snarled at them as they sat down.

“Yeah?” Jack answered. “They don’t seem to be here.”

The biker came to the table and said, “*You* won’t be here if I have to make you move.”

Fiona looked up at him and purred, “I’m sure we could work something out.”

“Oh yeah?” he answered, “You have something you think I want?”

She came around the table until she stood in front of him. “You bet I do,” she smiled, striking a pose.

“Give it to me then,” the biker commanded, leering.

“Gladly,” the clurichaun said, and clocked him cold with an uppercut. “Anyone else want some of this?”

The biker’s buddies looked to one another, perplexed. On the one hand, they’d just seen one of their own laid out by the stranger. They should gang up on her right now and beat her to a pulp. On the other hand, he’d started it by picking on the new guys, and he’d just had his ass kicked by a girl. Their leader leaned back in his seat, shook his head at his gang, and nodded to Fiona. “Pretty nice,” he praised.

Fiona flashed him a dazzling smile and replied, “You should see my friends.”

Doyle tried to look tough, but Jack just yawned. That settled it in the biker leader’s mind. These people were okay. He signaled for a couple of the others to go pick up their buddy and take him outside.

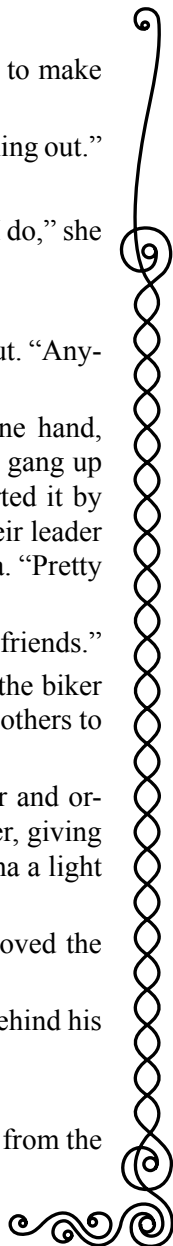
Since there didn’t seem to be any servers, Jack went up to the bar and ordered beers for them all. The guy working the bar messed up their order, giving Doyle (who had ordered a draft beer) a cheap gutter beer. He gave Fiona a light draft when she’d ordered a Guinness.

“Oh, for the love of...” Fiona began, then went to the bar and shoved the bartender aside. “Do you even know what a beer is?”

“Uh...” he gaped, not knowing what to do with this fierce lioness behind his bar.

“Where’s the owner?” Fiona snapped.

“I’m the owner.” A big, gruff guy with a thick, long beard came out from the back office. “You causing trouble?”



“The only trouble I see here is your bartender, who doesn’t know the difference between a beer and a lager or an ale and a stout.”

“And you do?” he asked.

“I’ve been a barkeep from Boston to Chicago. Haven’t lost my touch just because I’m on the west coast,” Fiona answered.

“Fine. You’re hired. You screw up or steal from me and you’re in the hospital, got it?”

“Charming,” she sighed, “Got a name?”

“Finn. Yours?”

“Fiona. Good to meet you. Always nice working with a fellow Irishman.”

Finn snorted, “Fellow Irishman, huh? What’s that make you? A leprechaun?”

“How’d you ever guess?” she laughed.

Finn tossed a few dollars the old bartender’s way and told him to get lost. The ex-bartender stalked out, muttering under his breath. Doyle tailed him on the way out and caught him in the parking lot.

“Hey!”

The bartender turned, puffed out his skinny chest, and snarled at Doyle, “Yeah? What!”

“Don’t get any ideas about messing up Fiona. She’ll thrash you, and then, when she drops you on your ass out here, her friends will roll in to take out the trash. Get the picture?”

“Ah, *whatever*, man.” The guy took off his dirty, wet apron and threw it into Doyle’s chest. Something heavy clinked in one of the apron’s pockets as it hit the Kithain.

“Get lost, and don’t come back,” Doyle called after him.

Doyle went back inside, going through the apron pocket to figure out what had hit him. Luck was with him: the former barkeep had given over his keys to Tricksters. He passed them of Fiona with a gleeful grin. This meant that they would be able to elicit information just as soon as the clientele got used to Fiona and stopped looking at them as outsiders. Fiona rolled up her sleeves, donned a clean apron, and got to work.

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Count Elias of Oakhold had ruled his fief for three dozen years — an accomplishment for an ennobled eshu charged with keeping the peace in his mostly Unseelie territory. He had outlasted challenges to his authority, false allegations of treason against his liege lord, Aeon of Golden Gate, assassination attempts, and the changing nature of his holdings. There was little cause to wonder why his hair had gone so gray.

In his time, Elias had ruled over a mostly working-class city thought of as a throwaway poor cousin to San Francisco and had seen that place evolve and become gentrified into the diverse — and sometimes divisive — place it was today. Oakland had improved its image overall, but still caused headaches for the Seelie count. He supposed it was only to be expected that he was receiving two sidhe for a meeting today: one a member of the sometimes reviled and mistrusted House Liam, (though he had found Cameron straightforward enough at the ball), and the other a brash warrior from the lately arrived Unseelie House Aesin.

Despite his reservations about these two emissaries from Duke Aeon, he smiled in welcome and invited them to sit with him in his office. He knew they might resent standing before him in a court setting. He had no idea what the Liam's actual standing was, but he recognized the Aesin as one of the princely suitors here to woo Princess Alieria.

“Welcome to Oakhold, my lords. I was surprised to receive your request for an appointment. How can I help you?”

Cameron took the lead. “Thank you for seeing us so promptly, Count Elias. May I present my oath mate, Wulf Ragnarson, warrior of House Aesin?”

Elias extended a gesture of welcome to Wulf, saying, “You are welcome in my court and my home.”

Wulf bowed slightly to the count, saying, “It is my pleasure to meet you, Count Elias.”

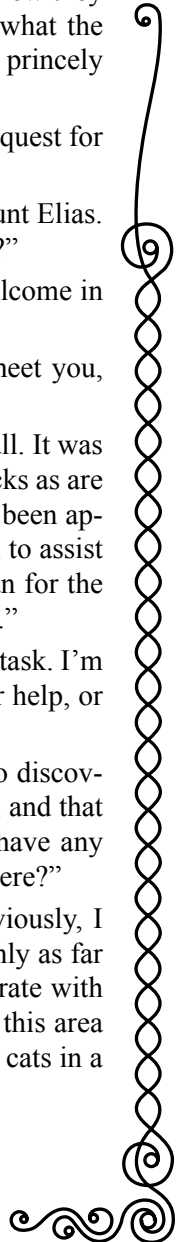
Cameron continued, “I remember our conversation at the duke's ball. It was my understanding that your people are suffering from the Thallain attacks as are the Kithain of Golden Gate. As you may recall from the ball, we have been appointed by Queen Aeron to identify where these attacks are happening, to assist in preventing further damage and violence, to recover whatever we can for the victims of the Thallain thefts, and to punish the ones perpetrating them.”

“A tall order,” the count commented. “But you seem well up to the task. I'm happy to provide any help that I can to you. Are you here to offer your help, or do you see a connection between my fief and the trouble?”

“Both,” Wulf answered, “We'd like to assist you, but we have also discovered a link here. Someone is paying these Thallain to make the attacks, and that person is apparently meeting them at places like Tricksters. Do you have any knowledge of this, or would you have any idea why they would meet here?”

Count Elias frowned slightly at Wulf's sudden questioning. “Obviously, I have no personal knowledge of these matters. My involvement goes only as far as hearing the complaints from my subjects and attempting to collaborate with the Duke. But I have some ideas born of my long years trying to hold this area together. Governing this fief is like trying to vaccinate three dozen wet cats in a full bathtub. Nonetheless, would you hear my suspicions?”

Wulf snorted. “A vivid comparison, Count Elias.”



“Of course, we would appreciate anything you could tell us,” Cameron murmured.

“You probably already know that Oakland has served as a haven for many Unseelie for too many years to enumerate. Not all of them are enemies to Aeon’s rule; they just don’t like all the pomp and old-fashioned ways of the sidhe. Others are more critical. Many of the Kithain here have genuine grievances — and some only believe that they do. Few of them come from the more affluent families; they’re working class, or else quite impoverished indeed. Some envy the sidhe with all their titles, money, and influence.”

Cameron leaned closer, clearly listening. Wulf had a slight frown on his face and toyed with a paperweight as he sat.

“In any case, Oakland has served as a haven for gangs and Unseelie groups of all kinds. Today, many of them are also flirting with making methamphetamines and dealing in opioids. That’s why we warn visitors here not to walk around neighborhoods to the west and south of the city — especially after dark.

“We’ve also suspected for some time that one of those neighborhoods shelters the Shadow Court, not the one that holds Samhain revels, but the real troublemakers. If I were you, I’d look there first, and at Tricksters as well. Meanwhile, I will put out new feelers concerning this “boss” you say is paying the Thallain. My agents will also investigate and send you word if we turn up anything.”

“Thank you, Count Elias,” Cameron told him. “We are very grateful for your help. Please let us know if there are more incidents here so we can try to assist.”

“Thank you for hosting us,” Wulf added. “We will do all we can to ferret out those responsible for these attacks.”

Hearing Wulf’s quiet chuckle as they left, Cameron asked, “What’s funny?”

“I am a vet. I said *ferret* out...well, never mind,” Wulf replied.

Supplied with a little more information than they’d arrived with, the two decided to check out the western and southern parts of the city before darkness made it any more dangerous.

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Wulf and Cam prowled around the southern and western portions of Oakland without running into trouble. The areas were run down compared to the rest of the city, and they felt tense at times when residents noticed them. Still, no one bothered them, or even questioned what they were doing there.

The city’s long history of poverty and gang violence was countered by its community pride. It had seen the rise of the Black Panther Party and of the late rapper Tupac Shakur. More recently, Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, had grown up in Oakland. Because the political past and present of the area fascinated Cameron, he filled Wulf in on all these aspects of the city while they were looking for evidence of Thallain hideouts.

Eventually, they gave up the search, realizing that as strangers, they would never uncover those who didn't want to be found.

Cameron called Doyle, saying, "We talked with Count Elias, and he mentioned a few places we could check out, but we didn't uncover anything."

Doyle replied, "That's too bad. Fiona got a job at Tricksters so it looks like we'll be in a better position to gain information for now. What are your plans for the rest of the night?"

"We're heading back to the Toybox to help guard it from anyone attacking while you're stuck at Tricksters. Will you be back late?"

"Looks like it. Don't wait up for us," Doyle laughed.



Doyle and Jack camped out at the small table they'd claimed when they first arrived. For her part, Fiona whisked around the bar, pulling beers on tap, serving bottled specials and sodas, and managing to serve food and drinks to everyone in record time. The boss checked on things a couple of times and seemed highly satisfied.

The bar filled up over the next couple of hours. Just after eleven o'clock, a group of Unseelie changelings entered and took seats near the bar at a table that had just been cleared from its last group. They were boisterous and a bit rude, especially when they noticed the new bartender was a female clurichaun. "Hey honey, why don't 'cha bring me a beer?" a redcap called to Fiona.

"Why don't 'cha come get it yourself, cappie?" she retorted. His friends oohed and laughed as the redcap got up to do just that. He sauntered to the bar and showed her his huge mouth with his sharpened teeth. Looking unimpressed, Fiona leaned closer and said, "That'll be \$3. I won't tell if you eat the bottle."

He laughed and said, "You're okay, honey."

"That's *Miss Honey* to you," she corrected, "You hang out here much?"

"I guess so."

"I'm new here, as you probably noticed," Fiona smiled. "I'd rather not piss off any of the regulars, you know?"

"Yeah, me and my boys are pretty regular here. The bikers hang here all the time. That couple over there, the two nockers working on that... whatever they've got, they're in here most nights. They probably wouldn't notice if you poured their beers on 'em, though. They're just so crazy about that box they work on. I once considered trying to take it away and look inside, but they'd probably remote detonate it or something."

"That's really helpful..." she prompted, offering a handshake.

"Chase. The name's Chase," he said, returning her greeting.

"I'm Fiona. I appreciate you telling me all this. I wouldn't want to make any mistakes and piss off the boss." She pulled another beer for him and pushed a



basket full of pretzels and a mustard dipping sauce his way. She reached in her pocket and stuck a few dollars in the cash drawer to pay for them.

Chase raised his eyebrows, "Cool. You paid for me."

"Well, yeah, you're helping me out."

He raised his eyebrows again, suitably impressed, then leaned across the bar to whisper, "There are *some* people who've been coming in recently who a nice gal like you should steer clear of. I don't know where they came from, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were wrapped up in these attacks and thefts around here. It's getting so an honest Unseelie can't steal any Glamour anymore." He laughed heartily from his big beer belly, and she joined in.

One of his gang came up to the bar, "Hey, babe, I want a beer." He turned to Chase, "You gonna chat this chick up all night?"

Fiona poured the beer for him, "Beer's \$3. You wanna call me 'babe' or 'chick,' it'll cost you more."

Chase laughed again. "Her name's Fiona."

"I'll let it slide this time since you're Chase's buddy, but don't try me again," she warned.

"Or what?" he asked.

"You don't want to know," she batted her eyes at him, and both the guys laughed.

"So, if those people you were talking about come in, can you let me know? I'd rather be prepared if they might cause trouble."

"Sure," Chase agreed.

"Beers for both then," she cooed, and put a few more dollars in the drawer.

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Jack and Doyle spent their time between nursing their beers, keeping an eye on Fiona, and trying to get a feel for the clientele. Most were only small players or fake toughs, but a few were probably planning heists or car thefts. If they weren't changelings, the two ignored them.

"I think I'm mildly disappointed," Doyle commented, "I expected it to be rowdier and a lot rougher. Most of them seem like they wouldn't do much more than start a bar fight."

Jack snickered. "I wouldn't say they're *that* innocent..."

Doyle cut in. "Okay, but you know what I meant. I wouldn't put it past them to try a little ravaging, and I wouldn't leave Fiona alone with a group of them, but somehow, they're just not as *bad* as the Thallain we've run into."

"I can see that," Jack murmured, but then prepared to eat his words. A new group had just entered the bar.

Neither Jack nor Doyle gave any sign that they recognized the newcomers as Thallain. To Jack's eye, three of them could easily pass for Unseelie redcaps rather than ghaists, but there was an essence to them that put his teeth on edge. The boggarts that accompanied the ghaists were far too unkempt to ever pass for a boggan, though. Their whole mean-eyed demeanor just screamed greed, malice, and general disdain for other people. The group slouched in and bumped a couple of annoyed sluagh from a large table, then sat. Doyle was praying that Fiona hadn't noticed. He might as well have saved his breath.

"Hey," she shouted from the bar, "We don't tolerate that kind of behavior in here. Those two are regulars. Who the hell do you think you are?" She came out from behind the bar, dishtowel in hand.

"You want a table? I'll clear that one for you." She walked over to another large table near the first and began clearing it off and wiping it down.

"So give it to the stinking rats," one of the ghaists said. "We want *this* table."

"Fine," she agreed, "but cause any more trouble and you're gonna get bounced." She made her way back to the bar. A couple of the Thallain group laughed at her, and one made a rude gesture behind her back.

She called out to them, "You want something, you come to the bar to get it."

"Tell, 'em, sister," a member of the biker gang that she had won over cheered.

One of the boggarts moved to the bar and put in an order for six draft beers. As she filled his glasses, the boggart grabbed the entire bowl of peanuts on the bar and reached for the tip jar. He jumped when a big hand closed over his and squeezed, making him drop the jar. Jack October stood tall and menacing as he whispered, "Try it and I'll gut you like the pig you are." Jack saw the other two boggarts rise and said, "And call off your friends, or we'll waste you all."

The boggart sagged in place and called, "It's okay. He's just gonna help me carry the beers over."

"Good call," Jack whispered, "And I *will* help you carry them. This doesn't have to be any more than it has been."

When Fiona set out the drinks, Jack grabbed four glasses and brought them to the table. The boggart took the other two and sat down.

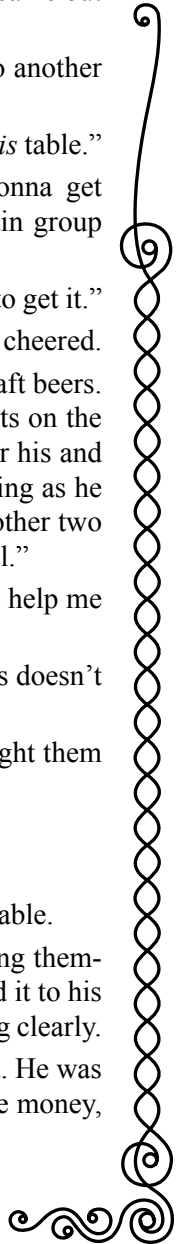
"No problems, here, right?" Jack queried.

"We're good," one of the ghaists said.

Jack mumbled, "I seriously doubt that," as he returned to his own table.

The Thallain behaved for the rest of the evening, just talking among themselves. Doyle pulled out an odd-looking, elongated earring and attached it to his ear. The conversation he was most interested in came through the earring clearly.

"They're wondering why their contact didn't meet them as planned. He was supposed to give them another job. Since they needed the dross and the money, they're a little miffed." He repeated to Jack.



"I wonder if this Lord guy knows we're here investigating," Jack speculated.

"I don't know," Doyle replied, "But all we can do is keep up the charade and hope he makes a mistake. It sounds to me like they don't have any more idea who this guy is than we do."

"Well, we can try again tomorrow. I have an idea I want to suggest to the whole group."

"Sounds good."

"Right, well, I'm going to go talk to those guys and see if I can get things set up."

"Okay..." Doyle sounded less confident, "Don't get yourself killed."

Jack went to the Thallain table and spoke to the ghaist who had been leading the conversation. "Hey, man, sorry about the trouble earlier. I was wondering: my friend and I are looking for work, and your group seems tough. Could you use some more muscle?"

"We're kind of between jobs right now," the leader said.

"You working for that Pale Lord guy?" Jack dared to ask. "I heard he's been stiffing the guys he's been hiring lately. Pissed me off. I do a job, I expect to get paid."

"Yeah," one of the other boggarts chimed in, spoiling for trouble.

"Anyway, we'll be back tomorrow night. My friend and I may have a job for all of us, or if you get onto something, maybe you can cut us in."

"We'll think about it," the leader replied, "Got a name?"

"Yeah, but you can just call me Jack."

He returned to his table with Doyle, where they settled until the bar closed after three o'clock. Finn tipped Fiona an extra ten besides what was in the tip jar and asked if she was coming in the next night. They bartered over her salary, then she headed out with Doyle and Jack. Outside, they found a couple of the bikers waiting for them.

"Hey, you guys need a ride? Those guys that came in late looked like they might try something."

"We've got our own bikes, but if you'd like to go with us —" Fiona replied.

Thus, the trio made it back across the bridge into San Francisco with a leather-clad escort. Once they made it to their exit, the riders waved the changelings goodbye.

"I think we've made some new friends," Jack observed at a stop light.

"Good, we may need them," Doyle commented, "especially if we're going to hang out with the Thallain for long."

"At least Wulf and Cameron can't say we just hung around a bar all day without accomplishing anything."

“Let’s see, ‘A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool’ Shakespeare, ...” Doyle began.

“What if we’re the fools?” Fiona interrupted.

“Then I guess we’re wiser than we knew.” Jack laughed.



When the three changelings arrived back at the Toybox, they found Cameron and Wulf involved in a debate about how to handle the Pale Lord.

Cameron passionately argued, “It has to be some unknown Unseelie doing this,” he declaimed.

Wulf snorted, “Don’t be naïve,” he scoffed. “The Pale Lord can only be a dark-kin or maybe someone from House Balor. They are the only ones these Thallain would obey.”

“Is anyone considering the idea that the Pale Lord might actually be a Pale Lady disguising her voice?” Fiona asked as she sat next to Cam at the table he’d chosen.

“Wonderful,” Wulf exclaimed. “Now we have even more suspects, and we’re already not making any progress. I really wish they’d come out of the shadows and face us directly.”

“Well,” Doyle broke in, “we might have a way to find out more about the Pale One, whatever their gender is.”

Both sidhe gave him their full attention. Doyle filled the sidhe and Fizzlewig in on their visit to Tricksters, including the fact that Fiona was now the bartender there. He added,

“You shoulda seen Jack, too. He slid right up to the Thallain and asked for jobs with their bunch.”

“Sweet,” Cameron allowed himself to voice the over-used term. “Seriously, congratulations! Sounds like you three got right in the thick of things.”

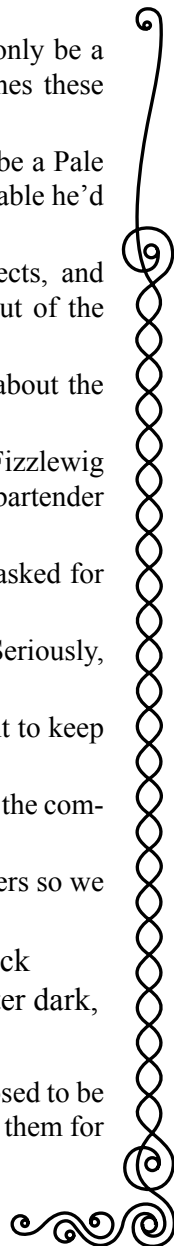
“We did,” Fiona confirmed, “and we’re going back tomorrow night to keep digging.”

Wulf morosely told them, “Cameron and I could not seem to fit into the communities we toured. I think you did a much better job than we did.”

“Should we try to disguise ourselves and hang around near Tricksters so we can lend a hand if you need us?” asked Cameron.

“It might be more useful for you two to report to Duke Aeon,” Jack suggested. “Maybe you could do that, then come into the area after dark, when you’re less likely to be noticed.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot,” Doyle added. “These guys we met were supposed to be meeting the Pale Lord, but he didn’t show up. I got the feeling he owed them for their last job, and they were expecting payment.”



"I tried to reinforce the idea that he might be stiffing the people he was paying to do all the break-ins," said Jack.

"Good work, all of you," Wulf said. "We'll see if we can't get him tomorrow night."

"Okay," Jack agreed, "but you two should step in if we give you a signal. We might need to keep this up longer than you might think."

"So, what's the signal?" Cameron asked.

"Jump in only if we pull weapons and start a fight," Doyle decided.

Cameron shrugged. "That's as good as anything else."

"We should probably get some rest so we can be fresh for tomorrow," Fiona yawned. "Remember, I'm on my feet working an actual job."

"If you call tossing drinks around and punching out the patrons at the bar a job," Jack teased.

"Oh, lay off her, or I'll pull all your teeth while you're sleeping," Doyle teased.

"Are these threats among oath mates anything to worry about, or are all commoners just like that?" Wulf asked Cameron, flashing a wink to make sure everyone knew he was joining in on the fun.

"Well, you know how we Autumn creatures are," Cam answered. "Our entertainments aren't as elevated as those of you Arcadian types."

"All of you behave and get to bed before you give me a headache," Fizzlewig declared. They all made their "good-nights," and retired to their various sleeping places, eager to catch the Pale Lord and his thugs on the morrow.

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The Protectors split up again the next day, with Wulf and Cameron making the trip to Nob Hill to speak to Aeon and fill him in. On the way, Cameron turned to Wulf, stopping momentarily. He looked up at his oath mate and asked, "Do you trust me?"

"Why should I not?" Wulf asked.

"Because I'm House Liam, and plenty of other sidhe claim we're oath-breakers," Cam explained.

"You are the first of your house I have met," Wulf returned, "I have seen no sign that you are not to be trusted. I have sworn an oath with you which was witnessed by the Dreaming. Why would that oath be accounted false if the Dreaming accepts it?"

"I'm relieved," Cameron said. "I know your family takes oaths very seriously, and I hoped to talk with you in case you had any doubts. I'm glad you don't." He smiled shakily.

"I understand," Wulf assured him. "Besides, if you break an oath to one of my family, we don't get angry, we just kill you and let the Dreaming sort it out." Seeing the look of shock on Cameron's face, Wulf burst out laughing. "I'm joking, Cameron. I swear, nobody here gets my sense of humor."

"I got it," Cameron said ruefully. "Just don't be surprised when I deliver some payback for it."

"No problem," Wulf laughed. "I deserve it."

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While the two sidhe were out, Jack and Doyle once again combed over the Toybox and identified every place they could think of that might be fortified or rigged with a trap. They and Fiona worked on booby trapping every square inch of the coffee shop until Fizzlewig called a halt to it. "How are my regular customers supposed to get in the door or sit anywhere with all these traps waiting to snare them, turn them into pincushions, or hit them on the head?" he asked, dispirited.

"No problem," Doyle told him, offering him a remote control with some buttons and a toggle switch on it. "This is a master control box. You don't even have to turn them on unless you want them working."

"Great — if it works with my fumble fingers," the boggan replied. "I will admit I can't see where any of them are set up. Guess I'll just wait until a bad guy comes in and hope nothing backfires on *me* when it's time to hit the Go button."

"I hope we're here when it happens. I'd love to see it at work," Jack mused. "Of course, we could not tell the sidhe about it and let them test it out, but that's probably a crappy way to treat our oath mates."

"Yes, it is," Fizzlewig sniffed. "Whose side are you on, Jack?"

"Good question," Jack answered. "How about I'm on the side I've made oaths with *and* the side that feeds me." He grinned widely.

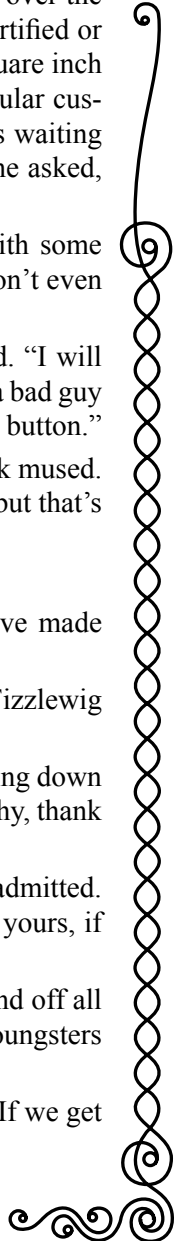
"Sweet rolls and hot coffee for the famished workers coming up," Fizzlewig said, relieved.

The old boggan was a bit surprised to find Fiona in the kitchen writing down recipes for non-alcoholic drinks for him to try out on his customers. "Why, thank you, Fiona," he smiled.

"I was getting a little bored with the booby-trapping stuff," she admitted. "This way I can share some of my favorites and maybe learn some of yours, if you'd teach me," she hinted.

"I'd be happy to share recipes with you, dear. It would take my mind off all this uproar. Goodness knows I have enough on my mind with you youngsters going off to Tricksters tonight."

"We'll be fine," she assured him. "But you're a dear for worrying. If we get in any trouble, we'll have Wulf and Cameron for backup."



“Just make sure you’re careful. We can always find the person behind this another time, but we can’t replace you or the others.”

“You are such a darling,” Fiona said coming forward to hug him and give him a kiss on the forehead.

“Go on with you, then.” Fizzlewig shooed her off, blushing as he turned away, and began cleaning imaginary spots off the lenses of his glasses, which were already sparkling.

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An hour before Fiona was due at work, the Protectors moved into place. Wulf and Cameron found a restaurant near Tricksters where they could spend at least part of the evening. After the restaurant closed, they would have to find somewhere else to hide in plain sight. Both dressed in jeans, t-shirts, boots, and jackets to blend in with the human crowd. Changelings would see them quite differently, of course.

Fiona, Doyle, and Jack headed for the bar. Jack and Doyle planned to get inside and claim seats where they could watch the whole room while keeping their backs to a wall. Fiona went to the bar, wiped it down, set out bowls of peanuts and pretzels, and looked in the office to let Finn know she was there. She took a couple of beers over to Doyle and Jack, smiling as she saw Doyle had brought his shock stick with him. Before unlocking the door for the evening, she made certain her braid was in order in case she got into a fight. Pulling on her apron and tucking a bar towel in at her waist, she readied herself for whatever might come.

The place began to fill up slowly. First to enter were two slough who took a table in a shadowy corner. Since nobody else was there, Fiona went over to them and whispered, “Hi. I’m Fiona. I’m glad last night’s unpleasantness didn’t keep you from coming back. What can I get for you?”

“Hello,” one of them answered so quietly she could barely hear him. “I’m Shane. This is Laura. Thanks for handling things last night. We’ll have two stouts. But we have something to tell you.”

“Oh?” the clurichaun asked.

“Yes, because those guys were so rotten, we followed them when they left. They went down further south, to someplace we’ve heard is a trap house. Before they got there though, a tall sidhe wearing a robe with a hood pulled up to cover his face met up with them. We couldn’t see his face, but we could hear him. He gave them some money and told them he’d have a new assignment for them tonight. They mentioned hooking up with your friends and he said he didn’t care how many ways they shared their pay. He planned to meet them tonight outside Tricksters. We thought you ought to know.”

“Thank you both. I’ll let my friends know.” Fiona smiled and got them the stouts from the bar. Leaning near them she whispered again, “No charge. Thanks

again.” She stopped by Doyle and Jack’s table on her way back to the bar to tell them what she had learned. She was relieved to see that Jack immediately pulled out his phone to text Cameron and Wulf and let them know the news.

A short time later, they heard the roar of motorcycles parking outside. The two sluaigh covered their ears. The door burst open and the riders who they had met last night came in and took over two tables.

“Hey, Fiona,” one of them called out. “Whatcha got on special tonight?”

To save Laura and Shane any more noise, she walked over to the table and said, “The draft is two dollars, and we’ve got ham sandwiches tonight. Want any?”

“Yeah.” He took a quick count: they’d take eight drafts, four sandwiches, and two bowls of pretzels with mustard dip.

“Got it! You’ll have to come to the bar to get it, though.”

“No problem. Hey, d’ya think those creeps will show up again tonight?”

“Probably, but don’t worry about them. I’ll get your order ready, guys.”

A few more people came in, but the bar remained pretty quiet. Doyle and Jack huddled over their table, talking. Aside from the occasional burst of loud laughter, not much was happening, and Fiona was getting bored. She was about to take a quick break when the door slammed open and the Thallain — a pack of four ghaists and six boggarts — strutted in.

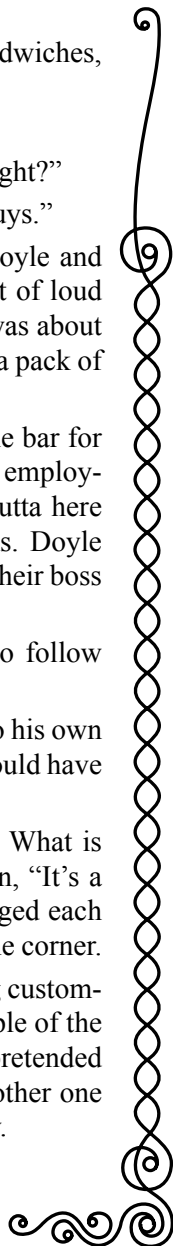
They took a table near Jack and Doyle, while the leader went to the bar for drinks. On his way back, he leaned over Doyle and Jack and said, “Our employer doesn’t need anyone else on the team. Looks like we’re clearing outta here anyway. Sorry.” He went back to his table and distributed the drinks. Doyle shrugged. He went up to the bar to put in a new order and told Fiona, “Their boss said no.”

“Crap,” she hissed under her breath. “Guess you’ll have to try to follow them, then. I’ll call the others in a minute and let them know.”

Doyle took the sandwiches and beers she gave him and went back to his own table. He shrugged to the Thallain. “Well, I can’t say we’re happy. We could have used the money, but we’re working on something else, anyway.”

A few minutes passed before one of the ghaists said loudly, “Ew! What is that smell?” he looked toward the two sluaigh. Another one joined in, “It’s a garbage truck, or maybe the toilet overflowed.” he snickered. They egged each other on, becoming more crude with each new objection to the pair in the corner.

Fiona gave them a quelling look and cried, “Shut it! They’re paying customers, just like you!” Waiting until her attention tuened elsewhere, a couple of the ghaists got up from their table and crossed to the sluaigh. One of them pretended to trip as he got to their table and shoved Shane out of his chair. The other one pushed Laura’s chair against the wall and leaned over her threateningly.



“You smell, you rat bitch!” he screamed in her face, spraying her with spit and hurting her sensitive ears. Shane was up like a shot to defend her, but the other ghastr slammed his elbow into the slugh’s face as he tried to rise. The ghastr kicked Shane in the ribs as he fell back, his nose streaming blood.

“Well, hell,” Jack swore, “Game’s up.” He and Doyle rose to help the slugh, but they weren’t quick enough. Fiona had already laid into the ghastr that hurt Shane. She clocked him with a deft right hook, then kicked him in the knee.

“Get the hell out of here. I warned you last night!” She upended a chair and menaced him with it, prepared to hit him with it if he didn’t comply. Not realizing how angry he’d made the clurichaun girl, the ghastr tried to rip the chair away.

“Big mistake,” she snarled. Fiona stopped pulling on the chair and, instead, jammed it into his chest. Knocked off-balance, the ghastr’s grip came loose. The clurichaun ripped it free from his grip, got a firm grip on two of its legs, and slammed it down on his head. He staggered and cried out. As they saw Doyle and Jack moving toward the fight, the other Thallain quit laughing and rose to join the fray. Three of the bikers waded in to support Fiona, and two more of them pulled knives on a couple of the boggarts, who pulled their own in response. The three who went to assist Fiona yanked the ghastr who’d been harassing Laura away. Once he raised his hands, they just acted to guard him and keep him from interfering in Fiona’s fight.

“You need any help?” one of them asked Fiona. She snorted in reply.

The momentary distraction let her opponent take two steps back and pull a knife on her. Fiona felt a wave of sickness and dread wash through her as he swiped at her, barely missing. *Cold iron*, she thought, *how can I combat that?*

“Now let’s see who kills who,” the ghastr hissed at her.

From behind the bully, a voice whispered, “Easy. I kill you,” as Shane drove a long, slender blade up into the Thallain’s kidney. The ghastr gurgled and dropped to the ground. His knife rolled under one of the booths. Shane whispered, “We need to get out of here. Sorry, and thanks for your help.”

Fiona let them go and retrieved the iron knife. She wrapped it in the bar cloth she had tucked in her waistband. The cold iron left goosebumps all down her back and an icy chill in her stomach from its mere proximity.



Wulf and Cameron waited in uncomfortable red plastic seats in a booth in the Thai restaurant two doors up from Tricksters. A waitress had unceremoniously dropped a single laminated, one-page menu off on the sticky table after they had arrived, then taken their order twenty minutes later.

“This is good,” Wulf commented as he ate the chicken satay Cameron had recommended. They had each gotten an appetizer and planned to share a curry dish. “It is quite different from what I am used to,” he admitted.

"I'm glad we found this place. Thai is one of my favorites. Hang on, Fiona's calling." Cameron answered, "Cam speaking."

"Hi," she said. "Doyle and Jack struck out on joining the Thallain in whatever they were up to, so we...dammit!"

"Fiona?— Fiona?" Cameron called into the phone. He heard someone yell in the background, chairs scraping, and the meaty thwack of flesh impacting flesh. "We need to get over there," he told Wulf. "I think they're in trouble."

They rose from the table and made for the door. As they left, Cameron tossed a wadded-up handful of bills at the woman at the cash register. "Here's forty dollars. That ought to cover it. Sorry, emergency."

They ran down the street toward Tricksters, expecting to find their oath mates beset by the Thallain. As they reached the door, two slugh ran out and down the street. Wulf and Cameron stopped. Within, the din of yelling, breaking glass, and scraping furniture continued. But Wulf saw a single figure dressed in a hooded robe turn the corner and start toward the bar.

"Cameron," he , gesturing toward the figure.

"I'll deal with this," Cameron answered. "You get him." He opened the door and stepped inside. Wulf turned to confront the robed figure who had stopped upon seeing the two sidhe at the bar's door. The figure quickly turned and ran back around the corner. Wulf followed in time to glimpse the figure entering an alley. When Wulf pursued, he found the figure was waiting at the far end. A low voice grated, "Aesin scum, walk away. I am not yet ready for battle with you."

"That's too bad," Wulf replied, "If you'd rather, you can answer my questions, and then we can go to Duke Aeon to answer his."

The hooded man laughed and manifested a slim, glittering blade. Judging by his posture and haughty demeanor, Wulf suspected that he might be facing another sidhe. He stalked down the alley, determined either to fight or to arrest this villain.

"I am surprised a proud Aesin is taking orders from a mere Fiona duke," his opponent sneered.

"What is *your* house?" Wulf asked as he moved closer.

"And *why* would I tell *you*? I have tarried with you long enough. Now, leave and keep your life or push this further. I will give you no more warnings."

"Then we fight," Wulf declared. He clothed himself in his armor and drew his axe, facing off against the figure.

"A pity I cannot take my time with you. It will be enjoyable to carve you into pieces as you scream for mercy, but I haven't the luxury now," the figure snarled.

"Talk proves nothing," Wulf replied and struck as he spoke.

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From the shadows, Laura and Shane saw the hooded figure turn onto the street where Tricksters was located. They had stopped momentarily to try to wipe the blood from Shane's face and make sure his nose wasn't broken. They stared after Wulf as he raced after the Pale Lord. Quickly, they ran to a nearby corner store and entered through a hidden door in the basement. Once there, they sprinted through a series of tunnels and sewer grates, utilizing their Glamour to speed their way until they reached Count Elias's house. As one of the count's spies, Laura knew the combination to unlock the door leading from the wine cellar to the kitchen.

Elias was engaged in a game of chess with one of his advisors — a fellow eshu named Zharani — in his private audience chamber when the two slugh burst in. Both slugh raised their hands to show the trolls guarding the count that they were unarmed and meant no harm. Then, they nearly flew across the room to bring their news to the count.

Luckily, those present recognized Laura. Elias rose as she raced in. Laura dropped to one knee before him, then spoke aloud, as loudly as she possibly could, "Count Elias, we've just found the people committing the attacks. The Kithain from Golden Gate are fighting them now. They're at Tricksters. Please come help."

At once, Elias told her, "Thank you for bringing this to me so quickly. I will see that you both are richly rewarded. Let's go. Guards! With me."

In moments, they were piling into the Count's garage. One of the troll guards took the wheel of a grand Rolls Royce. All together, they sped toward Tricksters to assist their allies.



Inside the bar, the brawl raged on. After Shane stabbed his fellow Thallain, the ghaist who had threatened Laura decided surrender wasn't an option after all. His hands still raised, he head-butted one of the bikers, who fell violently backward into Fiona as she stood up. Then, the Thallain grabbed another biker's arm and bit into it, tearing off a chunk of flesh as if he was a wild dog. The man screamed and tried to pull away, but only tore his arm even more severely. The third biker retreated, fumbling for a knife and screaming, "Holy crap, what the hell did you do to Tony?"

As the grinning, crimson ghaist lunged after him, the biker slashed at him, screaming, "You stay away from me!" Knowing that the Thallain wouldn't hesitate to kill the humans, Fiona interposed herself and manifested a small cudgel. The ghaist laughed, looking down at the short clurichaun girl. He sneered nastily, "A stick? What're you gonna do with that?"

Fiona quirked a smile at him. "Distract you," she piped, and kicked him in the knee. He crumpled, howling in pain, then lunged at her, mouth wide open and snarling. "Good, I was hungry for some fae flesh anyway." Fiona swung her cudgel as hard as she could into all those rotten teeth.

Across the room, Jack, Doyle, and the rest of the bikers faced off against the other ghastrid sand four boggarts. Knives slashed, boots stomped, fists connected with bellies and faces, while shouts, screams, and curses provided the soundtrack for the full-scale melee raging.

Finn emerged from his office with a baseball bat, sized up the situation, then neatly laid into the nearest boggart, using the bat to sweep the creature off his feet. One of the bikers reached down and used a Taser on him. Perplexed, Finn asked, "A Taser?"

Looking up at Finn, the biker shrugged. "Less trouble this way."

The outside door flew open and Cameron, clad in chimerical armor and wielding a chimerical sword, stepped into the fray. He took a moment to assess where he was needed, then moved to the ghastrid attacking Fiona. The creature had thrown Fiona down and pinned underneath him; now, her cudgel was useless. The ghastrid's mouth was bloody and some of his teeth were smashed, but he still tried to chomp into Fiona's face. She bucked to throw the thing off, wriggling and shoving, but was unable to free herself.

Cameron moved into position above them and brought his sword down, severing the ghastrid's spine. The Thallain's movements ceased, though his teeth still chattered at Fiona's throat. Cameron rolled the ghastrid off her and extended a hand, pulling Fiona to her feet. Looking at the ghastrid he said, "Eh, he'll heal."

"Not if I have anything to do with it, he won't" Fiona cried hotly, planting her feet to prepare to spring upon the paralyzed ghastrid.

"Don't," Cameron said softly, pulling her back. "It's something you never come back from." Fiona stared at him for a minute, realizing that she really knew very little about her oath mate. Thinking about the implications, she looked away. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "Let's help the others."

By the time they reached the others, the fight was over. Thallain were on the floor, guarded by Finn and the bikers. The injured humans had been escorted outside where an ambulance was pulling up. Finn announced, "I'm calling the police. Anyone care to let me know how this started?"

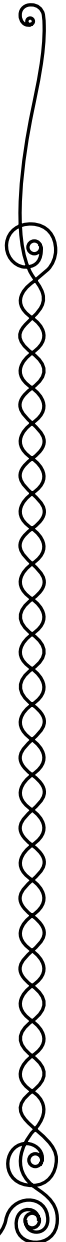
Fiona explained about the attack on Laura and Shane, who fought whom, and why.

Cameron grabbed Doyle by the elbow and whispered, "We saw the Pale Lord outside, and Wulf went after him. We need to go find him and see if Wulf needs help."

"Jack and I will come with you," Doyle agreed, and the three left the bar in search of Wulf.

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Cameron led his oath mates down the street where Wulf had headed a few minutes before. They turned the corner and saw a long stretch of street. Here and there, other streets and alleys branched away from it.



“It’s going to be interesting to find him in this warren,” Jack commented.

“I’ll find him,” Doyle assured him. “I get these feelings about where I need to go sometimes. Let’s see if it’s on point tonight.” He closed his eyes, spun around three times, then opened his eyes and began walking toward a dark alley to his right. When the group reached the alleyway, Doyle pulled out his shock stick and flicked on its flashlight capability. It illuminated the narrow lane, its beam bouncing off a pool of blood near the far end. A garbage bin stood open nearby.

Hurrying down the way, the three of them looked in the bin and saw Wulf lying inside, bleeding and unconscious. The proud sidhe hardly looked himself. His blond hair was brown from the amount of blood streaked through it. One wound on his right arm soaked through the shirt he was wearing, and another at the intersection of his collarbone and his throat looked burned. Staring at the burn mark, Cameron assessed, “Cold iron.” A bloody piece of paper lay atop Wulf’s chest.

Cameron checked to make sure Wulf still had a pulse while Jack reached in and picked up the paper. He read:

“This is your last warning. I could have killed your pet Aesin, but I left him for you to find. Interfere with us again at your peril. We are through playing.”

At that moment, they heard voices and car doors slamming at the opening to the alley. Doyle shone his makeshift flashlight that way. Ahead, Count Elias, another eshu, Laura, Shane, and two trolls were pierced by his ray of light. The new arrivals headed toward them.

“Fiona sent us this way to find you,” Count Elias announced as he came into earshot. “Are you all right?”

“No!” Cameron cried. “Wulf may be dying.”

Elias squeezed his way in until he was even with the bin. He asked for the trolls’ help plucking Wulf from the garbage bin, and once their friend was free, the count leaned down over him. “Do any of you heal?” he asked, but no one did.

Ignoring the trash, cigarette butts, and coffee and urine stains in the alley, the count took a seat on the cold concrete, then had the trolls lift Wulf into his arms. He began tracing his fingers over the wounds to the sidhe’s head and arm. Then he began to sing, crooning in a language none of the Protectors knew. As he sang, he rocked back and forth, then changed his language to English. His song told the story of a fallen hero who came back from his wounds to fight again and triumph. Elias detailed the healing of his wounds, each of which could have been fatal — and of the witch doctor whose magic closed the wounds and left no scars.

As he sang, the other eshu harmonized in counterpoint and swayed in time with the rhythm. The wounds began to diminish, then close until almost no trace of them remained. Wulf stirred and moaned. Elias slid Wulf’s head and shoulders

off of his lap. “I can’t do anything about the damage the iron did here. We’ll need to go to my house. We can take him in my car, but we can’t fit everyone in it.”

“We’ve got some bikes we can ride over there,” Jack offered. “Cameron knows where you live, right?”

“I do,” the Liam sidhe replied. “And we need to let Fiona know what’s happening. She can’t just leave the bar right now.”

One of the trolls picked Wulf up as if the 6’5” warrior weighed no more than a child, and gently tucked him into the Rolls Royce. The Protectors returned to the bar and filled Fiona in on what they had found.

She winced when she heard about Wulf’s injuries and let out a whistle when she read the note. “Anyone here want to go kick his pale lordship right where he sits?” she asked.

“We all do,” Cameron assured her. “Speaking of which, what did you do with the Thallain?”

“I had the bikers go dump them on the other side of town. Then they went to see how their buddies were doing at the hospital. It’s been quiet here since then. Just Chase and his bunch came in to play pool and have some drinks.” She jerked her head toward the Unseelie group they had met the previous night.

Chase noticed and moseyed up to the group. “Heard my name. What’s up?” he asked.

“Our friend is hurt, and we need to get him some medical help,” Jack answered. “But we’re a little leery about leaving Fiona alone until we get back to pick her up.”

“Who says she’s alone?” Chase asked. “Hey, boys, is Fiona alone here?”

The Unseelie gang all stopped what they were doing and came up to surround Fiona. “She’s a pal,” one of them said. “We don’t leave our friends to face fights alone.”

“Good enough! ‘The antidote to 50 enemies is one friend,’ said Aristotle,” Doyle recited. “Okay, we’ll be back as soon as we can.”

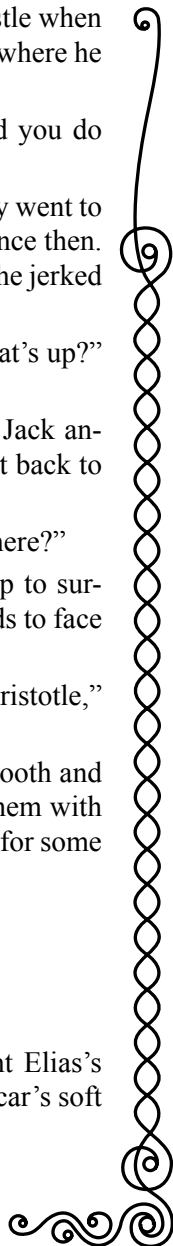
Finn stuck his head out of the office, then took up a position in a booth and laid out some cards. “Don’t worry about these guys. I can take all of them with one hand and half a foot. She can do it with just the foot. Now, who’s up for some poker?”

“Cool,” Jack said. “Later.”

Cam, Doyle, and Jack left the bar to travel to Elias’s home.



The gleaming Rolls Royce sped through the streets toward Count Elias’s home. Wulf stirred then sat straight up, almost banging his head on the car’s soft leather ceiling.



“*Hva skjer?*” he asked as he looked around wildly. A very large man next to him in the back seat turned toward him as if to restrain him. Another large man steered while, across from him, two dark-skinned men sat knee-to-knee with two rail thin black-clad individuals, a man and a woman. The smallest pair gave off a cloying smell of decaying leaves and dust. He recognized no one. His neck hurt fiercely. When he touched it, the skin felt burnt. He hissed in pain, wondering what had happened to him.

“*Hvem er du? Hva vil du av meg?*” he asked, then demanded, “*Hvor er vi?*” Finally, he commanded, “*Slip me løs!*”

The people in the car looked at one another in confusion. Then the driver guessed, “Uh, Norwegian?” One of the well-dressed men asked him, “Can you understand English?”

Confused and stumbling over his words as he tried to process all these changes, he answered, “Yes. Who are you? Why have you kidnapped me? What has happened?”

“My name is Elias. You do not remember right now, but I know you. You were in a fight and were hurt. I am taking you to my house to treat your wounds.”

“Why can’t you take me to a hospital?”

“You had a head wound so you are having trouble remembering things. You are in the United States, in California. You didn’t enter the country legally, so we can’t prove who you are.”

“How do you know me? Are you some sort of crime lord?”

“I am not. Just a legitimate businessman.” Elias told him.

“Why would I enter illegally? I am a veterinarian, not a drug runner or terrorist.” Wulf puzzled aloud, still terribly lost.

They arrived at a large house and entered an enclosed garage. As they were leaving the car, three motorcycles pulled in behind them, with the riders — a handsome blond man, a short, wiry fellow, and a man whose look was a cross between a biker and a thug — came over to him. The wiry one said, “Wow! Good to see you up and around. We were worried.” None of them were familiar either.

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Deciding that he was safer with these strangers than he was running away alone in a strange, foreign place, Wulf allowed his companions to lead him into the home. The African motifs gave the home a distinctive, but not overwhelming, feeling for the one called Elias’s pride in his heritage. Wulf couldn’t place why, but he began to breathe easier and feel even more relaxed as the group all sat down in the living room.

“Please, will you explain more to me?” the tall Norwegian asked. Cameron leaned forward. “I was working together with you and these other friends, Doyle and Jack. We came to consult with Count Elias, which is how you know him.”

“*Count Elias?*”

Cam sighed, “This may take a while.”

Patient, Elias shrugged. “Keep at it. I’ll be right back.” The count rose and departed from them. The others kept talking to Wulf, trying to awaken his memories, but their efforts only confused him more, to the point that he began to feel as if he might be on the receiving end of an elaborate prank.

Count Elias returned to the room and unfolded a silk cloth. Within it, someone had folded several small, glinting gemstones, broken into pieces. They glittered in his palm like a rainbow. Joining Wulf in his seat on one of the leather couches, Elias motioned for the warrior to hold out his hand, then poured the colorful gems into it.

“Close your hand around them,” he instructed Wulf, “and concentrate on how good they make you feel. Think about your home. It will come to you who and what you are.”

Perplexed but obedient, Wulf did as he was told, closed his eyes, and let the smooth facets of the tiny stones tumble around in his massive palms. He tried to think of his past until he finally realized a glimmer of his true self. With an explosion of light behind his closed eyelids, his fae soul awakened once again. Instead of the relief and smiles his friends expected, he grimaced, then cried out, “No! This skin suit is disgusting. My skin is crawling from within!” He tried to stand up, but his knees buckled beneath him.

“Careful!” Cameron caught his arm to steady him. “Cold iron is no joke.”

Elias called one of his trolls forward. “Drake, please escort our injured guest to the balefire and make certain he has a comfortable bed nearby. He needs to bathe in its energies to restore him fully.” To Wulf, he added, “Wulf Ragnarson, you are welcome in my fief. Thank you for your attempts to rid us of this criminal who has been preying upon my people.”

Wulf weakly mumbled his thanks to Elias for his welcome and for restoring him, then retreated as the troll led him from the room.

“He should be much better by morning,” Elias told the other Protectors. “You are welcome to stay, of course, but I suspect you need to report to Duke Aeon on what we’ve learned.”

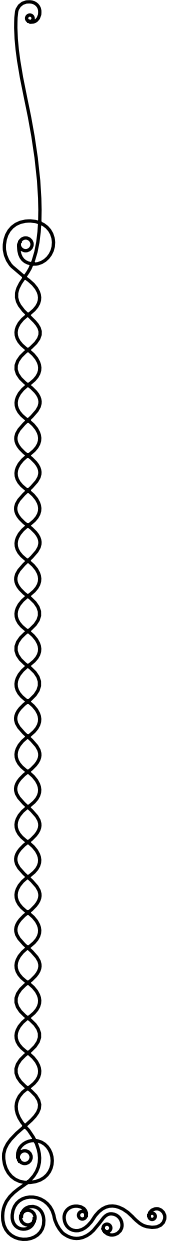
Doyle surprised them by asking, “Anyone mind if I stay to watch over Wulf?”

Elias nodded. “You, too, are welcome here.” The young nocker turned to Cameron and Jack. “I’m entrusting Fiona’s safety to you two. Please see that she gets back to the Toybox in one piece once she’s off work.”

“You got it,” Jack agreed. Cameron nodded, and they parted. Drake the troll took Doyle to the balefire and fetched him bedding as well. Wulf was already asleep. His long eyelashes and soft cheeks made him seem very young and vulnerable. Doyle noticed Wulf’s fists clenched at his sides, a clear sign that he still



grappled with his foe in his sleep as he recovered. Doyle wondered if the proud young noble would face lasting damage after his defeat at the hands of the Pale Lord. Would it erode his confidence, or push him to exert himself even more to stop the bad guy? Doyle fell asleep hoping for the best for his friend.



chapter nine: The Return



Edmund could never have said what alerted him to the danger while his companions were forging their way toward Silver’s Gate to re-enter the Autumn World. Hindered by the mists that seemed to be playing hide-and-seek with them and in which they had momentarily lost Rafael after his late arrival, they had stopped to make certain that Valmont’s sense of direction hadn’t become scrambled.

Maybe it was the eerie silence that made him nervous. Having been a child of the streets and a slave to Yrtalien’s whims in the past, he distrusted the stillness and the lack of motion. He sharpened his vision and glanced around. It was only this that permitted him to see the slaving beasties creeping from the trees and surrounding his oath mates.

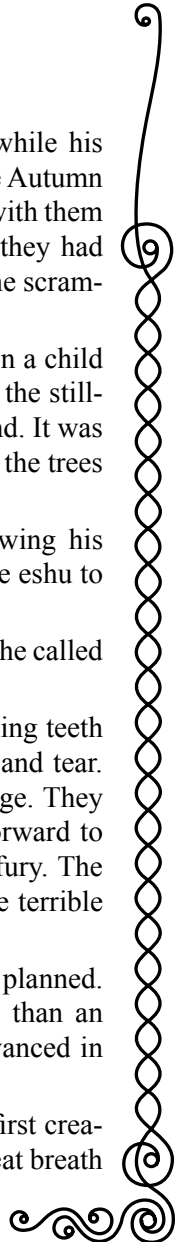
“Ambush!” he hissed just loudly enough for them to hear. Drawing his sword, he stepped up beside Valmont, whose quick reflexes enabled the eshu to draw his scimitar so fast Edmund almost missed seeing it.

Leigh turned quickly, drew her own sword and moved next to Tor. She called out, “Back to back and keep moving toward the gate.”

Six beasties, wild, primal kin to pooka, looped toward them, gnashing teeth like butchers’ knives and huge, twisted cruel claws extended to rend and tear. Spiny growths along their backs stood upright, poised to render damage. They advanced through the mist, black fur and blood red scales flashing forward to the attack. Some voiced chilling howls, filled with terrible, mindless fury. The companions could see knots of bloodied flesh caught in between those terrible teeth and readied for their onslaught.

Leigh’s knightly training gave her insight into the tactics their foes planned. Despite the imminent threat, she suspected they were nothing more than an opening gambit to distract her friends while more dangerous foes advanced in their wake.

“Beware the others,” she cried out as she swung her sword at the first creature. It leaped for her throat, its slaving mouth and stinking, rotted-meat breath



enough to sicken her. The Dreaming only reinforced the terror of its presence, so she forced herself to stand firm. Her blade sliced into the thing's shoulder as it leapt, cutting deeply. The blow forced it to miss her throat; instead, its incisors scraped down the length of her arm from shoulder to elbow. The pain burned, and bright blood seeped from her wound. The horror's blood was darker and oozed more slowly than her own.

Next to her, Tor swung his battle axe in a mighty, whistling sweep, almost severing his attacker's head. The answering attack from a neighboring attacker drew long furrows down Tor's thigh, tearing through with its claws and leaving jagged wounds that stung as if they were poisoned, or diseased. Tor grunted, the only sign of his pain he allowed as he finished it off.

Valmont stepped slightly ahead of Edmund, giving himself room to wield his scimitar to best use. His opponent was more versed in tactics than its compatriots. She charged forward like the rest, then stopped abruptly just outside the range of the eshu's blade. Momentarily unbalanced, Valmont barely managed not to follow through on the swing. His reward was a face full of stinging quills shot from the beastie's back-spines. Valmont shut his eyes to the incoming barbs, and in that instant, she sprang forward, mouth wide.

Valmont was saved from his foe's deadly attack by Edmund, who interposed his own sword and let the beast impale herself on it. "Hah!" Edmund yelled as black blood spurted onto the ground and Valmont in equal amounts, the creature shuddering in its death throes. Then he screamed in pain as another monster bit into his shoulder. He whipped around to face this new opponent and stretched out his own impressive mouth. His sword was currently buried under the dying creature facing Valmont.

"You did *not* just bite me, you lame excuse for a rabid wolf! I bite back." Suiting actions to words, he grasped one of the creature's legs and chomped down on it. The beastie howled in pain as Edmund spat out the rancid, bitter flesh he'd bitten off. "Blech! Not even redcaps could stand to eat that!" he wailed.

For its part, the devil-creature stared at him, shocked to be attacked by its victim, then turned tail and fled. "Yeah, run back to your mangy momma, as-shat!" Edmund taunted.

Valmont blinked away the noxious fumes released by the barbs imbedded in his face. Pushing aside the pain, he braced himself for the next assault. Edmund grinned at him. "You look like you have cat whiskers!" he chortled. Valmont didn't seem amused.

Edmund managed to pull his sword from the dead creature's stomach as the last two rushed them. "I'm up by two," Edmund claimed. "Whatsa matter, Valmont? You gettin' old?"

A particularly large foe that looked and smelled like a sick and twisted grizzly bear covered in mange exploded forward and swung a clawed paw the size of home plate. The eshu twirled in place and murmured a few words. In what

seemed an impossible move, Valmont was suddenly behind the monstrous bear. He slammed his scimitar down on it, cutting through its neck muscles and dropping it in mid-stride. Valmont danced aside as viscous, black blood spurted out. “Old?” he inquired archly.

“Good one,” Edmund crowed.

Behind him, he heard Leigh cry out a challenge, invoking the Dragon’s Ire as Tor roared and smashed the skull of the last beastie. Valmont turned to see three tall, over-muscled brutes with sharp, pointed antlers. Mostly unclad, they wore a few animal skins that stank from their lack of proper tanning. Rather than rushing forward as the others had, they paced forward deliberately, then charged from about ten feet out. Three heads lowered to stab with those sharp, powerful tines as they tried to cut Leigh off from her allies.

From the stories told her as a child and recently reiterated by her parents, the sidhe knight recognized what she faced: legendary enemies, the Fir-bholg, servants of the dreaded Fomorians. Though some fae considered the feral warriors to be honorable foes, most told stories of these dark-kin’s fierce attacks and penchant for consuming faerie flesh.

Leigh strode forward to meet their attack, repeating her war cry and setting herself to meet their charge. Her oath mates stepped up beside her, true of heart and willing to put their lives at risk for her. Valmont stood to her left and Tor to her right. Edmund anchored the line to the right of Tor.

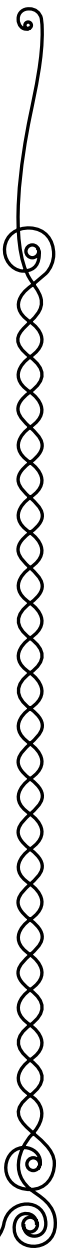
“Great,” he mumbled. “I risk my butt and I’m still on the outside. Figures.”

Leigh’s form changed from that of an agile warrior woman to a blazing, driving focus for the crackling golden red dragon flames that limned her and shot off sparks and flickers of might, creating trails of glowing light in the wake of her weapon’s strike. Her attack crashed and splintered on the first fir-bholg impacting it like a lightning bolt and throwing it back several feet. To her left, Valmont shuffled his feet, scuffing up dirt to cover his boots and whistled the chorus of a traveling song. He leapt over the fir-bholg, clearing the sharp antlers by at least two feet and landed behind the feral foe. The eshu thrust his scimitar toward the fir-bholg’s back and cried, “Surrender now!”

“There is no surrender,” the dark-fey rumbled. He turned to face Valmont. “These is only death or victory in the service of the Old Ones. Kill me tonight and tomorrow I will rise to hunt you down.”

“What Old Ones?” Valmont queried. “What do you want with us?”

“We want your deaths,” the horrid dark-kin replied, lurching toward the eshu, antlers lowered for a gut strike. His lurch became a stumble, then a scream and a final collapse as Valmont carved into his foe with his scimitar. “Edmund!” Valmont looked down to find the young redcap behind the fir-bholg, blood on his grinning mouth and a good chunk of the dark-kin’s Achilles tendon in his bloody hand. “Mm.” Edmund licked his lips. “Tastes like chicken.”



Tor stood like a sturdy redwood tree or a mountain waiting with the patience born of decades of combat experience. He lifted his great battle axe, taking one giant step to land a crushing blow against the creature's spreading antlers. Strength against strength, axe and antlers locked together as each opponent strove to push the other back.

The honorable troll unlocked his weapon from the creature's antlers and swung it in a deadly arc. "No need of your help here, Edmund. This one's dead."

Edmund quirked an eyebrow at the troll. "Aww, you know I love a good fight before lunch."

Leigh quickly checked to make certain their foes wouldn't be rising, then half-caught Valmont as he almost went down. The handsome eshu's face was ravaged, swollen from the venomous barbs that pierced him. His breathing was labored.

Tor looked around. "We need to get through the gate before any more of them show up. We can treat Valmont on the other side." The troll ripped off the hem of his tunic and used it to bind Leigh's bloody arm. He checked his own wounds next but dismissed them with a shrug. "Let's go. I'll manage. Besides, we need to see if Rafael made it through."

"The good news is we won't need to hunt for lunch meat for the foreseeable future," Edmund quipped. Tor gave the irrepressible redcap a quelling glare, and Leigh wrinkled her nose. "Edmund, that's disgusting. Fir-bholgs are intelligent and of faerie blood. How can you even think of eating them?"

Edmund shrugged, "Hey, I just chewed, I didn't swallow. I'm sure they would have happily eaten *us* if they'd gotten the upper hand, Leigh. But as it turns out, they don't actually taste very good, anyway." He shook his head, amazed she still didn't understand his dark humor. Then he pointed ahead, "Hey, look, it's the gate. If we're not having fir-bholg for lunch, I want a nice, juicy Autumn World hamburger!"

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Morgan stood in a grassy clearing surrounded by taller grass on all sides. The sudden brightness of the opening gate blinded Morgan. Despite the protection of her faerie blood, the raw Glamour unleashed made her hold up her hand to shield her face. Morgan remembered the glare she often faced when driving westward into the setting sun, using the brief insight from the mortal world to direct her gaze to a point just to the side of the rent in the world's fabric. This allowed her to make out a single form struggling at the threshold.

She ran forward and thrust her hand into the blinding gap, feeling around for something solid. Another hand latched onto hers and she heard a faint voice, more in her head than aloud. "Don't pull!"

But Morgan pulled with all her strength, until she fell backward. She landed on her back in soft, mossy grass and momentarily felt the weight of another per-

son on top of her. The weight disappeared as the figure rolled off her. She heard a sudden whoosh of displaced air and a sudden silence as the world around her reassembled, the rent closed with no sign that anything had ever happened.

As her eyes adjusted to the lack of blinding light, Morgan made out the shape of a slender young man — actually, not a man, but a pooka, dressed in fine faerie *voile* of russet and dark greens. His soft brown hair barely concealed a pair of long, velvety rabbit ears.

“Rasputin!” she gasped, recalling her companion who had died in battle at the opening of Silver’s Gate.

The pooka stood up, offered Morgan a slender hand to help her stand. “Rasputin died,” he said. “So don’t call me Rafael.”

For an instant, Morgan felt once again twelve years old. Her entire expression lit into a wonderous smile. She threw her arms around him and burst into tears.

Morgan sobbed against Rafael’s shoulder for a few moments, while he twitched his ears in sympathy. “It’s not as if it’s been a really long time for you, hasn’t it?” he asked tenderly.

Morgan sniffled, then drew back to look at him again, “Oh, Rafael, I think I’ve missed you most of all. But where are the others?”

He dried the last of her tears from her cheeks with one velvety ear. “Oh, it hasn’t been hard at all being without your company, dear one. As for the others, they’ll be awhile. It’s not as if they were right behind me, after all.” Rafael turned back toward where the gate had been, as if expecting to see it immediately open again for his companions to come through. Morgan moved closer again as well, looking for the rift.

“Where is it?” she asked, seeing no sign of the door she had just opened.

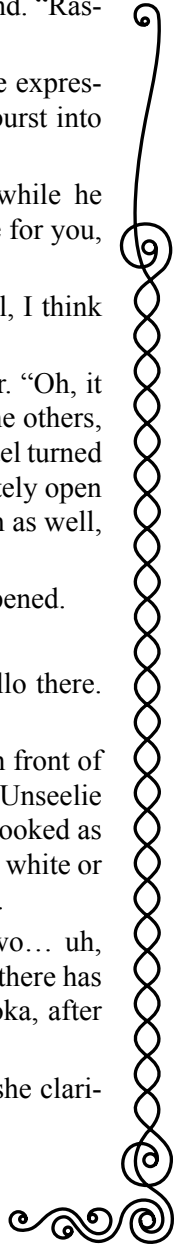
“Nothing like being obvious,” Rafael quipped.

Both jumped as they heard a rough voice behind them. “Well, hello there. Does the widdle girlie and her pet need help?”

Morgan stiffened and turned. Rafael turned as well, then stepped in front of Morgan as he caught sight of the whatever-they-were. Not even many Unseelie looked like these. The newcomers were tall and too thin, skeletal, and looked as if something had stretched them out too far. Their skin tones were pasty white or ghoulish gray, and their long fingers were tipped with razor-sharp nails.

“Yes, indeed,” Rafael replied, quick to the draw. “Could you two... uh, three...hmm... five gentlemen run down to the village to see if anyone there has a car we might borrow? We wouldn’t appreciate it, but I’m just a pooka, after all.”

Morgan whispered to him, “They’re ghosts — Thallain redcaps,” she clarified. “See? Each of them is carrying something red.”



She was right. One had a red kerchief around his neck. Another was wearing a scarlet headband. A third sported another red kerchief in his back pocket, while the fourth had a crimson vest. The last had painted his teeth a lurid blood red, which he revealed to them in a wide, nasty grin.

They closed in on Morgan and Rafael, pulling knives, a hatchet, and a machete. “We eat well tonight, friends,” the original speaker laughed nastily. “I want the rabbit legs. Who wants sidhe spleen?” The one with the headband snickered, “Why be picky? Let’s just gut them and pull out what we want.”

“Front to front?” Rafael asked.

“Not yet,” Morgan dismissed, flicking her hand in a regal gesture toward the ghosts and standing as tall as she could. At once, she took on her most impressive *voile*, a midnight blue formal gown studded with diamonds and sapphires that outlined the constellations in the Arcadian sky, and commanded, “Ghastly creatures, your presence and your rude words offend me. How dare you threaten my oath mate and me? Begone, I command!”

For a moment, it seemed as if her command would work. Though she wasn’t in the habit of wantonly using her innate sidhe aura of command, she did know how to summon it at need. Beside her, Rafael stared at her in surprise, simultaneously impressed and saddened by her display of her sidhe power. She had changed as much as his other companions.

“Nice to see you up to your old tricks,” he murmured.

The ghosts shuddered. Three began to shuffle and turn away. Then the leader turned back and brandished a mirror-bright golden medallion the size of his palm, which hung from a purple ribbon around his neck. “Hah! Using sidhe tricks on us, are you? Won’t work. We’re wearing protections from your puny magic.”

Shocked, Morgan gasped gasped. *Protections?* She’d never heard of such things. By her side, she heard Rafael breathe, “Oh goodie. Just what I was hoping for.”

Hoping to head off an immediate attack, Morgan asked, “What do you want with us? Can’t we reach some sort of accord?”

“Not in this lifetime,” the one in the vest chortled. “Our master said to kill you and your friends. Two for one. We get paid, and we get a good meal, too!”

“Shut up, stupid,” the leader snarled. “They don’t need to know our business. Get them.”

Recognizing they wouldn’t be able talk their way out of this, Rafael drew his slender foil, determined to do what he could to keep them from harming Morgan. He waved it in the air, catching their attention, then jumped behind Morgan and yelled, “Look, I have an army!”

The ghosts sneered and charged. Morgan drew her own dagger and braced herself; they were probably going to die. She wondered if they could find Sil-

ver's Gate again and escape through it. She called to Rafael, "Run! See if you can cross through the gate again."

"By all means, keep talking," the sly pooka hissed. "I'm not doing anything to hide us."

She barely had time to wonder if the ghosts' protections worked against the pooka's magic too when the first ghost reached her and swung his machete. Instinctively she cringed away from the blow and gasped as the cut, meant to eviscerate her, passed by harmlessly about two feet to the left of her position. A second ghost stabbed with his knife at the same place. The third and fourth made similarly useless attacks intended to slay them both. Morgan realized that Rafael had used his illusionary abilities on them. The ghost leader stood back, analyzing the battle. Then he commanded, "Stop. Spread out in a circle around where we last saw them and work your way inward. We'll hear them if they move." He walked forward, joining his cohorts.

Rafael's heart plummeted. He couldn't hope to hide them on all sides. Instead of waiting for the inevitable, he stepped forward and attacked the ghost with the crimson headband, scoring across her weapon hand. The Thallain dropped her knife, but then retrieved it using her left hand and slashed out. Rafael hadn't expected her to recover so quickly! He gave a cry, and his left leg just above the knee spurting blood.

"Got one!" the ghost yelled. Rafael and Morgan's true position was revealed to the Thallain as Rafael's control wavered and his Chicanery evaporated.

"Run," he howled to Morgan. "Don't hide in the tall grasses!"

"You too," Morgan cried out, pulling a small folding fan from her sleeve. Grateful beyond measure that she had learned how to utilize the fan as a coquettish amusement at court functions, she waved it quickly in Silver's Gate's direction. She whistled a jaunty tune, then took off running for the grasses as Rafael had suggested. He followed. Cool, brisk wind blew at their backs, pushing strongly and wafting them along so quickly, they doubled the distance between themselves and their attackers.

"How long can you keep this up?" he asked.

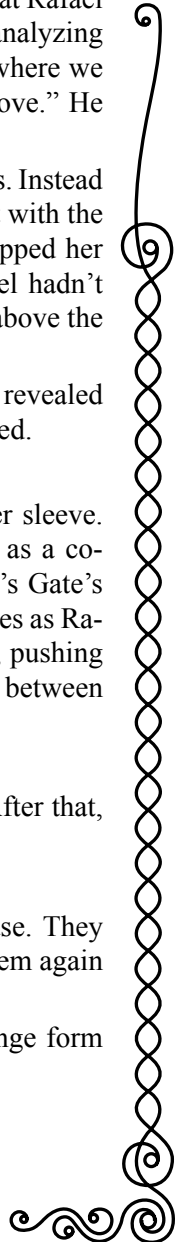
"Only for a minute," the raven-haired sidhe replied, breathless. "After that, I'm afraid I'm out of ideas."

"Great," the pooka returned. "Luckily, I have loads of plans."

They were almost to the grasses, but the ghosts were giving chase. They were too close for Morgan's liking. The frightful beasts would be on them again in just a moment.

"Rafael, one of us needs to escape this. Once you're hidden, change form and go in a different direction. I'll lead them on as long as I can."

"Whatever you say," the pooka gasped.



She had no idea if he had managed to overcome his inability to be entirely truthful in this moment of crisis or if he was talking pooka-speak again. She hoped he'd listen. As he grabbed her hand and urged greater speed, she had her answer. "Rafael!" she admonished.

At that moment, the bugle of hunting horns and the thunder of galloping hooves reached the ears of the pooka, the sidhe, and their pursuers. From out of the mist, a troop of riders emerged. Their gleaming chimeric armor shone brightly, and their lances flashed in their gauntleted hands. The Riders of the Silver Court raced toward the two oath mates and set themselves between them and the ghaists. Morgan just had time to recognize Lady Rowena and Sir Odhran — both older, but still unmistakable — before the Riders charged into combat with the Thallain.

As the armored knights thundered toward them, the ghaists broke rank and fled, scattering to the four winds to escape the superior force. While most of the group lowered chimeric lances to pierce the Thallain, Lady Rowena pulled up beside Morgan and Rafael.

"Well met, Baroness Morgania and — could this possibly be Rasputin? Though we have not seen you in some time, I remember you both well."

As she had been a childling when she first met Lady Rowena and the Riders, Morgan almost curtsied. Instead, she held her ground, explaining her mission to visit the woods where the Hidden King dwelled. Her oath mate Leigh had fought a duel with a Rider named Sorcha to prove the oath mates' right to meet the Hidden King, whom the Riders guarded. She remembered with sadness Sorcha's death when the proud Scathach warrior refused to accept that Leigh had beaten her in honorable combat. In the heat of combat, Sorcha had pulled Leigh's blade across her own throat, dying by suicide. With the experience the intervening years had given her, Morgan felt she finally understood the unhappy Rider.

"Rasputin? Not here," the pooka answered. "You can't call me Rafael if you like."

Lady Rowena smiled at the pooka. "You do know that we Riders honor you as a hero for giving your life to defend Silver's Gate from Yrtalien and his army, don't you, Rafael? And what is this?" she asked pointing down at the wound on the pooka's leg.

"Uh," Rafael replied, unable to think of an answer to the thought of being a hero. Lady Rowena dismounted to treat her old ally. She painted Rafael's leg with a cool liquid she poured from a small vial at her waist, then wrapped it in a gauzy cloth that resembled spiderweb. "That should keep it until we can heal you properly."

"Hello, Lady Rowena, it's wonderful to see you again," Morgan said as the knight worked. "You arrived just in time."

"Yes, we were just about to kick ghaist and take names," Rafael lied.

Meanwhile, the Riders harried the ghosts, wounding three and riding down two. Sir Odhran led the troops back toward the companions on the hillside, accompanied by one of the ghosts, who walked with hands raised before the knight's lance. Two other knights escorted two other ghosts in similar fashion. Each of the last two enemies, rendered unconscious, lay draped across a knight's horse. Sir Odhran raised a gauntleted hand in greeting to Morgan and Rafael.

"Where are the rest of you?" he asked as the other riders surrounded their captives.

Rafael recovered from his embarrassment at being thought a hero. "I might be wrong, but I think they're hiding behind that big gate over there," he told Odhran, pointing down to the place where Silver's Gate had vanished.

"Let us dispose of our prisoners, then we shall see if we can open it again," Lady Rowena stated. The rest of the Riders set to knocking the Thallain unconscious, then three Riders tied them across the rear of their horses and rode off to deposit them somewhere secure. They confiscated the ghosts' steel weapons.

"Muddle their minds as best you can to erase their knowledge of this place," Lady Rowena commanded as her knights departed. A few remained. Morgan thought she recognized a couple of older knights as ones she'd met before but noticed that a several were younger. They must have joined the Riders in the intervening years. One of them, a female sidhe, smiled at the two oath mates. "I'm Dame Siobhan," she laughed. "Pleased to meet you." The young woman's face seemed suffused with mirth. Her long blonde hair set off a face made for smiling and large green eyes that twinkled at the companions. Unlike the other, more somber knights, Siobhan's face was flushed with the excitement of the chase. Morgan and Rafael felt completely at home with her, as though they had been friends for years. Rowena smiled at the young rider too, glad that her young charge was so at home with newcomers.

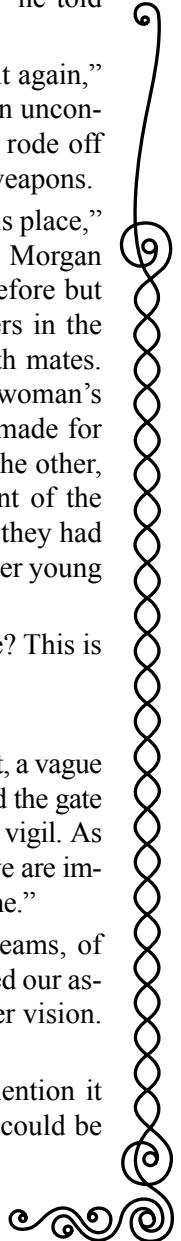
Siobhan smiled at Rafael, asking eagerly, "Are we opening the gate? This is amazing. I've never helped open a gateway before."

"Me neither," the abashed pooka replied.

The group turned toward the area where Silver's Gate stood. At present, a vague outline set atop the grass. The outline of the two brothers who had guarded the gate since its closing during the Shattering so long ago still kept their eternal vigil. As the Riders, Morgan, and Rafael walked together, Morgan asked, "While we are immensely grateful for your rescue, I'm not sure what led you here just in time."

Sir Odhran answered, "That is no mystery, Baroness. We had dreams, of course. Dame Siobhan had the first one. She foresaw that you would need our assistance, so we went to the Dreamer's Glen, and the King confirmed her vision. He sent us to bring you to him, and here we are."

"I see. What house does Dame Siobhan belong to? She didn't mention it when she introduced herself." Morgan wondered if the friendly Rider could be an Eiluned like herself. She was no stranger to having visions.



“Well, I’ll let her tell you her own story once we’ve found your companions,” he hedged.’

As they reached the gate, it shimmered in a myriad of colors, like a rainbow prism. Morgan called, “Close your eyes, or shade them. This gets really bright!”

“I didn’t notice any lights,” Rafael shrugged. “But it’s nice to see that our mere presence here opens it up like a zipper. Oh look, what a surprise to see you all here,” he greeted the oath mates as they stepped through Silver’s Gate back into the Autumn World.

The Kithain who crossed through looked a little like *The Spirit of ‘76*, by Archibald Willard, the famous painting of the wounded Revolutionary soldiers in which one wore a bandage around his head and another limped along. Valmont was in the worst condition, slumped against Leigh, and Leigh herself had a leaking wound on her upper arm. Tor helped to hold Valmont upright, though he had a leg wound as well. Edmund followed behind, nursing a bleeding shoulder and muttering about his teeth being better than the beastie’s any day.

Despite her admonishment to herself to greet them as an adult, Morgan raced forward to embrace Tor, wrapping her arms around him in a desperate gesture of love and relief. Tor stroked her hair, saying, “It’s all right, Morgan, it’s all right.” His own eyes misting, he raised his big, rough hand to stroke her face gently. “I’ve missed you, too.”

Morgan pulled back to look at him and gave him a dazzling smile. “You look wonderful!” she cried “Well, except for those wounds.”

Tor smiled gently. “I feel that way, too. You’ve grown into a most beautiful lady.”

Lady Rowena and young Siobhan immediately began helping the companions to sit and dress their wounds. They cleaned and bandaged Leigh, Tor, and Edmund’s wounds. Rowena spent a long time washing Valmont’s face and singing in a soft voice. She finally managed to extract the barbs. After applying what ministrations they could, Rowena told them, “I’ve done what I can. We must get to the Dreamer’s Glen quickly.”

Hoping to offset her seriousness, Edmund asked Morgan, “Guess you didn’t miss *all* of us, huh?”

“Of *course* I did, Edmund,” she assured him, wrapping him up in a one-armed hug. “I thought of each of you every day. Somehow, I thought with your being in the Dreaming, you’d still be a childling though. Pretty silly.”

“Well I still pictured you like you used to be, too. Weren’t you kind of gawky?”

“You look good,” Morgan returned. She wasn’t expecting any return compliments from Edmund, so she wasn’t disappointed.

Leigh left Valmont for a moment to give Morgan a kiss on the cheek and a tight hug. As she did so, she whispered, “Don’t mind Edmund. You’ve grown so much and become so beautiful.”

Morgan looked from each to the next, letting herself take in her friends' appearances one by one. As she did so, she saw that Leigh, Valmont, Edmond, and Tor each wore a ring she'd never seen before. "What are those?" she queried, moving forward to take Leigh's hand and look closely at the sidhe knight's ring.

"Oh, that's right," Leigh answered. "You weren't with us, so you don't know. She indicated the other companions besides Raphael. "The four of us had the Eyestones made into rings for for us. Much easier to carry around," she laughed.

Lady Rowena had to interrupt, though she hated to. "I hate to cut your reunion short, but the Hidden King has asked to see all of you as soon as we can reach him. We have brought along extra horses for you. We even have a large mount for Sir Torvald."

Tor's raised eyebrows indicated his surprise. His large size usually kept him from riding. As Sir Odhran led forward the beautiful faerie horses the knights usually rode, another larger mount followed. He looked like a Friesian but was even larger than that breed. Unlike most of those magnificent horses, he was not jet black but a gleaming white with silvery hooves. Tor moved forward slowly, as if entranced, as he beheld the amazing steed. He sidled up to the stallion and patted the horse's velvety nose, letting the beast breathe in his scent. Then, as if he did it every day, he swung easily into the saddle.

Sir Odhran mounted and two Riders lifted Valmont up to ride in front of him. The others vaulted onto their own steeds and the company trotted off toward the Dreamer's Glen.

As they rode forth, Dame Siobhan pulled her horse up alongside Leigh's. "Hello, Leigh. I'm sorry you and your friends were hurt. Were you attacked?"

Casting a worried glance at Valmont, Leigh replied absently, "Yes. Beasties and fir-bholg."

Siobhan whistled. "I'd say you acquitted yourselves well, then."

Still only half-listening Leigh murmured, "Thank you," and prepared to ride up to be beside Valmont.

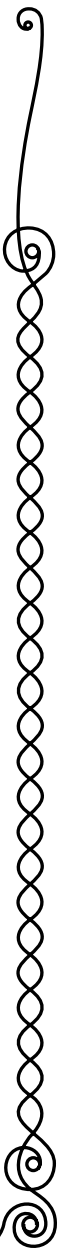
"Leigh, I know you're worried about Valmont, but please listen to me for just a moment."

Blinking, Leigh gave Siobhan her full attention for the first time. Nervous, the knight finally managed to get her words out. "My name is Siobhan Mc-Skeath. You knew me once as Sorcha."

Leigh felt the edges of her vision fade black for a moment. Judging by the warmth in her cheeks, her face had reddened, but she said nothing.

"Please don't be upset," Siobhan pleaded. "I know you never meant to hurt me. What happened was entirely my fault. I hope you put my death behind you long ago. You freed me to become the person I am now."

Leigh shook her head, "But, how...?"



“You forget, I was House Scathach. Now I’m affiliated with them just like the rest of my family. I was given a wake, so I’ve returned. I know I look like a sidhe, but I’m a piskie now. Lady Rowena, Sir Odhran, Lord Tiernach, and a few others know, but some of the Riders don’t. I’ve been welcomed into the Riders since they now remember that all the Riders used to be Scathach, and they’ve relaxed their rules some. Lady Rowena even said it was done to honor me, so I’m pretty happy with that,” Siobhan laughed. “Come back in a year or two, and you’ll find that half of us are clurichauns!”

Leigh wasn’t certain what to say, so she smiled faintly. “Well, my goodness. Welcome back. I’m so glad that you’re happy now. You’ve always deserved that. Thank you for telling me. Do you want me to keep this secret, or should I tell my oath mates?”

Siobhan laughed and ducked her head. The apprehensive gesture concealed her forehead and one of her eyes with her hair. “Tell them if you like, but please let me tell my fellow knights when I’m ready to do it myself.”

“You have my word,” the Fiona knight promised. She moved up to ride beside Sir Odhran. “How is he?” she asked of Valmont.

“He’s sleeping. He’ll be fine once we get to the glen. I see you’ve been speaking with Siobhan,” he noted. “I know she wanted to talk to you. Is all in accord between you?”

“Yes,” Leigh answered, smiling to herself. “She seems very happy to be among your company.”

“That she is. And we’re happy to have her.”

“Good.” Satisfied, Leigh dropped back to check on her other companions. Edmund was still mumbling thoughts of what he should have said to their opponents, but he seemed otherwise well. Morgan rode next to Tor, whose joyous face showed his wonder at riding his impressive steed and at being reunited with his granddaughter. Somewhat ill at ease, Rafael sat his horse whispering, “I hope you’re a pooka. Is it okay to ride you? Would you like a carrot? Does your kind really run people into rivers and drown them? Or is that just pooka-tales? I wouldn’t mind a quick dip.”

Seeing that they were mostly alright, Leigh relaxed and allowed her mind to drift as the group rode on into the night.

chapter Ten:

Dreams



“Do you remember this place?” Lady Rowena asked Morgan as the oath mates entered the King’s forest, this time in the company of the Riders. Lady Rowena smiled, a note of humor in her voice. Morgan felt her face redden as she remembered her indignation so long ago as the Riders challenged the oath mates’ right to meet with the Hidden King.

“I do,” Morgan replied softly. “As if it were yesterday.”

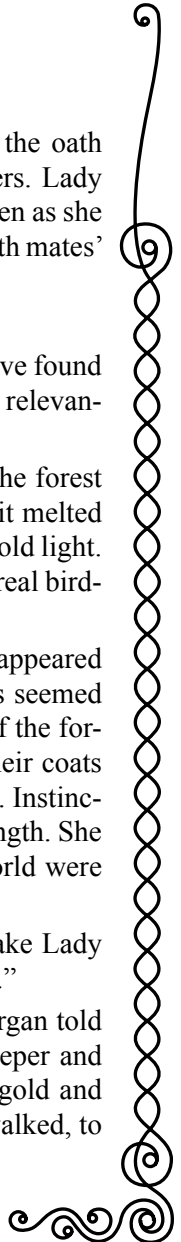
“In some ways, it is yesterday,” Lady Rowena reflected aloud. “I have found that as one rides further into the forest, time seems to have less and less relevancy.”

As they rode, subtle changes began to appear to mark the end of the forest that belonged to the Autumn World and the beginning of the forest as it melted into the Dreaming. The bark of the trees began to glow with silver and gold light. Leaves of gold, silver, and crystal sighed softly as they passed, and ethereal bird-songs twittered high above the riders.

As their horses stepped along the path deeper into the forest, bells appeared on their bridles and began to tinkle softly. Even the horses themselves seemed transformed into delicate creatures more suited to the magical nature of the forest, their manes and tails lengthening and becoming like spun silk. Their coats took on a translucent glow, while their hooves shone like deep obsidian. Instinctively, she looked at Tor, making sure his steed retained its size and strength. She laughed at herself, realizing once again that the laws of the mortal world were merely guidelines in this place.

“I remember this, too,” Leigh said from beside her, riding up to take Lady Rowena’s place. “It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before.”

“It reminds me of the story of the twelve dancing princesses,” Morgan told her. “The soldier who followed them noticed how, as they walked deeper and deeper into the forest, the leaves on the trees changed from silver to gold and then to diamonds. He broke off a branch from each kind of tree as he walked, to present to their parents as proof of where they went every night.”



Leigh smiled. "I would hardly call us princesses," she demurred, raising an eyebrow toward Rafael. He had bent his head low over his horse as he whispered to the animal, his long, soft rabbit ears drooping over its neck. Behind him, Edmund sat nonchalantly astride his horse, which — thanks to its newfound magical wildness — pranced and danced, wanting to bolt headlong through the forest. It was held back only by its rider and by the horses in front of and behind it. Tor and Valmont rode together, each noble in his own fashion, though neither could be mistaken for princesses even in the strangest of circumstances.

Leigh nodded. "I saw so much wonder in Arcadia, and every time, I thought of how much joy you would get out of seeing what I saw. I tried to look at everything as if I had your eyes, as if I could see it for you."

Morgan blinked back her tears. "I would pretend I was still with you all, sometimes," she confessed. "Even after I got older, went to college, and got my degrees, I would still talk to you. Particularly when I went out to eat and had some tasty meal, I would pretend I could hear you as you reacted to it."

Leigh laughed. "You know, I missed the variety of meals here. Arcadian food is wonderful, but it's like having nothing but hot Chinese takeout noodles or just a nice Mediterranean grilled fish or salad. There was no real variation in it. I really wanted some squid ink pasta with head-on prawns, or Cuban-style flan..." her voice drifted off as she saw the twinkle in Morgan's eyes.

"You mean Arcadian restaurants aren't all Michelin stars?" she asked.

"Restaurants? In Arcadia?" Leigh teased. "I am so glad to be back."

"We're not exactly back," Valmont pointed out, bringing his horse up beside Leigh's as the path widened. "We're closer to the Dreaming here than we are to the Autumn World."

Both Leigh and Morgan nodded, then laughed as they noticed each other. "We're like a pair of bobble-heads," Morgan joked. Valmont chuckled. "I wasn't going to mention it," he said.

"You're so kind," Leigh answered him.

"Hey, is there some kind of rule that we're all supposed to mumble in here?" Edmund called out loudly from somewhere amid the Riders.

"I think you just proved that there isn't," Morgan called back.

"Wow! I can actually hear you!" Edmund retorted.

"You weren't here the last time we escorted you to the Dreamer's Glen," Sir Odhran remarked to the young redcap riding near him.

"Nope," Edmund replied, trying to conceal his amazement at the ever-changing forest around him. "But I've seen this before. It's all like this in Arcadia," he finished lamely, knowing that the sidhe knight beside him could see through his words.

"Why were you not with your oath mates?" Sir Odhran persisted.

"Cause I was busy betraying them."

“What?” the Rider sputtered, shocked by Edmund’s brash admission.

“Yeah,” Edmund replied. “I was pretty stupid as a kid. It’s done now.” He turned his attention to his mount, intent upon studying its silky mane.

“I don’t understand,” Sir Odhran began.

“Leave it alone,” Edmund warned. “It’s over and settled.” After a minute, he added, “The Dreaming says it’s okay, too.” He nudged his mount. “Let’s go, Hi-yo Silver,” he told it. Together, beast and rider put some distance between themselves and Sir Odhran.

From his place behind the rest of his oath mates, Tor watched the group as they re-formed connections left dormant for twenty years. Repeatedly, his gaze returned to his granddaughter. Leaving her alone in the Autumn World nearly broke his heart, but Morgan was adamant that he needed the Glamour-rich world of Arcadia to salvage his faerie spirit. To her credit, she had been right. The Dreaming had given him a new lease on his life as a changeling, enabling him to enjoy many more years as his true self before the inevitable fading of his life as a troll.

Morgan seemed to have fared well without him. She had grown from a shy childling struggling to balance her mortal life with her parents and her fae life as a sidhe noble into a poised wilder and a polished citizen of the mortal realm. He supposed he needn’t have worried so much about her, though it seemed she had not ceased to worry about him. Even now, she kept looking over her shoulder to catch his eye. Each time she did so, her face lit up. It was enough to make Tor’s heart sing. She was his ward, and he had sworn to be her protector for as long as the Dreaming gave him life. All was well.

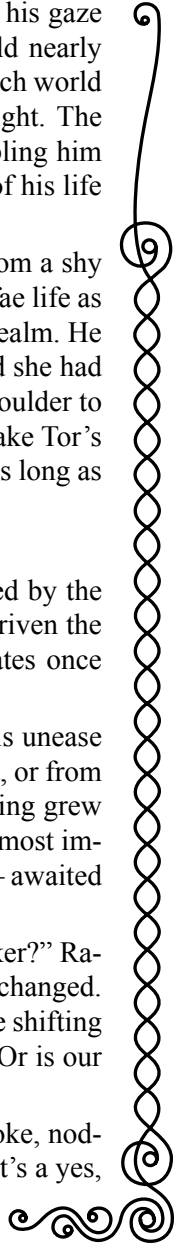
But not for Valmont.

Even amid the Riders, even in a patch of the Dreaming constructed by the Hidden King as a place of safety from the wave of Banality that had driven the fae from the Autumn World, even in the company of all his oath mates once again, the eshu noble was troubled.

He wasn’t sure what bothered him, and he didn’t know whether his unease stemmed from something involving all of his oath mates and their quest, or from something personal. As he drew nearer to the Dreamers’ Glen, the feeling grew stronger. He became certain that he followed a path that would test his most important bond: his love for Leigh. Suddenly, he sensed what — or who — awaited him. It was a test he had hoped he would never have to face.

“Have you noticed that it seems to be getting lighter instead of darker?” Rafael asked his horse, whose color shifted even as the quality of the light changed. The pooka leaned down close to his horse’s neck to whisper, “Is the time shifting back and forth so that we’ll arrive at our destination at the right time? Or is our destination trying to catch up with or slow down to meet the time?”

His mount, which was shifting from a light plum to a lavender smoke, nodded his head up and down, making the bells on his bridle jingle. “If that’s a yes,



then I agree with you,” Rafael said. “Of course, if that’s a no, then I don’t disagree. After all, you know this place far better than I do.”

A few seconds later, Rafael added, “Are you sure you aren’t a pooka?” The horse jingled his bridle bells again. “I thought so,” Rafael remarked. “You know, or maybe you don’t know, I used to always feel jumpy when I didn’t know what was going to happen, which was most of the time, but things are a bit different now, since I’ve been born again — I mean reborn — which is entirely not the same. I feel something that might be called peaceful, except I’ve never felt peaceful before, so I don’t know if this is what I’m feeling now, unless I exclude everything else I’ve felt and what’s left is what peaceful feels like. Does that sound like peaceful to you?” As his horse started to jangle its bridle again, Rafael assured it, “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. It doesn’t matter anyway. Besides,” he added, “since everyone ahead of us is stopping, I think we’re here.”

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The oath mates and their Rider escorts passed from the forest, which now sparkled with diamond and crystal leaves and underbrush that glinted with deep reds and blues as ruby and sapphire berries caught and reflected the magical light from an unseen sun. As they entered the Dreamers’ Glen, Edmund sniffed once, then inhaled deeply.

“I smell pancakes!” he yelled and spurred his horse into the Glen.

“You!” Sir Odhran called out. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I might have known,” remarked Lady Rowena. “He’s always showing up at odd times.”

She was about to continue her comment when she stopped short at the sight that greeted her. Liam nearly dropped the tray of fresh Irish pancakes, recovering just in time to place the tray carefully on a small folding table he had apparently brought with him.

“You!” he cried, shocked, amazed, and delighted. He ran forward to Rafael, who partly leapt and partly fell off his horse. Mutely, clurichaun and pooka ran into each other’s arms. For a moment, they held each other, then Rafael spoke, his voice breaking through tears.

“How terrible to see you!”

Liam, also close to tears, hugged him fiercely, then stepped away. “I dreamed about you,” he choked out, then cleared his throat to assume his normal speech. “But I never thought — ”

“— to trust your dreams?” Valmont interjected softly.

Liam laughed as well, recovering his composure. Rafael went back to his horse and started stroking the animal’s head repeatedly, staring at Liam all the while.

The rest of the companions dismounted, along with the Riders who were going to remain in the Glen and exchanged greetings with the clurichaun. Even Morgan, who had only seen Liam one or two times in her trips to Ireland, greeted him warmly.

“I made a small meal for you,” Liam said. “I thought you might be a bit peckish and might need some food before we went to see the King.” He leaned toward Lady Rowena and clarified, “Oh, yes, I was summoned as well.”

Tight-lipped, Lady Rowena acceded to Liam’s statement.

“Gather round, everyone. The food’s hot, the drinks are mellow, and I hope you’ll appreciate the entertainment.”

“Does that mean you’re going to play for us?” Morgan asked, delighted.

“I hope your music is better than the Arcadian Top 40!” Edmund said.

“That bad, huh?” asked Liam.

“Worse,” answered Edmund. “The sidhe have songs that go on for hours and they always sing in some language that they haven’t bothered to share with anyone.” He took a deep swallow of mead. “Even the songs of the redcaps are a little too vicious for me.” He laughed as Liam gave him a puzzled look. “Surprised I know words like vicious?” He shook his head hard enough to rearrange his elaborate dreadlocks. “Seriously, their music sounds more like a butcher’s catalog! I could even stand some jigs and reels.”

“I think I can manage some of those,” Liam answered him. “Then I’ll play us some music for us to fall asleep to.”

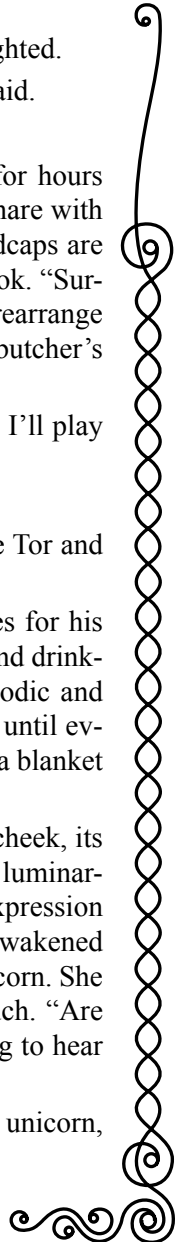
“You don’t mean the *Súan-traige*?” Rafael asked.

“That’s exactly what I mean.” Liam answered. “Now go eat before Tor and the Riders finish all the best cakes and use up my good syrup.”

After Leigh extracted from Liam a promise to give her the recipes for his pancakes and syrup, the group fell silent, chowing down on pancakes and drinking a calming chamomile tea while Liam played music that was melodic and smooth, the “sleep strain” of the three ancient bardic tunes. He played until everyone found places to settle down in the Glen. Then he too spread out a blanket and fell at once into a deep, sonorous sleep.

Morgan woke first, feeling the soft nudge of a horse’s nose at her cheek, its sweet, grassy breath redolent with the promise of starshine and golden luminaries. She opened her eyes, a smile on her face. The smile changed to an expression of open-mouthed wonder as she realized that the creature which had awakened her was not the mare she had ridden into the Glen, but an iridescent unicorn. She reached out a hand to stroke it. The unicorn did not shy from her touch. “Are you the same unicorn I met here before?” she whispered, not expecting to hear anything.

“Yes and no,” she heard inside her head. “All unicorns are the same unicorn, so either answer would be a truth.”



Morgan laughed softly. "That's an answer worthy of a pooka."

Having said that, she glanced anxiously toward Rafael, remembering another time when he had followed a large red deer into the forest, a deer which had been an omen of death. Instead, she saw a tall, slender rabbit approaching the pooka. The creature looked large and powerful enough to ride.

"Each of you has a mount suited to your nature," she heard the unicorn whisper in her mind again.

"Are you speaking to me, or am I hearing the voice of King Meilseoir?" she asked it.

It fixed her with a measured glance through one of its round, brilliant eyes. "Does it matter, if what you hear is truth?"

Morgan stretched, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and peered around the clearing, which was now nearly as bright as a cloudy day. A carpet of stars hung overhead, forming a glowing pathway across the sky. Kneeling beside Leigh, poised to awaken her with a giant paw, a regal lion, symbol of House Fiona, regarded the sidhe knight. A magnificent white camel, with all the grace of the finest riding horse, bent his long neck down to nudge Valmont. Morgan laughed softly at the sight, causing the camel to turn its head and stare at her with its long-lashed, dark eyes. "I'm sorry," Morgan mouthed. The camel nodded gravely, accepting her apology, and turned its focus back to Valmont.

The jingle of bells drew Morgan's attention to her grandfather, as the troll turned uneasily in his sleep. Astonished, the sidhe gaped at what she saw. How could it be that a *mammoth* decked out in an embroidered, handsome howdah, replete with tassels and bells, would appear for Tor? Then she noted the creature's shagginess and remembered the ancient origin of the elephant's ancestor and realized how just how appropriate the mount was for a troll, an ancient creature in and of itself. A zebra awaited Edmund. The exotic animal leaned over the redcap and started nibbling at his dreadlocks. Lastly, Morgan dared to steal a glance at the mount that awaited Liam and had to stop herself from laughing out loud at the gigantic, vivid pink flamingo that stood over the clurichaun, balancing delicately on one stilt-like leg.

"Oh, my," was all she had time for as, one by one, her oath mates awoke and marveled at their mounts, which had been woven from their dreams.

The oath mates led the way this time to the Forest's Heart, where the Hidden King lived. The Riders, including Sir Odhran, Sir Tiernan, Lady Rowena, Lady Caitrin, and the newest Rider, Siobhan, followed afterward on their own mounts. Those beasts, already magnificent specimens of their breeds, shone with the light of faerie magic, transforming into paragons of their species.

The path to King Meilseoir's palace and grounds seemed shorter than Morgan remembered. Valmont confirmed her silent observation when he remarked, "He must need to see us quickly."

"Why do you say that?" Leigh asked.

“Because he could’ve put on a total show,” quipped Edmund. Behind him, Morgan laughed.

“What is it, Miss Brighteyes?” The redcap’s head whipped around, and he fixed Morgan with a quick grin and a wink.

“You’re matching the zebra,” Morgan announced. “You’re all shadow and light stripes!”

“Aren’t we all?” observed Rafael, just loud enough to be heard.

“Spoken like a true court jester,” Liam said.

Tor grunted his agreement, a sound which could be heard down the entire line of travel.

“You’ve come in a timely fashion,” a melodious voice greeted them. “Welcome to Forest’s Heart.”

They had arrived.

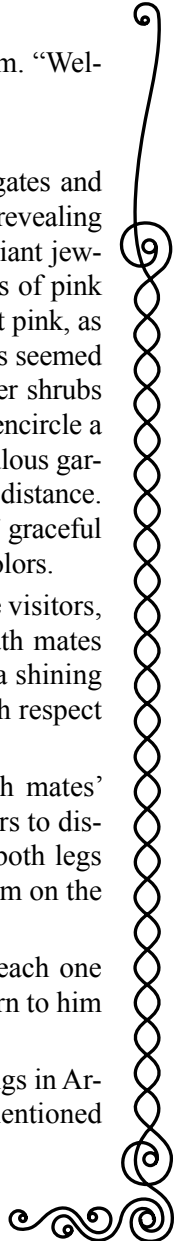
The clearing before them spread out like a magnificent estate, its gates and wall a masterpiece of delicate crystalline lacework. The gate stood open, revealing a landscape awash with colors that ranged from pale iridescence to brilliant jewel tones, displaying both evergreen and broadleaf trees, as well as banks of pink and purple peonies, roses in colors ranging from deep crimson to faintest pink, as well as yellow, ivory, and midnight-colored ones. Annuals and perennials seemed to stretch for miles, all in full bloom. Rhododendrons, azaleas, and other shrubs formed mesmerizing borders. Beyond that, a hill sloped gently down to encircle a pond full of waterfowl. Horses and deer grazed in grassy fields, and fabulous gardens, both wild-growing and meticulously landscaped, blossomed in the distance. At the center of everything stood the King’s Palace, a masterwork of graceful spires and domes that caught the moonlight and reflected a rainbow of colors.

Backlit by the castle, stood King Meilseoir, only a few feet from the visitors, his finely-etched face and form seeming more solid than when the oath mates had last seen him. He was still, in the eyes of those who viewed him, a shining creature who radiated both human and fae beauty that commanded both respect and love.

When everyone entered the king’s grounds, one by one, the oath mates’ mounts bowed before Meilseoir, extending a foreleg to allow their riders to dismount easily. In the case of Liam’s mount, the flamingo simply bent both legs and shrugged, its motion lifting the clurichaun and gently depositing him on the ground.

When all had dismounted, they bowed to the king, who greeted each one warmly, taking both their hands in his, signifying a fealty they had sworn to him two decades ago.

“I am happy to see you have all returned safely from your wanderings in Arcadia and in the Autumn World,” he said, looking at Morgan when he mentioned the Autumn World. “I trust your wounds have healed?”



Valmont spoke for the group. "It seems we healed completely while we slept," he said, "though your Riders did much to heal the worst of our injuries."

"I'm glad to hear that," Meilseoir smiled.

Meilseoir led the oath mates and Liam to an outdoor gathering place not far from the palace. Smooth granite flagstones paved a path lined with blue, bell-shaped flowers which led to a sheltered grotto containing a small, low table and seats hand-carved from stone. The Riders took their places in the company as their King motioned them to another row of seating. "We would appreciate your presence as well," he invited.

Leigh's chair seemed to mold itself under her, forming a comfortable seat very unlike what she had expected from mere rock. She watched as her oath mates settled into their reshaped chairs, also pleasantly surprised by the accommodation.

"The information we shall share here will increase your knowledge of the Cup of Dreams," the king said. "Some will touch upon other matters. But first there are some people you need to meet — or meet again."

The king indicated a small stand of trees directly behind him. From within the trees, two pairs of figures came forward to stand, one pair on either side of Meilseoir. The oath mates's eyes widened, surprise following recognition of the Meilseoir's other guests.

"Glynnis," Valmont greeted one of the figures, rising to greet the elegant Eiluned fae who had once opposed them, working closely with Yrtalien, the Forsworn Prince, to beat the oath mates to Silver's Gate. In the end, the oath mates had crossed through the gate after battling their opponents. King Meilseoir had offered to take Glynnis into his sanctuary, while Yrtalien, whose fae self had been driven from him, made his way into the Autumn world, guided by the brothers Donal and Dougal.

Glynnis bowed her head to the oath mates.

"I am glad to see you so happy, for once," Valmont remarked.

"Glynnis has proven invaluable for her knowledge of mortal history and her skills in research and ancient history," Meilseoir said. "She will share her knowledge with us in a bit."

"And now it's my turn."

Leigh started at the sound of a familiar voice, one she had never expected to hear again.

"Yrtalien!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I received a summons as well, after a fashion." The Ailil prince stepped forward.

Tor shifted his weight onto his feet, as if to rise to protect his oath mates, but one of the Riders put a firm, restraining hand on the troll's shoulder. "I don't think he means any harm to us," Sir Tiernan said quietly.

“I think he has something to say,” Morgan interrupted them, bidding them in her own fashion to be silent.

Indeed, Yrtalien did. He explained, “I’ve spent the last two decades or so, I think, as a mortal — taking the Banality cure, it seems.”

“You were fairly well down the Bedlam road,” one of the pair that stood behind Glynnis and Yrtalien spoke up, his Northern Irish accent evident in his speech. He bowed slightly to the group. “I’m Donal, by the way, and this is me brother Dougal.”

“His Majesty tasked us with watching over this one,” Dougal spoke up this time. “To make sure he stayed well away from anything that could bring him close enough to Glamour to awaken him.”

“Yeah,” Donal added. “He had a fair amount of excess Glamour that had to bleed out of him before he was fit for decent company.”

“That’s rude,” Dougal said. “You’ve no respect for mortals.”

“I’ve little enough respect for our kind either,” Donal replied, with a half-smile that indicated his sarcasm.

“You remind me of the arguments Edmund and I used to have,” Morgan remarked. “I was 12 at the time. He,” she said, indicating Edmund with a glance, “was 8.”

“And that makes us different how?” Edmund retorted.

“I became a dart-sliding champion at the local bar, near the cottage I inhabited,” Yrtalien said. “I also remember some fairly rough games of — rugby?” Yrtalien looked to the brothers for confirmation, receiving it. “Oh, and some time spent bowling.” Yrtalien shivered as he said the word.

“It’s an honest sport,” Dougal said, “and it’s as old as the hills.”

“Some say it started here in Ireland, but others say the ancient Egyptians bowled,” Donal added.

“And Henry the Eighth was a bowler.”

“So was Martin Luther.”

“I spent many nights listening to that,” Yrtalien said, extending his arm in a gesture to take in Donal and Dougal.”

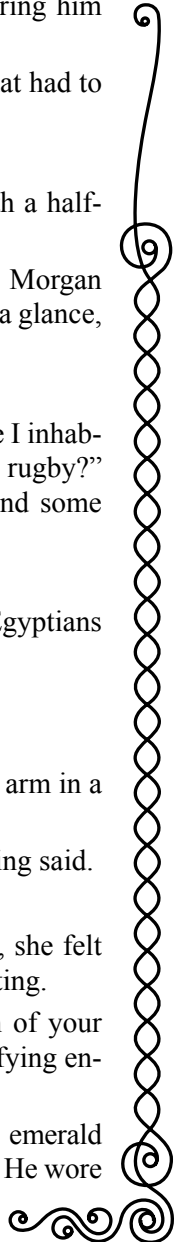
“And now you’ve come back to us, cured of your madness,” the King said.

“I hope so,” Yrtalien said quietly.

Leigh wondered if he had somehow learned humility. Once again, she felt old feelings stir. She would need to deal with those, but after their meeting.

“I ask your indulgence,” said the King. “The importance of both of your former acquaintances and adversaries will come to light after some edifying entertainment.”

At the king’s indication, Liam stepped forward, decked out in an emerald green velvet tunic, its cut-out sleeves revealing a deep purple under coat. He wore



leggings that matched his tunic and thigh-high boots of supple black leather. He carried his lute, an instrument made of rosewood with silver-strings, in one hand.

“My friends and other folk,” the clurichaun began, “I have a tale to tell about the ancient times, a tale I learned not long ago and have been waiting until a time such as this to tell it.”

Glynnis, Yrtalien, and the brothers took their places in the stone circle, their attention directed to Liam as he began to weave his tale.

“Once upon a time, in a time so long ago, in a world so divorced from today that even our eldest can no longer recall it, the elements, spirits, powers, and dreams came together in a beautiful garden pleasing to all. There they took their ease, surrounded by jeweled starlight, with scents of patchouli, jasmine, honeysuckle, and amber carried on warm breezes that caressed their beings. All the while soft vocal and musical harmonies soothed their cares away.

This legendary consortium wanted to capture this perfect moment in a solid form to hold all possibilities, good and bad, sublime and horrid. Though all were excited to create such a treasure, they could not agree on the shape it was to take. After suggestions too numerous to recount and vociferous arguments that drew a few to exchange lethal blows, they finally reached an accord.

Using all the woods, plants, minerals, and elements at their disposal in the garden, created a cup. Into that amazing vessel they poured all their knowledge, emotions, magic, hopes, and dreams. They decreed that the wondrous cup would be found only by those whose need was great and whose deeds were worthy — either for great good or terrible evil, or else to keep the balance between the two. When the chalice that they created was finished, it could take any shape that suited it at the time. Any liquid poured within it empowered the Cup to fulfill the wishes or dreams of its user. Thus, they named it the Cup of Dreams.

Barely after had it been created, though, the powers and spirits began to squabble over who was to keep it and how it would be used. Seeing the discord it sowed among those who had been creators and friends, a few wiser beings bonded together to take the cup and throw it as far into the Deep Dreaming as they could.

Since that time, the Cup of Dreams has appeared in the Dreaming and in the Autumn World according to where the Dreaming determines it needs to be, and in the form the Dreaming discerns is best for it to take. Many have sought it, yet most never find it.”

Liam took a sip from a goblet that appeared in his hand.

“Do you have within you the abilities to find the cup and use it?” He took his goblet and swept his arm in an arc to toast the oath mates. “Perhaps. You will only know when you try.”

He set his empty goblet on a table that had appeared beside him.

“And now my tale is done. Take from it what you will.”

Valmont led the applause, which, though not loud, still indicated strong approval. Liam bowed, then picked up his lute and used a braided cloth shoulder strap to allow him the free use of both hands.

“And now, I need to play you a song. I don’t know if you’ve heard of an old ballad called *The Elf Knight* —” He smiled as he saw Leigh nod. “— but it’s an old tale with many versions. This version seems to have circulated most among the fae and pertains to things only the fae would know about. It virtually disappeared at the time of the Shattering, but resurfaced some time later and both fae and mortal bards picked it up.”

“So, without further ado, here’s a version of *The Elf Knight* that I call *The Green Leaves*.”

He began to play a haunting and lyrical tune, setting it firmly in his audience’s ears before he sang the lyrics:

*The elf knight sits on his milk white steed
Red and white roses in the garden bleed
He blows his horn as the four winds call
And the green leaves cover them all.*

*The elf knight rides o’er the silver road
Red and white roses wither in the cold
A great king’s daughter hears the call
And the green leaves cover them all*

*“Ride with me, princess, do not say no”
Red and white roses in the garden scream
“Though all forbid me, with you I’ll go”
And the green leaves cover them all*

*They rode forty days and as many nights
Red and white roses strain to catch the light
Till they came to a field filled with flowers tall
And the green leaves cover them all*

*“Light down, king’s child, and stand with me”
Red and white roses twine around her feet
“We’ve come to the place where thou shalt die”
And the green leaves cover them all*



*“It is eight king’s daughters that here I’ve slain”
Red and white roses sigh and weep
“With the ninth I’ll awake the ones who sleep”
And the green leaves cover them all*

*“Before I die, lie down here by me
Let the red and white roses make our bed
Let me dream of what will never be
And the green leaves will cover my head.”*

*The elf knight lay down by her side
Red and white roses spread their thorns
And she sang her dagger into his side
And the green leaves cover them all*

*“It’s eight you’ve slain” the princess did exclaim
Red and white roses sigh in relief
“Now you’ll lie as companion and never leave
And the green leaves will be your bed”*

A moment of silence greeted the clurichaun as Liam bowed and removed the strap, putting his instrument aside. Coming around from her reverie first, Morgan led the group in a round of warm applause.

“The colors mean something, don’t they?” Morgan asked. “Something very old, or primordial?”

“Those are the colors of the ancient Fomorian courts, aren’t they?” Leigh asked.

“Yes,” the king answered.

“I heard of that in Arcadia,” Leigh mused. “But only in passing.”

“And here is where Glynnis has compiled more information pertinent to what you’ve just heard.” Meilseoir extended a hand, and Glynnis rose to stand before the gathering. She stood straight, looking to Morgan like some of her professors, her easy posture ready for giving a lesson. Her simple robe, deep blue in the color of her house, fell in graceful folds to her feet.

The Eiluned scholar took a steadying breath, and began:

“Though this does not tell the whole story, it is enough to explain to you what we think may be going on. Hear, then, the tale of the War of Trees.

“In a time before time, the dark fae ruled all. They embodied all the horror, cruelty, and evil in the world. When humans entered the scene, they worshipped these terrible gods. And the gods took all they wanted in sacrifice. Then humans changed or evolved, and they began to dream new stories: of shining, benevolent beings to protect them from and to oppose the dark fae. Over time, the two opposing dreams came to be known as the Fomorians and the Tuatha da Danaan. The Fomorians’ children arose as Dark Fae while those of the Tuatha da Danaan became the Kithain.

“The Fomorians organized into three Courts: the White, the Red, and the Green.”

“Like in the song,” Edmund interrupted. When he saw the others nod, he said, “See, I’m not a total dumbass.”

“No one said you were,” Rafael noted quietly.

“The Fomorians and the Tuatha went to war, the great battle known as the Tessarakonta,”

“The War of Trees,” Tor rumbled in translation, his response drawing looks from the small audience. “I’m not a total dumbass, either,” he said, drawing a few laughs and a snort of approval from Edmund.

Glynnis smiled. “The Red King commanded the three courts as they met the Tuatha in Battle.

“The Red King controlled a great and terrible weapon: the Triumph Casque of Sorrows. This artifact contained all the woes, evils, and terrors ever known.”

“Like Pandora’s Box,” Morgan murmured.

Once again, Glynnis acknowledged the comment. “Indeed, but one which did not contain Hope. In fact, some claimed that if the Triumph Casque of Sorrows was ever opened, its contents could destroy all life across all the realms of Arcadia, the Autumn World, and any others that might exist.

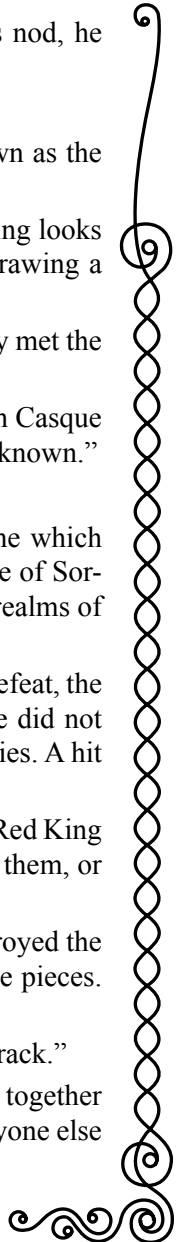
When the battle against the Tuatha seemed headed for a Fomorian defeat, the Red King, in desperation, deployed this greatest weapon. Although he did not open the Casque, even closed, it rained down fire and acid on his enemies. A hit with it could lay waste to a thousand enemies and splinter mountains.

Still, the battle turned against the Fomorians. Fatally wounded, the Red King died. As he died, the king broke the Casque in nine parts and scattered them, or so the story goes.

In truth, he did not break the Casque itself for that would have destroyed the entire world. Instead he broke the *key* that opened the Casque into nine pieces. Each piece became a key.

“So he made nine keys,” Edmund said, shaking his head. “That’s crack.”

“All of the keys, now scattered to the four winds, must be brought together to open the Casque.” Glynnis paused for a moment, waiting to see if anyone else wanted to speak.



“When the Fomorians saw they had lost their king, their hearts failed, and they surrendered.

“The defeated Fomorians were bound into magical sleep — the White Court in the Forest of Lies, and the Red Court under the Splintered Mountains — or went into exile and sleep of their own accord, as the Green Court did, taking themselves beneath the Lake of Silver.

“The Tuatha da Danaan, anxious to maintain a balance of power, also retired from the world, leaving their children to protect the mortals. Everything else, the rise of Seelie and Unseelie Courts, even the division of kiths into commoners and nobles followed from this. What matters now, however, is that rumors are circulating that the Fomorians are awakening. Some say this is because some of the keys have been found. We believe that this has something to do with the song Liam sang to you. If so, the Cup of Dreams may be all that can stop what might otherwise happen.”

“What are the sources of these rumors?” Morgan asked.

Lady Glynnis smiled. “Many members of our house,” as you know, “are true dreamers and seers. They make up some of my sources.”

“I have also dreamed of this,” Meilseoir said.

“That means we should try to find the Cup as soon as we can,” Morgan said.

“Duh,” Edmund responded, then shrugged, smiling, as Morgan shot him a glance. “For old times’ sake,” he offered. Morgan rolled her eyes.

“Speaking of old times’ sake,” Yrtalien said, coming forward to stand before the group. “There is something I must do before we embark on any journey.”

“Journey?” Valmont queried.

“*We?*” Leigh asked.

Yrtalien approached Edmund and knelt before the redcap. “Edmund, I have wronged you in many ways when you traveled with me. Please forgive me for the pain I caused you, and for all the lies I told you.” He bowed his head and waited.

Edmund looked a long time at the kneeling noble.

“What are you doing?” Morgan hissed.

“Remembering this moment.” Edmund looked down at Yrtalien. “I have one of the stones, so I could probably hurt you so you’d remember it.” He let the moment drag on before deciding, “but I won’t. Get up.” His voice took on an air of command. Yrtalien stood, as if drawn up by Edmund’s voice and not by his own accord.

“Let the Dreaming bear witness,” Edmund invoked. “I forgive you for the wrongs you did to me. Let the path be cleared that we may or may not walk together. Let nothing of the past interfere in our dealings with one another. So let it be.”

“So let it be,” Yrtalien whispered.

“So let it be,” the rest of the group echoed. So near to the Dreaming, everyone felt the bindings of Glamour take hold between the redcap and the sidhe lord.

“The Dreaming has witnessed your oath,” King Meilseoir announced.

“Where did you learn —” Morgan’s voice dwindled away as she realized she was unsure of her question.

“Where did I learn such a fancy speech?” Edmund asked, a delighted smirk at the edges of his mouth. “I learned it at Oaths School in Arcadia.”

“That’s true,” said Rafael solemnly. “I was in his class.”

“Somehow, I feel a tug on my leg,” Morgan said, “but, yes, that was what I was going to ask.”

“I guess the time spent in Dreamland rubbed off on me,” Edmund said. “Almost everyone, even the other redcaps, spoke like that. I really missed hearing normal people talk.”

Leigh cleared her throat. “I think the King has something more to say to us.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Edmund. “Sorry.”

“I receive many dreams,” the king said, “and one dream in particular urges me to tell you that there are folk to the far west, in the islands you call Hawai’i, who need to see you. I think that they need your presence, and that you may also find what you need to lead you to the Cup of Dreams.”

“Then we should go,” Tor decided for them all.

“I’m coming with you,” Yrtalien said. Leigh whipped around as if to object, but the Forsworn Prince spoke again. “I also received a dream, and my path lies with you for now.”

“So that’s why you needed to do the whole kneeling thing,” Edmund observed without rancor.

“Not entirely,” Yrtalien said. “I did need to apologize to you. But, yes, my dream was part of why I asked for your forgiveness.”

“At least you’re honest,” Edmund said. “Not like you’re Forsworn or anything.”

“Edmund!” Leigh admonished.

“What? I’m right,” Edmund said.

“He is right,” Yrtalien agreed, resigned. “That title will always cling to me. But it doesn’t mean I can’t tell the truth when it suits me, and this time, it suits me.”

Morgan slipped her hand into Tor’s large one as they made ready to follow the king. A thought struck her. She had often thought about the nature of the Hidden King, wondering if he were one of the True Fae. Her thoughts finally coalesced. *He’s one of the Siochain*, she realized, as she remembered the rumors of Kithain who had so balanced Glamour and Banality that they could live equally

in both worlds without fear. She kept the thought to herself, though, wondering when, if ever, she would share her hunch with her companions.



The Hidden King led them to a clearing in the woodland surrounding his palace and bade them to sit in the fine, silver grass as he opened the trod.

“We should obviously all made a lot of noise and be as distracting as possible, then,” Rafael said softly, his somber gaze fixed upon Edmund as he did so.

“Yeah, well I’m not the one talking, am I, cottontail?” Edmund snarled back, earning him a rebuking glance from Valmont. “Sheesh, you always blame me. He started it.” The irrepressible redcap jabbed a thumb at Rafael.

“Ssh!” both Morgan and Leigh hissed at the same time. Tor rumbled menacingly, and Edmund shut his mouth.

The king was walking about the clearing making gestures of supplication and humming so low the sound was almost inaudible. He mimed strewing pebbles or seeds from the palm of his hand as if he were feeding chickens. He whistled in a low tone and then broke into a smile as several white clouds scudded across the sky and down towards the earth. As they approached, each cloud resolved its form into that of a graceful deer, except one that became a huge, towering buck.

Forgetting he was supposed to be quiet, Edmund poked Tor saying, “Bet that one’s for you, lard butt.”

“Edmund!” Morgan admonished as Yrtalien commented, “I see you’ve yet to learn the value of silence, Edmund.”

“Yeah, well let’s see you torture me now that I’m as big as you,” Edmund returned.

Tor ignored Edmund and Yrtalien. He walked over to the buck in the same frame of mind as when he’d greeted the horse provided him by the Riders: appreciation, admiration, and wonder.

“You may touch them,” the King declared. “They will take you to the Menehune as swiftly as the clouds they seem to be.”

Valmont and Leigh approached the white deer, each with a hand held out for the creatures to sniff. The gentle deer accepted them immediately. Yrtalien’s did the same. “I’ve ridden them before,” he said. “Long ago.”

Edmund yelled, “Wahoo, cloud deer! I always wanted to ride one of those,” he snorted. “As if! Ah come on, doesn’t anyone else think this is weird?”

The king gently replied, “If you are afraid of heights, Edmund, do not be. The deer will not let you fall, regardless of what it might think of you.”

“It? Think of *me*?” Edmund found that thought ridiculous, then reconsidered as he saw the intelligence in the creature’s eyes. “Uh, okay deer, sorry.” He gingerly put his hand out and stroked the deer’s neck. It nuzzled him, and he got a goofy look on his face. Could it be that his deer actually liked him?

Morgan slowly approached her mount. *Everyone else thinks you're a deer, but you aren't, are you,* she thought at it.

"Indeed, Morgania, daughter of Eiluned, you see rightly," the creature thought back to her. *"I am your unicorn. Ride me swiftly, child, for even now, I am in danger. You must make haste to see your friends across the oceans, then reach home before all is lost."*

Rafael stroked his deer, then nimbly leapt onto her back. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "I can't thank you for the ride, but answer a question for me please. Have you ever been to the North Pole?" The deer blinked her crystal-clear eyes at him, but didn't answer.

The King advised them, "The trod is open for you now. Let the deer guide you and trust to their instincts. Go with my blessing and hopes. My dreams tell me we shall meet again before all is done." He lifted his hand to bid them farewell as the deer rose into the sky carrying the companions and Yrtalien on their lengthy journey.

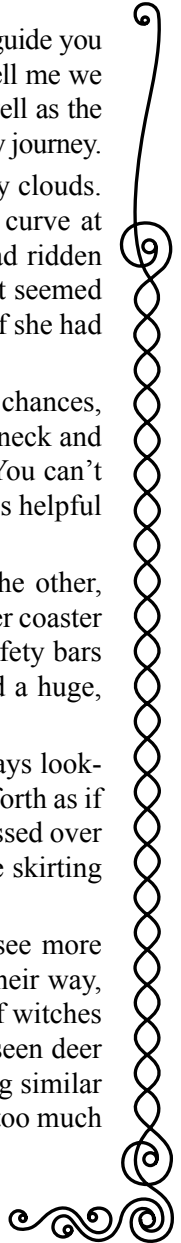
The deer took them high up in the sky along a path made of silvery clouds. Although it was a smooth ride, the path did climb up and down and curve at times. Yrtalien was at home on his mount, which made sense if he had ridden before as he claimed. Morgan tried to keep talking with her deer, but it seemed to have reverted into just a deer. The unicorn was gone. She wondered if she had somehow dreamed the encounter in a waking dream.

Tor, Leigh, and Valmont rode their beasts carefully, not taking any chances, but not actually afraid of falling either. Rafael kept stroking his deer's neck and shoulders and murmuring encouragement to her, though his coos of "You can't do it," and "Hey, nobody really taught you to fly, didn't they?" were less helpful than a non-pooka's comments might have been.

Edmund was shrieking with laughter, leaning off one side then the other, throwing his hands in the air and claiming the ride was better than a roller coaster — except for the lack of cotton candy, of course. And with no tasty safety bars in sight to munch on, he was also missing popcorn, funnel cakes, and a huge, fizzy drink.

As time passed, they became more used to riding and stopped always looking down to see how high up they were. Some of them talked back and forth as if on an everyday trip rather than riding on cloud deer in the sky. They passed over land masses and tried to identify them, but Valmont claimed they were skirting the edge of the Near Dreaming, so who knew where they might be?

The sky darkened around them as the sun set, allowing them to see more stars than they'd ever seen before. An enormous moon rose, lighting their way, and Morgan laughed as she thought about all the Halloween pictures of witches flying across the face of the moon. She wondered if anyone had ever seen deer with riders doing just that. She decided that anyone who saw something similar would just attribute the sight to the fact that they were imbibing a little too much Christmas cheer, or they might be a fellow changeling.



Rafael had just relaxed enough to fall into a light doze when his deer suddenly plummeted downward at an alarming pace. The other deer followed as the changelings all grabbed for some kind of handhold on their mounts.

Rafael yelled, "Good girl! Buck us off, please." As the ground rushed up to meet them all, he cried even louder, "Hooray! We're still on the trod! No need to panic!"

The rest managed to keep their seats, though the angle was quite steep. Yrtalien called out, "Trust the deer!"

"But we've left the trod," Leigh yelled back.

"Awesome ride, dude! When do we jump?" Edmund chortled. Tor hung on and tried to steer his deer closer to Morgan's.

Yrtalien reiterated, "Trust the deer. It only *looks* like we're off the trod. This is the first test."

Valmont closed his eyes momentarily and said calmly, "Yrtalien is right. I can feel it. Everyone just hang on."

"Why does this thing feel like it's flying upside down?" Rafael yelled. "Oh, because it obviously isn't," he groaned weakly.

The deer had flipped in midair and were merrily galloping along the underside of the clouds that had been overhead. Edmund was trying to leap off his deer's back and whooping when he didn't crash to the ground below his head. His deer looked tired to Morgan, who advised him, "Edmund, I'm pretty sure the deer are tired. Don't make it worse by jumping around and unbalancing yours."

"Same old Morgan," he grumbled, "Always Miss Perfect spoiling any fun we could have." His deer snorted at him, so he quit his acrobatics and settled down. "Don't dump me off, okay?" he whispered to the deer.

After a tense hour, the trod righted itself again, allowing the blood to rush back to their fingertips and their stomachs to stop heaving. Eventually, lulled by the gentle wind flowing by and the rocking motion of the deer, they all fell asleep.

The companions were awakened by the sound of several screeches overhead. From the sky above, they could see what looked like giant black birds of prey diving toward them. "Chickens!" Edmund yelled gleefully pulling his sword, "I get the legs!"

Tor pulled his axe from his back one-handed and swung it experimentally. He maneuvered his buck to get between the creatures and Morgan.

With the usual caution and fear rabbits generally felt around predators, Rafael laughed nervously and said, "You can't have my portions, Edmund. Hares always hunt hawks."

Leigh and Valmont, sword and scimitar in hand, guided their mounts upward to meet the birds in battle. Yrtalien followed immediately behind them. Whatever trials he'd been through in the past, the prince's battle skills remained impressive. Leigh called out to him, "Yrtalien, have you encountered these before?"

“No, I’ve never been on this trod before.”

Rafael leaned forward slightly then began making motions as though he were casting a line to catch a fish. He mimed getting one on the line, then trussing it up while singing, “Speed up, you’re movin’ too fast, ya don’t wanna make the mornin’ last” a pooka-speak version of the old song “Feelin’ Groovy.” One of the bird creatures acted as though it had somehow tripped over a cloud and slowed down its dive significantly, missing the companions completely.

The four Kithain who were armed met the first onslaught of the birds with slashing swords; Leigh, Valmont, and Yrtalien striking almost simultaneously. Leigh’s cut barely grazed her bird, and she felt like swearing. Valmont’s curved blade managed to take a wing off his bird, and it shrieked, spit at him, and fell toward the ground. Though the spittle missed Valmont, it fell on his deer’s shoulder and sizzled. The deer gave a scream as that area turned black, and it faltered in its flight.

“Watch out for their spit. It’s venom or acid of some kind. My deer is hurt!” He called to the others.

Yrtalien managed to wound his bird near its neck. The bird drew its head back and didn’t spit. Tor swung his axe in mighty strokes, keeping the birds away and shielding Morgan and Rafael from their attacks.

Morgan took an extra moment as she prepared her cantrip carefully.

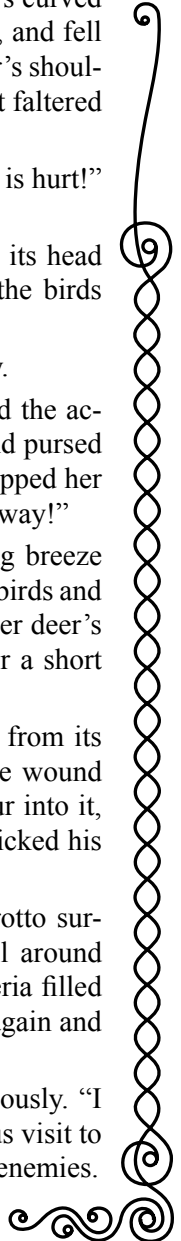
She took several deep breaths, then exhaled strongly. She repeated the action three times then drew an invisible cloud in the air. It had a face and pursed lips and lines denoting it blowing outward. She coughed twice then clapped her hands together and called out, “Blow, winds, blow, and send us on our way!”

Originating from Morgan and pushing all the deer along, a strong breeze sprang up, growing louder and stronger as it swept them away from the birds and pushed them much further along the trod. Morgan leaned down over her deer’s neck and breathed hard. She felt lightheaded after her exertions. After a short time, the wind died down and their progress returned to normal.

Valmont called a halt, though. His deer was obviously struggling from its wound. He examined it for a moment, then passed his hands over the wound while murmuring a phrase or two. Infusing a little of his own Glamour into it, he managed to heal the deer’s shoulder. The deer turned its head and licked his fingers and the group started to travel on.

Finally, the deer spiraled down out of the sky and landed in a grotto surrounding a rock-ringed pool at the foot of a cascading waterfall. All around them, orchids, frangipani, and white, red, magenta, and fuschia plumeria filled the air with a lusciously aromatic fragrance. The deer took to the sky again and faded from sight.

“I think we’re here,” Edmund whispered. He looked around anxiously. “I don’t see our welcoming committee,” he said, referring to their previous visit to the Menehune, when the local fae had treated them at first as potential enemies.



A sudden gasp from Morgan drew everyone's attention. "You're still here!" she exclaimed, as a tiny, chimeric, winged unicorn left its place atop a pitcher plant and alighted on Morgan's outstretched hand.

"Hey, it's your nightlight!" Edmund exclaimed.

"I'm sure it hasn't changed careers in the time since we left," Rafael said.

"I only used it once to write in my diary," Morgan said softly. "I still feel bad for stuffing it... him... her in my backpack and forgetting about... her."

"How do you know it's not a he?" Edmund needed.

"I just know!" Morgan snapped. Then she took a slow breath. "Maybe's she's what you think of her as," she offered in reconciliation.

"So, we arrive here together, now," Yrtalien said, looking at Leigh as he spoke.

"I would say we arrived at the same time," Leigh grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest. "We're not together." She transferred her gaze to Valmont, who had stepped up to stand beside Leigh.

"If I had my way, we would be together as we were once before," Yrtalien proclaimed. As Leigh glared at him, he fixed her with a devastating smile. Leigh's heart twinged as memories came back to her of a time long ago.

"You are my heart, Eleighanara. We can change everything, so long as we stand together," Yrtalien said as a bitter wind chilled the Arcadian skies, mirroring the hard coldness of the Unseelie rebellion.

"We're hopelessly outnumbered," Leigh sighed, tears burning her eyes and scalding her cheeks. "Our only hope is surrender now, before our foes' hearts are frozen against us."

"You mean our parents and their allies," Yrtalien snarled, his voice hard and his expression changing in an instant from ethereal beauty to carved ice. "We must prevail; we have come too far to turn back." He looked away for just a moment. When his gaze return to Leigh again, his face had softened once more, a quiet desperation giving him a haunted look. Leigh's heart broke.

"Please, if our love means anything to you, take advantage of their offer of mercy. They will temper their punishment if we stop fighting now." Her voice was a whisper, her throat too tight for anything stronger.

Yrtalien took her cool hand and held it to his warm cheek. It was damp, for he too wept. "Don't you see? I cannot surrender," he declared. "I have come too far." He let go of her hand and stepped back, as if to release her from his influence. "I want you to stay with me more than I can say, but you, at least, have a chance to gain your parents' mercy."

“No,” she wept. “I cannot leave you.”

“You can, and you must. I will be content so long as I know you are free.”

In the end, she had left him to return to her family’s mercy, a decision that meant exile to the harsh Autumn World. Yrtalien had fought on until he was beaten down. His punishment had been much harsher, warping him without altering his quixotic essence.

“Eleighanara?” Yrtalien’s interruption shattered her thoughts, bringing her sharply back to the present.

“I was just — remembering,” she said, surprised at the shakiness of her voice. She looked away from him quickly. Almost desperately, she reached out for Valmont, who took her hand and drew her closer to himself, shoring her up.

Yrtalien looked lost, dumbstruck hurt on his face. He added one plus one quickly and understood the pairing before his eyes. Bitter and resigned, he squared his shoulders.

“And forgetting,” he accused softly. He faced Valmont. “You have won a treasure,” he said. “Please do not forfeit her love for your own ambitions.”

“I have not won her,” Valmont replied. “We found each other after dancing around our differences. When we finally saw each other, there was no doubt that we belonged together.”

“I will have to trust both of you, then,” Yrtalien acquiesced.

“In the meantime,” Leigh said, trying to get them back on track, “we have come here for a reason, and that must take precedence.”

“I don’t think anyone is coming to meet us,” Rafael muttered, as the warriors of the Menehune revealed themselves from amidst the jungle to surround the oath mates.



chapter eleven: strange alliances



Though her form was slight, the woman, now young and in her prime, was strong. She carried the reborn sidhe noble deeper into the rainforest, which changed with every step. Cyprian Ryder, or Chevalier, the fae name by which he now thought of himself, allowed the woman to wrap him up in her strong arms. They traveled along an enchanted road, something with only passing similarity to a trod. As the woman, whose name was Pele, and whose guise took many forms — flame-haired beauty, wizened crone, mighty dragon, and volcanic essence — walked, she sang a soft and wordless song, creating the road with every footstep.

“I am taking you to Moe’uhane,” Pele told him. “The Village of the Dream. There you will learn the ways of the Menehune, who have lived here for years beyond counting. They are threatened by a group of Thallain called the huaka’i po. They are native to this land, but they are also servants of the Fomorians. You are the dream of a warrior, and here there are battles for you to fight alongside my children. Here, you will become who you were meant to be.”

Ryder remembered the young Menehune, daughter of the chief, who had been the guest of the Forsworn Prince. His thoughts darkened as he remembered Yrtalien’s real purpose in treating Kanani as a treasured guest: to sacrifice her to the volcano and reawaken the ancient faerie tradition that demanded such a gift be given to the powers of death every seven years. Shamefully, he had agreed to allow Yrtalien to conduct his sacrifice.

Now he had returned from his demise in the volcano, his death deemed unacceptable by Pele. A new life stretched before him, and he was determined not to waste it.

Still carrying Ryder, Pele came to a clearing. Brilliant red, purple, and yellow flowers limned the periphery of a village that contained houses made from stones and living dwarf trees. The volcano goddess gently laid her burden down.

“Here is where I leave you to make your own way. You are expected.”

She disappeared in a soft wind of ash and heat. Ryder tried to stand, but found his knees buckled underneath him. He lay back in the enveloping foliage, closed his eyes, and waited.



As if he were newborn, Ryder stumbled through his lessons in the ways of the Menehune. Around his neck hung a small shell, held by a cord made of braided twine. When he touched the shell, it served to translate his speech into the language of the Menehune, which resembled that of the native Hawai'ians. With language differences accounted for, cultural lessons were somewhat easier. Although he did not understand some of the kapu, or taboos of the Hawai'ian Kithain, Ryder did his best to embrace them. He took great care that his shadow did not fall upon Makani, the ali'i or chief of the village. Following the customs of the Menehune challenged him, but in thanks for their hospitality and for the gift of his life that Pele had given him, he did his best.

"We will be receiving visitors before too long," the ali'i's younger daughter Lulani told him as she and Ryder walked through the village. He could see some of the warriors at one end of the clearing practicing some battle techniques he had shared with them, learning the menehune's battle skills in his turn.

Ryder nodded, distracted. "The ali'i seems certain that the village will come under attack soon," he observed.

"Yes, but those are not the visitors I meant," Lulani told him. "The ones who come now you have met before, and though your relations may not have been friendly, you will need to find a way to make peace with them."

Ryder searched his memory, trying to recall who the visitors might be. He blanched as the memory of his past rushed in on him.

"You're talking about the fae I hunted, aren't you? The ones I died fighting." He had to will his voice not to shake as he spoke.

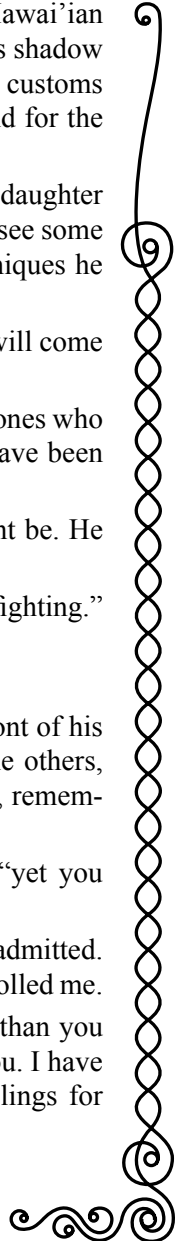
Lulani nodded. "Those," she said, "and one more."

Ryder bowed his head. "Yrtalien," he whispered. He stopped in front of his hale, or house. "I don't know if I'm ready to face him," he said. "The others, maybe, but not him." He couldn't help but lapse into brooding silence, remembering their past encounters and the harm he had done.

"You have buried yourself in your thoughts," Lulani observed, "yet you wear them on your face. You doubt yourself."

Ryder nodded. "I don't trust myself not to try to harm Yrtalien," he admitted. "I find it hard not to hate him for what he did to me and for how he controlled me."

Lulani placed a hand on his chest, over his heart. "You are better than you think," she said. "You have no need for anger, and it has no need for you. I have seen your kindness. You have learned to smile. Save your harsh feelings for those who are your real enemies, for those are our enemies as well."



Ryder calmed under Lulani's touch as her serenity spread to him. "I will try," he said. "For you." He offered her a shy smile, something he found easier to do with every passing day. "You have taken the time to be my teacher in so many ways."

Lulani's face blossomed with delight. "I begin to think I am a good teacher," she said. "Let us see if my father knows of our visitors."



The Thallain had begun to gather a month ago, since they heard the call of Maharag, a White Court Fomorian. Long ago, their ancestors had sworn oaths to the Fomorians, whose dark, chaotic dreams most closely resembled theirs. Those ancient, elemental fae promised power to those who served them. These Thallain, who assembled not far from the dwelling of the Menehune, called themselves the huaka'i po, the night marchers.

Some of them came from the city of Kapa'a on the island of Kauai. A few belonged to a fight club that met regularly to hone their physical skills, and proudly bore the scars from their battles. Others preferred the simple pleasures of drinking and brawling. Above all, they embodied the nightmares of darkness and the terror of drums in that darkness. Just as the Menehune embodied the dreams of the men and women of Hawai'i, the huaka'i po embodied dreams of death.

Still other huaka'i po preferred to dwell in makeshift villages deep in the canyons and wild valleys of the island. The men and women of the nameless settlement spent their days hunting and foraging for food. At night, they gave in to the violence inherent in their natures. They fought among each other or raided other settlements of huaka'i po, in order to see just how much damage they could cause to each other. Governed by their dreams of violence, they prepared for the time when they could answer the call of their Fomorian masters, sleeping though they might be.

Kekipi called himself the leader of the group he called Oke, the divine spear. Each night, Kekipi, who also went by the name "Rebel" among English speakers, worked the members of Oke into a frenzy that erupted into a brawl that ceased only when everyone had drawn blood. "We serve a higher purpose," he told his followers, by way of explanation. "And we have to be ready."

This night, though the weather was mild, as is usual in the islands, tempers ran high; the smell of blood filled the air as members of Kekipi's night marchers slashed their arms with thorny vines to drive themselves into a frenzy. The Thallain manifested their marching *voile*: armor made from the bark of trees or obsidian plaques with helmets that concealed their faces and bore frightful, painted masks depicting monsters created from their nightmares. Beneath those masks, the faces they wore as fae showed scars and tattoos that marked milestones in their lives — their first night march, their first blooded battle, their first takedown of an enemy.

“Tonight, we have a special purpose to our march,” Kekipi announced. “The Pale Lord, Lord Maharag, has sent me a dream.” A roar rose up from the crowd or perhaps 50 huaka’i po, and Kekipi waited for it to fade until he could speak over them once more. “The village of the Menehune lies in that direction,” he said, pointing in the direction indicated by the pull of Glamour he felt. “Maharag wants the daughters of the chieftain. He wants their blood. There are Kithain defenders in the village. He wants their blood, as well.”

In truth, Kekipi knew from his recent dreams only that his Fomorian master wanted the huaka’i po to fight for as long as they could, even after they grabbed the young women. Their true purpose was to distract the defenders from any other actions except protecting the village. He thought calling for Kithain blood sounded better and would rouse his people more than a holding action would.

“Sound the call and strike the beat,” he cried, throwing back his head to yell at the top of his voice. From within the group, one of the hunters manifested a conch shell horn and blew into it. An eerie moaning sound caught the night wind and traveled for miles before fading into the dreadful dark.

As the conch shell sounded, some marchers manifested lit torches and heavy clubs. Others brought forth their drums made from sonorous wood with hardened skin stretched tight across the hollow inside of the drum. The skin came from chimera the beaters had slain in some cases; for others, the beaters had painstakingly peeled off layers of their own skin, painting or tattooing the surface of the skin while their self-inflicted wounds healed. Some boasted that these drums resonated more strongly than the ones with chimeric skins because they rang out with the pain contained within their surfaces.

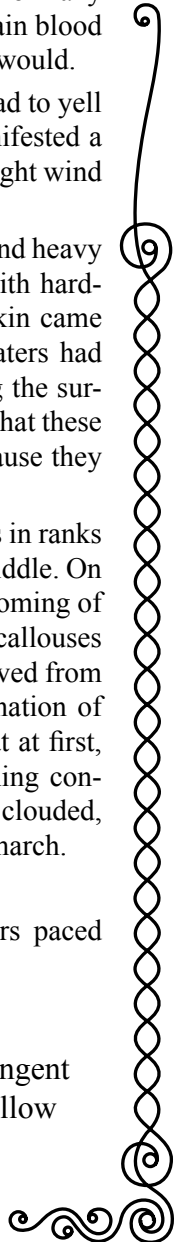
“Form the ranks!” Kekipi called. The marchers grouped themselves in ranks of four across, with torch bearers on the outside and drummers in the middle. On their leader’s signal, the beaters began the drumming that marked the coming of the night marchers. Some drummers used their hands, hardened with callouses on their palms and fingers from years of practice; others used sticks carved from the branches of trees or meticulously shaped from stone. The combination of sounds produced a fearsome pounding that mimicked a slow heartbeat at first, then quickened to the frenzy of a maddened creature. As the drumming continued, the marchers felt their blood rush in their veins. Their minds clouded, blocking out rational thought, until all they could feel was the urge to march.

“March!” Kekipi screamed when none could stand it any longer.

Silently, except for the sound of their drums, the night marchers paced moved toward their destination.

• • • • •

The oath mates made their way through the jungle, led by a contingent of Menehune kokua, or warriors. The kokua left the Kithain to follow



closely; it was their responsibility to keep careful track of their guides to keep from losing their way.

“This is a lot different from the last time we came here,” Edmund remarked. “Last time, these guys weren’t as friendly to us, ’cause *somebody* had told them we were enemies.” The redcap wilder looked pointedly at Yrtalien, who had the grace to look abashed.

“I thought we were going to put those hard feelings behind us,” he demurred.

“Just sayin’,” Edmund responded. “I’m not gonna make a big deal about it, and these guys can’t understand us anyway.”

“Right,” Rafael said. “It’s not as if they’re wearing translator shells around their necks or anything.”

Edmund flipped a glance at one of their escort, then cursed softly.

The warrior blew air out through his teeth, amused.

“We wondered what you would say to each other if you didn’t think we could understand you,” he admitted in English. “I am Kawikani. I remember when we learned strange ways of fighting from the Walking Rock.” He indicated Tor as he spoke.

“I have gifts for you,” he added, passing out shells strung on braided vines for them to put around their necks. “Now we can all understand each other.”

“Aloha, Kawikani,” Morgan said as she put the shell necklace around her neck and touched a finger to it. “I’m Morgan.”

The big warrior grinned. “You were just a small girl when I saw you last,” he said.

Morgan smiled. Gesturing toward Edmund, she offered, “We both were young. But, it’s getting late.” Indeed, the sky lost its daytime sheen. Instead, it glowed with the luster of dusk.

“There’s the village,” Leigh sighed, catching a view of the rooftops ahead. “I can’t wait to be off my feet soon!”

As the group broke through the foliage that separated them from the jungle and Moe’uhane, the Village of Dream, a pair of young women who could have been twins ran to greet them.

“Lulani!” Leigh exclaimed. She had half a moment to wonder whether she should embrace the ali’i’s younger daughter, but Lulani’s fierce hug gave her the answer.

“Aloha!” Lulani exclaimed. “Your face shines with the Dreaming! And you look no older than when I saw you last!”

She turned to the others, embracing them in turn, followed closely by her sister Kanani. Both sisters stopped abruptly when they came to Yrtalien, dropping their arms to their sides and stepping backwards.

“Aloha,” Yrtalien said. “I come seeking forgiveness for what I’ve done.”

Lulani looked to Leigh, questioningly. Leigh shrugged. “We have settled our differences,” she said. “You must decide whether you can settle yours.”

Kanani stared at Yrtalien. “You deceived me and would have killed me.”

Yrtalien nodded. “I was wrong,” he said, “and I make no other excuses for myself. I only hope that you will allow me to make up for what I have done by helping to defend this village.”

“The ali’i will decide that,” Kanani said, authoritative.

Yrtalien bowed his head. “I will present myself to him and submit to his judgment.” He started to move in the direction of the largest house, then stopped abruptly and dropped to his knees as the man himself emerged.

“I thought I would make it easier for you to present yourself to me,” said Makani, the ali’i. At the sound of his voice, every one of the oath mates and Makani’s daughters also respectfully acknowledged the chief’s presence. Leigh felt certain that Lulani and Kanani knew the position of the sun relative to Makani’s shadow, but she checked anyway to make sure she did not violate the most sacred of kapu, or taboos.

Makani gestured to Yrtalien to stand.

“I would like our other guest to join us, as well.”

From behind Lulani and Kanani, Ryder approached Makani, nodding formally in respect to the ali’i.

“Pele has sent him to us so that we can learn from one another and so that he might discover what it means to be one of the Dreaming’s children” Makani smiled as he spoke. He looked at all his visitors and motioned with his hands for them to come closer. “I am remiss,” he said. “Welcome back to our village! Aloha!”

Leigh, Valmont, Rafael, Tor, Edmund, and Morgan exchanged greetings with Makani. Yrtalien and Ryder remained silent until Makani turned to them. “I would like for the two of you and my daughters,” he nodded to Kanani and Lulani, “to stand with your friends,” He emphasized the word “friends” as he looked at Morgan and her oath mates. “Together you will listen to the words of those who have wronged us. One,” he gestured toward Ryder, “has already made his peace with *us*, but has not achieved an understanding with you, Shadow Stealer.” He fixed Yrtalien with a long, dark stare. “Tell me why you acted as you did, so I may decide what to do with you.”

Yrtalien took a deep breath to steady himself. “I came here out of greed and a desire for power,” he said. “I misled you into believing that you should give me the Shadowstone. Then I left, taking your daughter Kanani with me. I intended to sacrifice her as a way of bringing back an ancient custom of the Kithain. I was in the grip of madness at the time, and now that I have been restored to myself, I see my actions for what they were — the works of a madman.”



“Sometimes madness touches a person to teach a harsh lesson; at other times madness is a refuge against something even worse,” Makani said. It seemed to Leigh, as she listened to the ali’i’s words, that his gaze rested briefly on Rafael when he spoke of a refuge.

“Perhaps my madness was a little of both,” Yrtalien observed. “At least I know now that power without true purpose only invites destruction and chaos.”

Makani nodded, but said nothing in return. Instead he turned to Ryder.

“Now you must make peace with the Shadow Stealer.”

“Is that to be my name, now?” Yrtalien sighed.

“Do you wish it to be?” Makani asked mildly.

“I hope to earn a better one,” Yrtalien replied.

“I wish for you and Ho’i Hou to go into the meeting house and make your peace with one another in whatever way you must, so long as no one dies.” When Makani called Ryder by his Hawai’ian name, Ho’i Hou, the oath mates heard the word *Reborn*. “I think our other guests need to be fed, and I shall eat with them.”

Makani’s daughters hurried to make sure food was made ready for the new arrivals.

“I’m starving,” Edmund said. “I hope they have some of that good stuff we had last time we were here!”

“I don’t think they’ve roasted a whole pig,” Morgan whispered to her oath mate.

“Not that,” Edmund said. “The sticky stuff you can eat with your fingers. Poi!”

• • • • •

Ryder and Yrtalien paced back and forth inside the empty meeting house until Ryder finally broke the silence. “The Menehune are very forgiving.”

Yrtalien made a small sound that might have been agreement. After more silence, he asked, “Are you as forgiving as they are?”

“I hope I have learned to be.”

“So do I,” Yrtalien replied, “because I am not used to begging for forgiveness.”

“You certainly knew how to make me grovel.”

“Yes, well, I could plead insanity, I suppose.”

“And that would be true,” Ryder agreed. “I recognize now what I didn’t see then. You were maddened by too much Glamour.”

Yrtalien nodded. Briefly, he told Ryder about the time spent in the prison somewhere between the Dreaming and the Autumn World. “If I had not man-

aged to find a way out,” he confided, “I think I would still be there — until I disappeared.”

Yrtalien looked carefully at Ryder, trying to assess the new person he had become. “Would you say that you, too, were trapped in your own prison of Glamour? He pointed to the center of his own palm and stared at Ryder.

“No, that’s not true,” Ryder began, then reconsidered. “You’re right,” he said. “I was exposed to too much Glamour just as you were.” He laughed bitterly.

“We could stand here for hours reciting a litany of offences we’ve committed against each other,” Yrtalien said.

“Or we could duel it out,” Ryder answered.

They stared at each other as the time passed. After about five minutes, both started laughing.

“Somehow,” Ryder finally said, “I don’t think either way will serve any purpose except to waste time we don’t have.”

“I agree,” Yrtalien said.

“What do you say we both just forgive each other?”

“Brothers in arms?” Yrtalien offered, extending a hand.

“Done,” Ryder agreed, and gripped Yrtalien’s arm in a warrior’s grasp. “It seems we will need to fight side by side before too long, from what the ali’i has said.”

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The companions, Chief Makani, Lulani, and Kanani had just finished their meal when Ryder and Yrtalien emerged in search of food. They dropped to their knees before the ali’i, who motioned for them to be seated.

The two sidhe partook of the ample feast of chicken laulau or steamed chicken wrapped in taro leaves, the fresh tomato and salmon salad called lomi lomi, and coconut pudding, as well as mangos, dragon fruit, rambutan, lychees, cherimoya, and guavas.

As they ate, Makani spoke up. “I have had a dream that has disturbed me,” he began. “It begins with an attack on the village, one which we have already spoken of to you. During the battle, it becomes clear that the attackers want my daughters. The phrase they use is this: “Our master requires princesses for his sacrifice.

The ali’i looked toward his guests, inviting comment.

“I don’t know where I’ve heard of such sacrifices before,” Rafael murmured.

“We will fight alongside your daughters.” Tor said., adding “I was my grand-daughter’s protector for many years.” Morgan nodded her agreement.

“Who is their master?” Valmont asked.



Makani shook his head. “I don’t know, but the huaka’i po serve the ancient beings of the first times, the ones you know as Fomorians.”

A cold wind blew through Leigh; she shivered. “We knew we had to come here,” she said. “I wasn’t quite sure why.” She searched her thoughts. “I’m still not quite sure why.”

“I think that’s something we’ll learn soon enough,” Valmont said.

“Come,” Makani invited his guests. “There is still plenty of food — unless you prefer more poi.” He glanced dolefully toward Edmund, who was still double-fisting mouthfuls from the pot of sticky paste, stopping every so often to savor it.

“Here,” he said, reluctantly pushing the pot towards Yrtalien and Ryder, who had both been studiously avoiding it. “There’s a little left. It tastes like glue, really sticks to your ribs.”

Ryder glanced at Yrtalien and slowly pushed the pot back toward Edmund. “Thank you, but no,” he said. “You seem to like it so much, we’d hate to deny you your enjoyment.” Edmund started to resume eating when he stopped, hand in mid-air.

“Did I just go deaf?” he asked. “Or has everything suddenly gotten really quiet?”

• • • • •

The soft bird calls and the chitters of small animals going about their daily routines in the surrounding jungle stilled to ominous silence, as if smothered. For a long instant, no sound pierced the dark veil that held all noises in abeyance.

Suddenly, a new, menacing sound ripped through the forest. A single conch shell blared its weird, mournful call. Morgan’s face, normally pale, grew deadly white. Involuntarily, she put a hand to her heart. Tor, ever solicitous, put an arm around his granddaughter, his face lined with concern.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice a soft rumble.

Morgan shook her head.

Makani nodded to Kanani, who extended a hand to Morgan, murmuring a tuneless chant as she did so. Morgan’s heart grew calmer, and her normal color returned to her face. “I’m alright,” she assured her grandfather and companions.

Leigh gave her a shaky smile. “I feel it, too,” she said. Looking around at her oath mates, she added, “I think we all do.”

As the sound of the conch faded into silence, drumming filled in. At first, it was a slow, pounding beat, as hollow and empty as the cry of the void. The rhythmic thudding of the drums expanded to fill the sky. Morgan’s teeth hurt and she felt empty inside, filled with nothing but the drums. Panicked, she looked around her, hoping to find comfort from one of her companions, from her grandfather at least, but she saw the same wild expression in their faces as well.

Edmund held his stomach. “I’ve never felt like barfing before,” he groaned, surprised.

“It gets worse,” Lulani whispered, deadened. “I’ve only heard it once before, but I will never forget it.”

“What did you do?” Leigh asked, trembling.

“We hid inside until it stopped,” Lulani said in a small, high-pitched whisper.

“We knew that if we met them, we would die,” her sister added.

“Who told you that?” Valmont asked.

“Our legends told us that to meet the night marchers was death,” Makani declared in a voice that seemed to settle the situation.

“But not this time,” Ryder said.

“No.” The ali’i’s voice was quiet in its finality.

As they spoke, the drums picked up in intensity and other sounds built upon the dull bass throb. Fast, high-pitched drums combined with arrhythmic middle-range pat-a-pats; other percussive sticks against sticks and metal against metal joined the manic ensemble, gaining in volume. As the noise level rose, so did the harsh emotions of those in the village — anger, hatred, envy, and violence.

“Shh! Don’t listen!” Rafael said. “They’re not saying anything intelligible.”

Through their shell necklaces, the oath mates could barely make out a low chant, which steadily built in intensity.

“*Ke kaikamahine a ke ali ‘i*,” the marchers repeated over and over, turning it into a sound that matched the rhythm of their drums. “*Chief’s daughter*,” was the translation, but in the ears of Leigh and her companions, the word that rang out was “*Princess!*”

Yrtalien stood and looked to Lulani and Kanani. “You need to go inside the meeting house,” he directed. “We’ll keep them away from there if we can.”

“Grandfather?” Morgan looked up at Tor. The troll nodded. “They will have to go through me,” he rumbled.

From within the village, a gong sounded, this one a call to arms. In defiance of custom, the warriors of the village assembled to meet the night marchers, joined by Ryder, Yrtalien, and the oath mates.



Ahead of him, Kekipi saw the outskirts of the village. With a word, he goaded the marchers on, prepared to brook no opposition. The Menehune and other fae residents knew that confronting the huaka’i po meant death — or so they believed. Those who dared oppose them became so maddened by the aura of violence that surrounded the night marchers that they often attacked unarmed and without thought, making mistakes that made them easy to defeat.



It is the sound of the drums, Kekipi thought, not for the first time. The rhythm gets inside them and pushes them into rash actions. He fully expected to find the village empty, its people cowering in their houses, allowing them to go straight to their objective, seizing the ali'i's daughters for their master.

Instead, he found a line of warriors blocking the path of the night marchers. They had raised their shields in a wall in front of them, and they held their spears and nets at the ready. His marchers did not pause in their forward momentum. With battle cries from the Menehune, the fight began.

The marchers parted ranks, with one drummer and one torch holder moving to either side, as from the middle of the host, warriors wielding clubs and spears charged to the front and clashed with the village guardians. The village's warriors held the marchers off for a few blows, but ingrained fear made them cautious. The marchers pushed through, knocking the kokuas aside with clubs and spears.

• • • • •

"They're breaking through!" Edmund called. Leigh, Valmont, Yrtalien, and Edmund ran toward the meeting house, where Tor and Ryder stood guard inside, protecting Lulani and Kanani. Morgan, Rafael, and Chief Makani formed a triad off to one side, where they could use their subtler powers against the intruders. A few chosen warriors, guarded the trio

"Let's get 'em!" Edmund yelled as he started to charge forward, his sword at the ready.

"Hold your place!" Leigh called to him. "Let them come to you!"

"Dragon's balls!" Edmund remarked. "Fine. Okay. Whatever." The redcap bounced back and forth on his feet, a bundle of energy waiting to explode into action.

One of the marchers broke through and rushed toward Edmund. He surged forward, lobbing his chimeric sword into his enemy's club, slicing it neatly in two. He caught the loose end of the club and popped it into his mouth, closing his teeth on it with an audible *crunch*.

"Tasty!" he exclaimed, dodging a blow from the bottom half of the club. He caught a look at his enemy, taking in the hideous mask that covered his face. A chill ran through him, followed by the urge to kill. He drew his sword back for a killing blow, when he heard a voice in his head saying, *Don't do it!* The voice sounded like Morgan's and he cringed.

Cripes! She's in my head! Almost immediately he knew he had given Morgan's voice to his own cautionary thoughts. He twisted his sword for a non-lethal blow, slamming the huaka'i po on the side of the head, felling him.

"One down!" Edmund called out as he moved to the next opponent.

• • • • •

A group of night marchers ran toward the meeting house. Leigh, Valmont, and Yrtalien sped towards them. Yrtalien led the way wielding two slender chimerical swords. Leigh and Valmont stood before the doorway of the meeting house, side by side, weapons at the ready. As the marchers approached, Yrtalien strode to meet them, skillfully cutting a pair of the marchers out and marking them as his targets.

“Now we dance,” he declared, stepping into them with both swords weaving back and forth in a pattern intended to dazzle and confuse.

The huaka’i po did not respond to the Ailil noble except to aim blows at his head.

Yrtalien murmured,

“Where is he, where is he? Tell me where!”

He’s not here, he’s not there,

He’s not anywhere!”

As the marchers’ blows struck what they thought was Yrtalien’s head, both clubs crashed into each other, missing the sidhe entirely. Yrtalien laughed as he ducked beneath the clubs to come up with the tips his swords within reach of the marchers’ abdomens. He carved into them with his blades. Reeling from their chimeric wounds, the night marchers’ fae miens faded, revealing a pair of thugs in worn and tattered clothing. Yrtalien moved to deliver another pair of blows that would render the pair unconscious and drive them all the way into their mortal selves.

“Good night,” he said, and looked for another enemy or two.

• • • • •

As she watched Yrtalien’s performance, Leigh remembered his fighting skill from his rebel days in Arcadia. A lump rose in her throat as she acknowledged his sheer beauty as a fighter, even as she bid farewell to her Arcadian love for him once and for all. She turned to regard Valmont, who returned her gaze.

“Impressive,” he agreed fairly, “but now it’s our turn.”

Together, they waded into the midst of their attackers. The marchers formed a circle around Leigh and Valmont, who stood back to back, bracing themselves against each other and preventing attacks from the rear.

As each warrior attempted to strike a blow, either Leigh or Valmont met the enemy’s weapons with their own. Leigh’s swordplay, while more straightforward than her Valmont’s artistry with his scimitar, proved effective in taking down one of her opponents. She suffered only a slight blow from another.

“Ow! No fair!” she called out, returning the hit with a stronger blow, this one flattening her opponent.



Braced against Valmont, feeling the comforting warmth of his body against hers, she settled in for an extended fight as more huaka'i po moved up to take the place of the fallen.



From the sidelines, Morgan, Rafael, and Chief Makani watched the fight unfold. As her oath mates traded blows with the night marchers, Morgan silently cheered them on, while Rafael kept up a running commentary, though it bore no resemblance to what was occurring.

“The slimy formerly bad good guy heaves an articulated giraffe at the oncoming army, covering them all with spots. In the meantime, the crafty redcap swallows his first two opponents, and the Bobbsey twins spray the battleground with a Gatling gun...”

Morgan managed to split her attention in order to listen to him with part of her awareness; but even as she did so, she looked out for a moment that called for their intervention.

She found that moment when a group of ten marchers headed toward the meeting house, taking advantage of the fact that the defenders were all occupied. Morgan nudged Rafael.

“It’s time,” she said.

“And they lived happily ever after,” Rafael said, finishing his narrative. He pulled a pair of juggling clubs out of his ornate shoulder bag and clapped them above his head while reciting a counting rhyme.

From all parts of the village and from the surrounding jungle, the foliage sent out lashing vines and snaking tendrils to wrap themselves around the legs of the huaka'i po, causing many of them to stumble and fall, while others were simply frozen in place, wrapped in greenery.

“Oh, look!” Rafael exclaimed. “It’s the greenhouse effect!”

Morgan watched as Leigh, Valmont, Edmund, and Yrtalien slowed, beginning to tire. She danced a few steps from a British contra-dance, and then pointed to each of the four in turn, sending them additional energy to keep fighting. Most onlookers would not notice anything, but Chief Makani put a hand on Morgan’s head and beamed down at her. “Here is more Mana so that you may keep assisting your friends,” he said.

Then he lifted both arms and sang out a war cry. Morgan and Rafael watched in amazement as the defenders’ wounds vanished.

“That didn’t help at all,” Rafael said mildly.

The ali'i chuckled. “You speak well, particularly when you describe the battle.”



Kekipi watched as one after another, his marchers fell. Incompetence! Now, it was all up to him. Cloaking himself in shadows, he slipped past the defenders who were locked in battle in front of the meeting house. The princesses would be inside, since no other hale was so well defended. Once within, he peered around. At one end of the house, where the ali'i would normally sit, stood the two princesses. With them, he saw only two defenders: a troll clad in armor and gripping an axe, and a sidhe warrior clad in light armor

Maddened himself by the sound of the drums, Kekipi sized up at the warriors and decided that he could take them both. Quietly, he crept forward, intending to take one from the rear. Instead of a club, Kekipi carried a long knife shaped from obsidian. He aimed the knife at the sidhe's back, where it would do the most harm. Before he could deliver his blow, he felt a foot kick him from the side.

"Behind you, Ho'i Hou!" Kanani cried as Kekipi stumbled.

Ryder spun around, his attention drawn to Kanani's movement. Peering intently at the empty space behind him, he could just make out the shape of his enemy.

First, Kekipi felt the blow from Ryder's chimeric blade. Next, the shadow of Tor's great axe darkened his vision, just before consciousness left him.



The battle was over. The warriors took charge of dragging the bodies of the defeated away from the village.

"We will leave them to the jungle," the ali'i said. "They will awaken, and their Mana will either return to them or it will not. They will make their way to where they came from, and perhaps we will face them again."

"Is there no way to make sure they don't come back?" Morgan asked, as the oath mates gathered around the ali'i.

Makani shook his head. "If there is, I don't know of it."

Edmund spoke up. "I think I know a way. Tor, I'm gonna need your help."

The troll raised an eyebrow, "What do you think I can do?" he asked.

Edmund held up his right hand, where his ruby ring glistened on one of his fingers. "I can do part of what I'm thinking of with this," he said, "but I need you to help out with the ring you have." Tor looked down at his own right hand, where a sapphire shone from his ring finger.

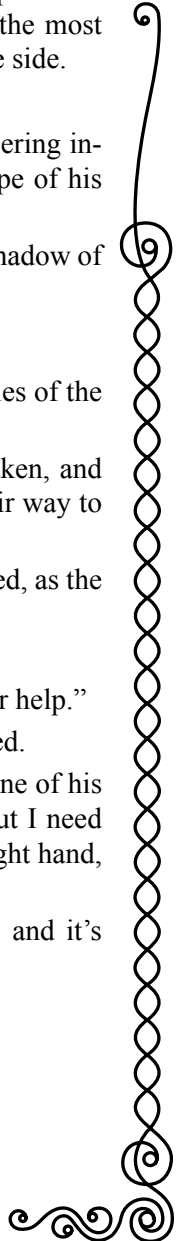
Valmont arched an eyebrow. "I think I know what you're up to, and it's brilliant," he said.

"Didn't think I had it in me, did ya?" Edmund sneered.

"I didn't say that," Valmont returned.

"That's right, he didn't," said Rafael.

"What's going on?" Morgan asked.



Understanding dawned on Leigh. “Edmund and Tor are going to use the Changestone and the Waystone to protect the village from the huaka’i po,” she explained.

“Right,” Edmund agreed.

He and Tor left the village and were gone for almost an hour. When they came back, Tor said simply, “It’s done.”

“We used the Changestone to alter the land surrounding the village so that no one who didn’t already know where they were going could find it, and the Waystone to make sure that those who belonged to the village could always find it again.”

Chief Makani nodded gravely. “You have done a very good thing,” he said. He looked around at the companions. “Tomorrow night, we will have a feast in your honor,” he said.

Leigh bowed to the ali’i. “Thank you,” she said. “I think we need to rest now.”

“I will show you to a hale you may use,” Lulani said, and led the companions and Yrtalien to their beds.

• • • • •

The companions spent the next day relaxing and reacquainting themselves with the village that had taught them so much the last time they visited it. Leigh disappeared among the villagers as they prepared the evening’s feast, learning as much as she could about how to make the food they would be eating that night. Edmund was fascinated by the steps involved in cooking the kalua pua’a, or roast pork, a process that involved using an underground steam oven known as an imu to cook a whole pig. Morgan feared for all the pigs in San Francisco when he returned home.

Yrtalien and Ryder spent the day in the company of the village’s kokua, watching the warriors practicing and competing in tests of strength, speed, and dexterity. When not competing with them, the two sidhe spoke together. Watching them, Morgan decided that they were coming to terms with each other. *First, they bonded through shared battle. Only then could they talk to each other as equals.* Morgan stopped herself from analyzing them further. *I’m on sabbatical,* she reminded herself.

Tor took advantage of their leisure time to acquaint himself with his granddaughter, whom he had last seen as a 12-year-old child. He told her stories of Morgan’s mother as a child and of her love for art.

“I thought for a while that she might be Kithain,” he remembered, “but she never had her Chrysalis.”

Morgan nodded, remembering her own Chrysalis, which revealed to her and most of the fae of the duchy of Golden Gate her faerie identity. “I suppose sometimes things like that skip a generation,” she commented.

“At first, your mother tried giving you crayons and drawing paper, hoping you had inherited her love of drawing and playing with colors,” Tor chuckled. “But you were more interested in writing — or trying to write. Your school was a very progressive one,” he added. “The teachers taught their students to try to spell words by sounding them out, even if they weren’t the usual words that were—” he paused, searching for the correct term.

“Age appropriate?” Morgan said, smiling. “I remember studying that kind of education in some of my child psych classes. The thinking was that you could promote greater intelligence and creativity in children by having them try to spell words they didn’t know.” She laughed. “I remember trying to spell pteranodon and a lot of other dinosaur words. Mother saved my spelling papers from that time and showed them to me much later. She thought my attempts were precious. I thought they were embarrassing.”

Tor’s eyebrows wrinkled in puzzlement. “I’m surprised your father kept you in a school like that,” he rumbled.

“He didn’t. Not long after, he sent me to The Stratton School, which emphasized science over art. I suppose that’s when school became work.”

Tor put his arm around Morgan. “I’m glad you’ve found something you like doing,” he said.

Morgan nodded. “I decided that children in their pre-Chrysalis years needed help in accepting what most people would consider the fantasy world, and that their parents would need even more help.”

Both Tor and Morgan fell silent, enjoying each other’s company. Valmont and Rafael spent time with Kanani and Lulani, who took them to gather flowers for leis and brought them along as they worked on other small chores that provided them the opportunity to speak with the villagers. At one point, Kanani drew Valmont aside and murmured, “I have something to show you.” She made a soft, chirping sound and a few minutes later, a strange chimeric beast came waddling out of the undergrowth to stand in front of Kanani, looking up at her. Kanani laughed and picked up the creature, which resembled a pug with six legs, great bulbous eyes, and a dark leathery tongue.

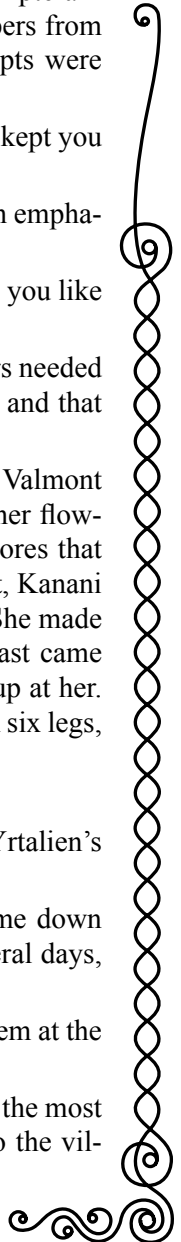
“Do you recognize it?” she asked Valmont.

The eshu laughed. “It’s the creature you were carrying around at Yrtalien’s palace in Hilo,” he said. “How did it get here?”

Kanani shook her head. “I was unconscious when Pele brought me down from the mountain and took me back here. Lulani says I slept for several days, exhausted from everything that had happened.”

“Most likely from the drugs they gave you so you wouldn’t fight them at the sacrifice,” Valmont growled, willing himself not to become angry.

Kanani nodded. “When I awoke, Lulani was beside me and I heard the most pitiful wail outside the hale. Lulani said that the creature had come to the vil-



lage early that morning and gone straight to the hale where I was sleeping. She wouldn't let it get close to me until she knew what it was and if it meant me any harm."

The little chimera flipped over in Kanani's arms. She cradled it like a baby with one arm while she stroked its stomach, eliciting a sound from it that was somewhere between a growl and a purr.

"Yrtalien and his court created many chimera for his guests to hunt and slay," Kanani continued. "This one was so little and seemed like such easy prey that I felt sorry for it. Yrtalien actually gave it to me, though I'm sure he just assumed I wouldn't be around."

"But you survived," Valmont reminded her.

"Yes, and so did this little one," Kanani replied. "He must have made his way from Yrtalien's palace and tracked me down."

"Perhaps he had help," Valmont suggested. "Perhaps the one who brought you here also brought this creature as well."

"I thought that was possible," Kanani said. "Outside of that dreadful place, I was all it knew."

"It really seems to feel safe with you," Valmont complimented her.

"Thank you! I think it has a nest somewhere around here. I hope it might show me its home someday soon."

After a while, Kanani put the chimera down and it followed her contentedly for some time before disappearing back into the jungle.



When darkness fell, chimeric lights began to twinkle in the palm trees that lined the village. Torches on tall sconces cast even more light as the villagers gathered to celebrate the victory over the huaka'i po. After everyone had feasted, the entertainment began. Leigh and her friends watched the graceful hula dancers as the dancers told the story of the battle for the village and the happy feast that followed.

The kokua also performed dances depicting hunts and battles, ending with the fire dancers. At the insistence of some of the younger villagers, Rafael performed his own juggling act to cackles and hoots of delight as his juggled objects became more and more outlandish: balls, pins, coconuts, torches, and then finally, eight spinning knives.

Seeing how happy Rafael was in this new incarnation, Leigh felt a warm sweep of affection for all her oath mates. She caught Edmund's eye.

"I know the recipe for poi now," she said.

The redcap's face lit up. "So you can make it?" he asked, smacking his lips.

Leigh nodded. "Anytime you want," she replied.

“Savage! I gotta find one of those imu ovens,” he enthused. “Do you think the duke will let me dig a hole in his lawn big enough to roast a pig?”

Leigh shook her head in mock sadness. “I don’t know. You’ll just have to ask him where Sir Cumulus can’t hear you.”

The sky faded from starlit darkness to pale lavender and gray as dawn approached.

Abruptly, Morgan stood, interrupting the remaining celebrants’ low conversation.

“We really need to go back,” she intoned, her voice tight and toneless.

“Do you feel something?” Valmont asked.

“Yes,” Morgan confirmed. “We should go to the grotto.”

Leigh turned to the ali’i, who leaned forward to listen to her. “We have cherished our visit with you and the opportunity to help you defend your village,” she told him. “Thank you for your hospitality, and for this feast. We find, however, that we must leave here as soon as possible. My oath mate has a strong sense that we are needed elsewhere.”

“Then go, with my blessing. My daughters and I will come with you so that we may open the trod for you.”

“Ryder?” Leigh asked. The sidhe shook his head.

“My place is here, at least for a while.”

“I will be going to Hilo,” Yrtalien said.

“Hilo?” Leigh asked, surprised.

“Yes. King Meilseoir has been preparing me to take my place as The Winter King. He says the day may yet come when the Seelie and Unseelie share power once again. More importantly, should the Endless Winter come about, the Kithain will need someone who can guide them through it until the inevitable spring.”

Leigh found herself viscerally in agreement with him. “But why Hilo?”

Yrtalien shrugged. “I know the city. It’s off the beaten path, but not so isolated that Kithain will be unable to find it. Besides,” he added, “King Meilseoir has said that he would summon me if there were need.” Then he turned to face the oath mates. “Besides, I harmed a lot of mortals while I was there, and I need to see if I can make reparations for what I’ve done.”

“I don’t know if humility suits you,” Valmont said.

Yrtalien smiled faintly. “Oh, it’s not humility; it’s pride.”

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The group arrived at the grotto, eager to see where the path might lead them but sad to be leaving so soon.

“Oh, look,” called Morgan. “My unicorn is still here!”



The little chimera she had made long ago to give her some light so she could write in her diary at night now perched in front of a pitcher plant. She laughed, feeling homesick. “It reminds me of the unicorn mug Fizzlewig always lets me have whenever I stop by.”

Her breath stopped. “That’s where we need to go,” she whispered. Then, so everyone could hear, she declared, “We’re needed at the Toy Box.”

Chief Makani and his daughters opened a trod to reveal a swan boat, ready and waiting to take them eastward.



Later, none of the oath mates could remember the journey from the Village of Dream to Point Reyes, where Ondine and her selkies awaited their arrival. The voyage could have taken weeks, for all they knew, yet Valmont had remarked that it was probably not very long and, if there a guardian had appeared to test them, they had all slept through whatever happened.

Ondine greeted them warmly but made no indication that she expected them to stay. “Otter told me you must make haste,” she assured her friends, “so we won’t keep you. To help you on your way, however, we have a gift for you. Just follow us.”

Ondine and Otter led the group up the steep walk to the road. There, in all its former glory, was Valmont’s wine-colored Cadillac, beautifully restored. Valmont’s eyes widened, and he gave a huge smile.

“It looks perfect!” he said. “Last time I saw her—”

“She looked like she was headed to the junkyard,” Drifter said, coming around from behind the car, a polishing cloth in his hand.

Valmont’s voice shook as he said, “I can’t thank you enough.”

“It was fun,” Drifter assured him. “We all worked on it.”

“It has a few new bells and whistles,” Otter chimed in. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh?” Valmont asked.

“Yes,” the selkie seer chirped, pleased. “I’d suggest you try out the new GPS as soon as you get in the car and buckle up.”

“GPS?” Valmont asked. “It didn’t have one before.”

“It does now. A *Glamour* Positioning System. Just tell it where you want to go, and it’ll get you there.” Otter beamed. “We all contributed to it.”

“Thank you,” Valmont breathed, amazed at her ingenuity. “I can’t thank you enough. But — I think we should probably be on our way.”

He and the oath mates piled into the car, which seemed to purr as they settled themselves in and buckled their seat belts.

“Toy Box Café, San Francis—” Valmont gasped as the car leapt forward onto the road, making its own way to its destination.

chapter Twelve: countdown



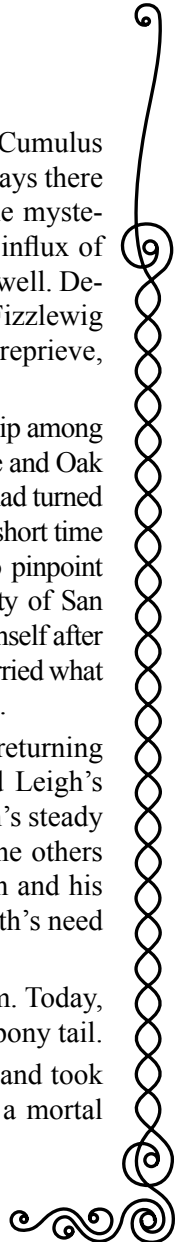
Aeon stalked through his palace, thinking furiously. He and Sir Cumulus were perplexed befuddled by the latest turn of events. For the last few days there had been no attacks or thefts perpetrated in Golden Gate. Whoever the mysterious Pale Lord was, he had disappeared as if he'd never existed. The influx of Thallain, if they were still in the area, had apparently gone to ground as well. Despite the Protectors laying traps throughout the Toy Box Coffee Shop, Fizzlewig had found no need to utilize them. Aeon should just be thankful for the reprieve, but he distrusted what seemed too good to be true.

Try though he might, Jack October could not dig up even a peep of gossip among the more unsavory members of the changeling communities of Golden Gate and Oak Hold. Fiona had made friends with several Unseelie in Oak Hold, but none had turned up even a whiff of news about the Thallain that had seemed so ubiquitous a short time ago. Cameron had worked his mortal political contacts in vain, hoping to pinpoint where the Thallain might be hiding, and Wulf was prowling the entire city of San Francisco like a hungry lion. Aeon could understand his wanting to prove himself after almost dying at the Pale Lord's hands the last time they met, but the duke worried what might happen if Wulf located the Lord while separated from his companions.

Not for the first time, Aeon wished Leigh and her oath mates were returning from the Dreaming as Morgan had indicated they would. He missed Leigh's spirit, Tor's protective presence, Valmont's canny instincts, and Morgan's steady cheer and wisdom. He would even take Edmund's rudeness to have the others back. He let himself dwell for a moment on thoughts of poor Rasputin and his uncanny ability to shine the light of truth on any situation despite his kith's need to lie.

As he made his way into the grand hall, Princess Alera greeted him. Today, she wore jeans and a t-shirt and had pulled her blonde hair back into a pony tail.

"Where are you off to, sweetling?" he asked as she ran up to him and took his hands to swing him in a lighthearted, dancing circle. "Playing at a mortal pursuit, are you?"



“Yes, Yvgeny and I are going to a soda shop and then to the movies. I hope that’s okay?” she asked.

“Of course!” he returned. “You seem to be favoring him over the others. Is he the one?”

She mock-frowned at him. “Maybe,” she teased.

“It’s your choice, sweet one, just make sure it’s what you want. Is Layla going with you?”

“No, I’d like a little time alone with him. And I think he feels the same,” she said wistfully.

“It’s fine. We’ve had no disturbances for several days now, so it should be safe for just the two of you to go out. Or,” he wondered aloud, “I could send my troll bodyguards along with you.”

Aliera shrieked in mock outrage. “Don’t you dare!”

The Duke chuckled. “I won’t. In fact, I’ll need them. Cumulus, the Protectors, and I are on our way to see Queen Aeron. Have a good time, but I want to know first — or at least right after you tell Layla — when you make your choice.” He kissed her forehead and watched as she practically skipped out of the room.

At least someone’s happy, he thought as he went to ready himself to visit the queen.

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As soon as she left Aeon, Aliera wondered why she had lied to him about where she was going. *I’m just tired of everyone always knowing my business,* she decided. *I know they’re all just concerned for my safety, but I need to find out if Yvgeny does plan to become my husband. And a picnic and horseback ride will be just the chance for a few hours alone. It’s now or never.* She had prepared just the gown to wear, something pretty but durable, and as romantic as she could imagine. She couldn’t wait to see Yvgeny in his fancy clothes, too. Hugging herself in excitement, she went to dress.

• • • • •

Aliera had gone on several more outings, some with one noble, some with another, but it seemed to Layla that of all her suitors, her friend liked Yvgeny Varich best. He came to her solar and played songs for her on his lute and created made up jaunty tunes for her on a pennywhistle. He sang of unrequited love, true love lasting an eternity, and of his absolute devotion. Layla noticed, however, that he never named the object of his devotion. She, at least, remembered Aeon’s warning that his House could not love, but Aliera would not hear of it.

Yvgeny took Aliera on long walks and to shows and clubs. He brought her small presents and asked about her preferences. They went to a movie and even to a costume ball where she dressed as a mermaid and he as a pirate. On most

of these outings, Layla was not invited, and she worried each time until Alieria was safely home. Every time they left, Layla noticed that Yvgeny tied a leather pouch to his belt. A cursory examination of his room when he was elsewhere at the estate failed to find it. She wondered if he kept the pouch on him all the time. Naturally, this made her curious. She resolved to swipe it the next time Yvgeny and Alieria went out together.

Three days later, she had her chance. Duke Aeon, Sir Cumulus, and the motley the queen had appointed as investigators were out of the city visiting Queen Aeron. Lady Alyssa was dealing with complaints from several commoners and would be tied up in courtly duties all day.

Alieria found Layla reading in her room. She knocked and entered saying, “Layla, I think it’s going to happen. I think Yvgeny is going to propose!” She flumped down on Layla’s bed, hugging the pillow to her and smiling.

“Why do you think that?” Layla asked, not certain why she found the thought disturbing, but trusting her instincts.

“Because we’re going horseback riding and on a picnic to a place he said was special to him. He even said he would get some of the sweet rolls I like so much from the Toybox. And he wanted us to dress like a grand lord and lady. Isn’t that sweet?”

Mild alarm bells sounded in Layla’s head. “If you’re to be a lady, am I to accompany you as your lady-in-waiting?”

Alieria shot her friend a downright mutinous glare, but checked herself. Con- trite, she replied, “Oh Layla, any other date, I’d love to have you come, but not this time. If I’m right, it could spoil the moment. If I’m wrong, I’d like to hide the embarrassment a little longer. Besides, if he does ask, he’ll still need Aeon’s permission, and I’ll share the news with you either way.”

Layla forced a smile onto her face, now fully determined to see what was in that pouch before that man left with Alieria. The princess left to get ready, but instead of lingering with her, Layla went to the bachelors’ hall to watch Yvgeny as he left. *It’s not like I don’t trust him*, she mused. *Okay, it’s exactly like I don’t trust him. What if he has some sort of drug in that pouch? What if he forces himself on her? I won’t let him hurt her like that.*

A few minutes later, Yvgeny left his room whistling to himself. As usual, the pouch was tied to his belt. He never saw Layla just around the corner as she mimed casting a line and fished the pouch from his belt to her hands. Now she just needed to get back to her room.

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Yvgeny and Alieria rode out on two fine chimeric steeds across the lawns and toward the small wooded area that enclosed the estate. He had chosen a gentle golden mare for her, since she was riding side-saddle. He was seated on a fiery black gelding. To the rear of his saddle he had affixed a picnic basket which held her favorite

sweet rolls. The smell was tantalizing as they rode along. She could barely wait as they rode through the estate, laughing together. The day was warm, so after a while, he offered her a flask of cool fruit juice. She took several sips gratefully.

“Will we be stopping for lunch soon?” she asked, her head starting to ache in the harsh sunlight.

“It’s just a short ride onward,” he assured her.

She didn’t want to ruin the mood, so she said nothing about the headache though she was feeling somewhat breathless. *It’s this fitted court dress*, she thought, and twisted a little in the saddle to relieve her distress. Then he was off his horse and down by her side, asking, “Lady are you well?”

“I am not,” she thought she said, but he laughed as if she’d made a joke.

“That is a great pity, my lovely Alera, for you have called to me as no other in this time and place,” he said.

Or at least she thought he said something like that as she fell from her horse into his waiting arms. “What?” she asked, trying to swim against a current of dizzying haze clouding her vision.

“Hush, sweet, rest but awhile. I mean no assault on your virtue.” She lost consciousness and did not hear him add, “Indeed, child of my enemies, I want only your life.”

Tying her back in the saddle, he led her horse to the gate he had opened into the Dreaming and began the journey to the meadow of death where his other eight brides lay.

• • • • •

It had all been so easy, Maharag thought. He had quickly put together that the last sacrifice must be Princess Alera of Golden Gate. He found it amusing that she hailed from San Francisco, where the Accordance War had started. His chosen form also lived there in the newly established freehold of House Varich. Two slaps to the proud sidhe of the duchy.

Hearing of Duke Aeon’s plans to find a suitor for his ward, he enacted the first part of his plot — the taking of Yvgeny Varich. He remembered it with satisfaction:

Yvgeny Varich strolled through the public garden, making his way toward the gazebo where he had arranged to meet Duke Aeon before presenting himself at the ball he would be attend that night. He had wanted the chance to speak privately with the ruler of Golden Gate prior to the festivities. Yvgeny had read the patterns and currents surrounding his family’s new home of San Francisco and was greatly troubled by them. Those patterns concerned incursions by the darker fae, the princess he was to meet, and a dangerous, sinister figure who orchestrated some great betrayal. Though uncertain why he was involved so directly in these complicated portents, he hoped the duke could help him understand strands of the puzzle he didn’t yet comprehend.

He spied the gazebo just ahead and saw the figure of Duke Aeon seated inside. Few could mistake the handsome duke with his shining, golden hair and rock star looks. Yvgeny raised a hand in greeting as he came nearer, wondering why he felt a sudden alarm. Was there some threat to the duke? He mounted the steps to the gazebo, then froze as his talent for recognizing patterns kicked in. He just had time enough to wonder where the duke's troll guards were when his mind was seized and stilled. The duke's face, predatory and ugly rose up in his vision, close and horrible. He felt a great rending pain and fell into blackness.

The "new" Yvgeny stepped into the original's mortal sheathe and glanced at himself in the small mirror his discarded human flesh carried with him. He approved. Deep blue-black hair worn long, but stylishly shaped, topped a more-than-handsome poetic face. Large blue-violet eyes stared back from the mirror. His trim, athletic body, clad in black and wearing a gold medallion shaped as a stylized sun would melt the heart of any young girl. Maharag was highly pleased that his Unseelie sluagh agent had intercepted the invitation from the Varich to the duke. She would dine well tonight. He congratulated himself on his conquest of the Varich and knew the conquest of the princess would not be far behind. He left the gazebo, leaving behind the uninteresting flesh he'd used to shape an image of Duke Aeon. Maharag laughed aloud as he imagined the mortal police finding the corpse and trying to figure out what had killed the unimportant human. Resuming the Varich's stroll, he disappeared from the garden.



That conquest had proceeded so well that he allowed a self-satisfied smile to cross his face. He had immediately presented himself at Duke Aeon's court as Yvgeny and been welcomed with open arms.

He'd spun his plans carefully as he searched for the hiding place of the Cup of Dreams. He watched and learned, he paid various groups to attack Seelie individuals and motleys, and he commanded Thallain and dark-kin from afar to steal whatever treasures and other Glamour they could.

Aside from weakening the changeling community of Golden Gate, he hoped these incursions would lead him to the Cup. Such a potent artifact could not hide its Glamour for long. When he realized it must be inside the Toybox Coffee Shop, he sent groups again and again to acquire it. To his annoyance, the cursed toy chest that gave the shop its name was protected by an entire group of changelings — including an Aesin sidhe, his Fomorian brothers' proclaimed enemies. He would find another way.

And he did. He had gone to the Toybox himself earlier today. Once there he laughed at himself. He and the old boggan cook were alone. No guards were in sight. He had realized from long familiarity that the Cup was not in the toy chest as he had thought. It hung from a hook in plain sight, but not in a form he recognized.



He spoke of the proposed outing with the boggan to allay any suspicions, and then he asked the old fool to bake him some of the rolls Alieria preferred. When the cook went into the kitchen to get them, Maharag took the mug from its hook and stowed it under his coat. He paid for the rolls and the picnic basket the boggan thoughtfully provided and had walked right out the front door with the Cup of Dreams in his hands. “Recognize me, old friend?” he had asked the Cup as he placed it in the basket with the rolls.

He smiled down at the unconscious Alieria. That too had been easy. With his long years of one conquest after another, he knew quite a lot about what young women desired in the modern world. He had wooed her with expertise, an appeal to her ego that she could break an age-old curse, and by working, each chance he got, to amuse and delight her while also speaking of matters of import to the Kithain she would one day govern. He treated her like an intelligent and thoughtful young woman whose opinions he valued and whom he found very desirable. He had never transgressed the bounds of propriety with her, though he often spoke of his longing to find a soul mate. He had strongly hinted that this outing was to become an engagement. Little did she know how many brides he’d taken. She still didn’t even know he wasn’t Yvgeny Varich, the silly cow. He would rectify that soon.

• • • • •

Layla wasted no time in opening the pouch she’d stolen from Yvgeny. Though it was made of leather, it wasn’t soft suede as she had thought, but a thick, hard leather that gave her no clue what could be inside. She wasn’t sure what she’d find in it. Maybe some sort of drug or concoction designed to put Alieria in an agreeable frame of mind, or even — and she was afraid of this — an engagement ring. If it *was* a ring, she had massively overstepped her boundaries.

She pulled open the top and gently poured the contents onto a soft pillow in case anything inside was breakable. Then she separated each item and forgot her earlier fears. She arranged them in a circle. As she looked from one to the next she saw a braided circle of brown hair, a painted folding fan wrapped in strands of black hair, an intricate coil of long, golden hair, a braid of coarse black hair twined with gold beads, brunette hair coiled with a jeweled Grecian style hairpin, a child’s fingernails, a preserved bright green eye wrapped in orange-red hair, and a pair of shriveled lips painted red.

Until the final three items, she could tell herself it wasn’t true, but by those three, her mind shut down all rational thought as it screamed at her over and over: *Serial killer! Serial killer! Serial killer!*

Wildly, she scrambled back away from the objects. Her first thought was to get Aeon and Sir Cumulus. Then she remembered they were gone. Lady Alyssa was in court and more likely to panic than do any good. She made herself take a deep breath. *I need help. Who can help me?* With shaking hands, she gingerly placed the horrid objects back into the pouch and left her room.

She decided she must trust to her eshu instincts to take her where she needed to go, so she walked down the stairs and out of the house. *First, where?* She thought. Shaking out her hands, she danced a small step and hummed a traveling song. Clicking her fingers in a staccato rhythm, she closed her eyes and took a step on Nob Hill. The Dreaming delivered her directly outside the Toybox. *Fizzlewig*, she exulted. *He'll know what to do!*



Chip Fizzlewig was pleased that the Varich suitor had made a special trip to the Haight to pick up the sweet rolls Alera liked so well. He had a feeling that the young princess would soon be announcing her choice for a husband-to-be. Fizzlewig allowed himself a few moments of giddy happiness as he daydreamed about baking a wedding cake for the pair. It had been more than a week since the last time a Thallain poked his nose into the shop and longer than that since any attacked outright. He was beginning to hope the recent troubles were over at last. He bustled around the Toybox cleaning and making some strawberry tarts for any visitors who might come in today.

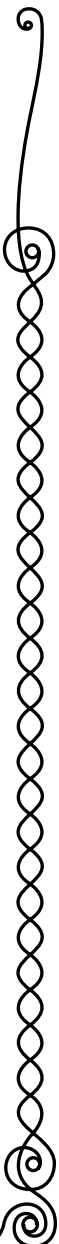
Despite his efforts, he was feeling a little under the weather. Somehow his freehold felt a little darker than usual, and he felt personally diminished. He wondered if all the traps laid throughout the coffee shop were interfering with the cheerful, bright Glamour that infused the space. He even polished the toy chest, gladdened when he felt the strong, steady pulse of Glamour that surrounded the old steamer trunk.

The door opened, and his heart lightened even more as he saw his old friend Tor enter at the head of his oath mates. But the Tor who entered was not the sometimes-confused grump he remembered, but a strong troll whose stride was steady and sure. A regal Valmont followed behind him, holding hands with Leigh, whose beauty was matched only by her air of confidence. Edmund — a wilder now — entered and sniffed, saying, “Tarts! I smell tarts! How’d you know we were coming, Fizzie?” Morgan, whom he had seen not too long ago, seemed somehow more at ease, or even more complete, now that she was reunited with her oath mates. But what brought tears to his eyes was seeing Rasputin just behind Morgan.

“How?” he began, then moved forward to embrace them all. “I’m so glad you’re all back,” he beamed, turning away to hide the fact that he was mopping his streaming eyes on his apron. “Let me go see to those tarts before Edmund eats them all right out of the oven.” He returned in the twinkling of an eye, with several plates piled high with the crisp, fruity tarts. Edmund grabbed two immediately.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed your food,” he exclaimed through a mouth stuffed full to bursting, even as he reached for two more.

“Have all you want,” Fizzlewig offered. “So, I guess Morgan has filled you in on all the gossip,” he began as he bustled about pouring drinks for them all.



He served Leigh in the red and silver striped mug he reserved for her. Valmont received his spiced cider in a brilliantly colored green mug decorated with a parade of lions around its center. For Tor, he pulled down the extra-large blue and white mug he'd always used. Fizzlewig stared at Edmund for a long moment before handing him his iced coffee in a deep red mug with a handle shaped like a dragon's tail. "Don't eat it," he commanded sharply.

"Sweet!" Edmund crowed. "I finally get one of the specials."

Fizzlewig turned to take down Morgan's unicorn mug and couldn't find it. "That's frustrating," he grumbled to himself.

"I didn't tell them everything," Morgan assured him. "But we've just come from Hawai'i and —"

"Oh, of course, you've been far away for some time now. Let me just fill you in." Fizzlewig was always ready to discuss the latest news and gossip, especially with good friends he hadn't seen in so long. He finally chose a deep navy-blue mug decorated with silver stars and moons for Morgan's drink.

"Let's see. I suppose you know that Alera is dating and entertaining suitors," the old boggan began. "I think she's made her choice. The Varich contender came in this morning and purchased some sweet rolls for an outing with Princess Alera. He seemed very excited about going for a horseback ride and then enjoying a picnic." He placed the starry cup in front of Morgan and shrugged, "Sorry young baroness, but your unicorn cup seems to have gone missing."

Morgan's face drained of color. She stood up quickly, though she felt as if she were about to faint. The last piece of the puzzle clicked in her head.

"The unicorn," she whispered. "That's why I kept dreaming of a unicorn. The unicorn mug is the Cup of Dreams. Alera is in terrible danger. We need to find her immediately."

Valmont stood and placed a steadying hand on Morgan's shoulder. "She's right. I feel a pull toward Aeon's palace."

"Cool. Do we get to beat somebody up?" Edmund asked, then scratched his head. "Does this mean Morgan's been drinking from the Cup of Dreams all this time? How come I never get to drink from ancient treasures?"

"Aeon and Cumulus went with the Protectors to visit Queen Aeron," Fizzlewig gasped. "They aren't here! I need to call Aeon."

He retrieved his phone from his pocket and dialed the duke's private line. Hoping that she too could summon help, Morgan called Wulf.

The bell at the door of the shop jingled as the door pushed open. Layla entered quickly and looked toward Fizzlewig.

"Help!" she cried. "Alera's been kidnapped by a serial killer!"

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When he wasn't rigging the traps in the Toybox and hanging out in Oakland, Doyle had consulted with Georgia on upgrading Duke Aeon's custom-made town car. Not only had they made it roomier to accommodate the duke's bodyguards, but it now boasted several updates to its turning radius, speed, and gas consumption. Doyle planned several more changes but had only had time for the first few. Even now, he cursed under his breath about the lack of his talent, his inability to complete a whole new braking system, and the car's penchant for climbing the hills of San Francisco even while not *in* San Francisco. It made for a somewhat bumpy ride.

Despite his inability to perceive his genius, the luxury town car purred along the highway, carrying the Protectors, Cumulus, and Aeon in the back, and Aeon's two bodyguards in the front. They had managed to depart earlier than they expected, and the car's anti-radar feature meant they could travel quite quickly without being pulled over by the police. They had made good time and were about halfway to the queen's palace when Doyle yelled, "We're going the wrong way. We need to turn around."

At the same time, both Aeon's and Wulf's phones rang.



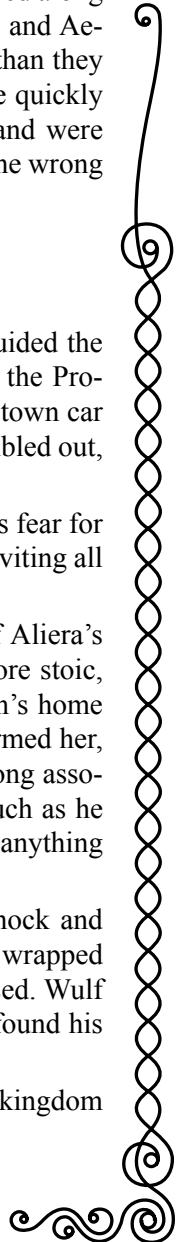
Using his talent for finding where he most needed to be, Doyle guided the car back to the Toybox in half the time it would normally take. Still, the Protectors, Aeon, and Sir Cumulus all urged their driver to step on it. The town car screeched into the street outside the coffee shop and the passengers tumbled out, scrambling into the Toybox.

"Where is she?" Aeon called, his honeyed voice made hoarse by his fear for his ward. Inwardly, he seethed at himself for putting her in danger by inviting all those suitors into his home.

Sir Cumulus harrumphed and cleared his throat at the thought of Alier's bright spirit being lost. Usually, the one-eyed sidhe knight was far more stoic, but he had known the princess from the time she was brought to Aeon's home as an infant. He allowed himself to feel a towering rage at whoever harmed her, making a silent vow to destroy anyone who would hurt her so. From long association he could tell that Aeon was ready to explode with anger as much as he was, but he worried that his old friend would break like a dry reed if anything happened to Alier.

The Protectors raced to Fizzlewig, whose face was gray with shock and grief. He gripped the edge of his coffee bar, his knuckles white. Fiona wrapped one arm around the aging boggan's waist. "We'll find her," she promised. Wulf clasped Fizzlewig's shoulder, then moved to take Morgan's hand. He found his way blocked by an impressive-looking troll.

Morgan spoke. "Oh grandfather, this is my friend Wulf from the kingdom of Dalarna."



“No need to compare axe sizes,” Jack laughed. “We’re all friends here.”

Morgan arched an eyebrow at Jack.

Wulf offered Tor a bow, saying, “Torvald Larsen, your reputation is known to me. I am honored to stand beside you in battle. You have my assurance that I will bring neither harm nor insult to your granddaughter.”

Tor nodded and stepped aside.

Wulf took Morgan’s hand. “I swore an oath to you, and I will fulfill it. Your friends are my friends and your enemies are mine as well. We may speak along the way to make introductions, but now we need to go quickly.”

Morgan gave him a beatific smile, then looked closer and saw the burn scar across his throat. She raised her hand tentatively and brushed it with her fingertips.

“What happened?” she murmured. He took her hand and gently kissed her fingertips.

“It’s nothing,” he assured her. “I will heal.”

Valmont raised one eyebrow and gave Leigh a significant look.

Edmund covered his eyes with one hand and groaned, “Sheesh, Morgan, could he be any cornier?”

“Hey,” interrupted Jack October. “That’s my oath mate you’re dissing.”

“Oh, sorry,” Edmund mumbled, rolling his eyes.

The door opened yet again, and Georgia rushed in, “What are we waiting for?” she asked.

“Who told *you* about this?” Fizzlewig asked.

“Ellen, of course,” she replied. “You know that sluagh know everything, right? So, let’s get moving. Where are we going?”

“Aeon’s house,” Doyle, Valmont and Layla replied in unison. They all rushed from the shop, with Fizzlewig assuring them he’d be right behind them.

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The small copse of trees at the rear of Aeon’s estate usually boasted colorful leaves and chimeric animals and songbirds. Never before had the trees surrounding Aeon’s property held a gateway into the Dreaming. After days and nights of preparation and the sacrifice of tremendous amounts of stolen Glamour, a hidden door was ready to open there now. Maharag made certain that Alera’s bonds were secure, then spoke the words to open the gate.

Feeling the horrid intrusion of a malignant trod and gate, the trees thrashed and moaned, tearing apart to reveal a twisted doorway dripping with what appeared to be blood. Near the door, throaty moans rose from the ground. Their terrible cries seemed to seep outward, and wherever the sound went, the grass blanched to a dead white and grew bloody, malignant vines. As Maharag pulled

the gate open, the ground shook and cracked. Its moans became a terrified, tortured scream. Frigid air escaped into the California sunlight, creating a bitter cold fog that coiled along the ground.

Maharag led both horses through the gateway. Each horse's shape transformed to reflect the dream that inspired this walk of terror. They became emaciated, white mounts with red eyes, and were bedecked with ornamentation like that of old-fashioned funeral horses. Their teeth elongated into sharp fangs, while their hooves were stained crimson. Maharag remounted.

Pulling an ivory hunting horn from his belt, he blew it softly three times, then three times more, and a final three times, then waited as the path took shape before him. The chill, white trail was lined with skeletal, polar-white trees, all hung with menacing, razor-tipped icicles. Icy air burned in the travelers' lungs. Aside from the slight eerie blue-white glow of the ice, the path wound through darkness and silence. Occasionally, tree branches overburdened with ice rubbed together, creaking with wintery doom, or an icicle fell and broke on the path with a sound like shattering glass.

An arched, icy bridge spanned the path ahead. In the center waited a tall, ice-draped white tree, which thrashed into a parody of a bow as Maharag and Alieria approached. "Well met, ancient guardian," Maharag greeted it. Eyes like icy embers opened in response. The wintery tree seemed to consider them for a long moment, then moved aside and Maharag guided the horses through and over the bridge.

Maharag turned back to the guardian, "Friend and shelter-keeper of my people, you know me as a prince of the White Court. As such, I make a request of you: stop any who would follow me and this captive and make any who pursue pay their own tithe to proceed. As the courts suffered sorrows and losses, so too let those who would enter our territories pay dearly for the privilege. I thank thee for thy service, sentinel of the Forest of Lies."

The great, ghastly tree bowed. "It shall be done as you request, Maharag, Prince of Nightmares. They shall not pass unscathed."

From the saddle of the horse he led, Maharag heard Alieria stir and cry out weakly, "No!"

He continued riding, but turned over his shoulder to address his captive. "Ah, my dear Alieria, I owe you some explanation. Allow me this small time to tell you why I have done what I have. It is a long and terrible story that has been unfolding for as long as I can recall.

I know for certain that we cannot live by joy and dreams alone. There must be strife to temper delight, hate to quench love, and nightmares to set against bliss. This is balance.

My people, the Fomorian, were formed at the dawn of time by the desires of those who cherish feral cunning, by the rage of brutal conquerors, by the design of the alien and unknowable terrors that plague all living things. We are children

of the dark, of those imaginings that take a soul and twist it into unreasoning, screaming agony.”

“And this is why you’ve kidnapped me?” she asked woozily.

Maharag laughed. “In a way. You cannot eradicate that part of life and death with all your hopes and wishes. In the end, we will be there to oppose your dreams of shining hope and love, no matter how you struggle to chain us in our prisons. We have waited millennia, we have planned, and we emerge at last, to reclaim our ancient glory and rulership.”

“How can you do this? Please, you must reconsider this. Maharag... did that tree thing call you? Stop now, while you can. You don’t have to be evil. I thought you cared about me.”

He fixed her with a steely glare. “Princess, we Fomorian are like you fae in at least one thing: we are the dreams — or nightmares, if you prefer — that we were meant to be. We were given no more choice in this than you were. It is true that I have been drawn to you. You speak to my soul as no other ever has, but this merely lends a piquant spice to what I must do. Perhaps you will come to understand as we continue along this nightmare trod. Here you will see the devastation your kind wrought when they condemned us to these prisons.”

They rode on together through the ancient forest of nightmare. “Once, we ruled the world. Then your kind was dreamed into existence. Your ancient progenitors, the Tuatha da Danaan went to war with us. Our leader, the king of the Red Court, did not use our ultimate weapon, the Triumph Casque of Sorrows. He chose to preserve the Dreaming and the Autumn World. He gave his life and shattered the key that opens the weapon so that no one could use it. These nine keys were scattered throughout the Dreaming and the Autumn World. We *lost* that war because of our sacrifice, because we would not destroy all dreams to save ours alone. Your vengeance was swift. None of your kind recognized that we had spared you all by our forbearance.”

Aliera looked around her as they traveled. Aside from the glacial chill and snow-covered ground, she saw little but ice-rimed, gnarled, stunted trees hemming in the twisting path. Some stretched bony fingers toward the travelers as if to scratch or throttle them, while others stared at them with cold, cruel eyes. Aliera shivered uncontrollably. Her breath froze as she exhaled.

“What is this place?” she asked, drawing back from the eeriness and silence around her. She sensed overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, regret, and centuries of futile waiting to be free.

Maharag answered, “Why, this is a grave, princess. Can you not feel the unnatural cold of a place that knows only the chill and silence of death? It is called the Forest of Lies, and it has been the prison of the White Court since the War of Trees.

“But think on this, child of the Tuatha da Danaan, you who believe that you were the victors in our long-ago war: you did not try to balance us, you sought to

supplant us. That was your undoing. We were not slain; we have but slept. Now we awaken, and the waking dream is great and terrible indeed. We were not banished, but bound in the very heart of the Dreaming. Did you think we could not dream of freedom as we slept?"

"It was all so long ago," Alera whispered. "Can't you just... let it go?"

He laughed loudly. "Let it go? We're trying to *be* let go. I suppose you don't really realize that *I* was one of those who fought in the war. And since our imprisonment I, the only one to escape, have walked the worlds seeking the way to free my kind. To me, it was only yesterday."

"So, you *are* a Fomorian. Then who is Yvgeny Varich?"

"He was one of the suitors who would have courted you. Now he is only a skin-suit I wear. Yvgeny is dead. You never knew him."

For the first time since she regained consciousness, Alera let her tears fall.

"You cry for someone you never really knew," he noted.

"Yes," she cried out. "You ask me to cry for your people. I never knew *them* either."

"Fair enough," he replied.

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The members of the group scrambled into any car they could reach first. They sped through streets that magically emptied of other traffic and past lights that inexplicably changed to green as they approached. As they arrived at the estate, they felt the earth rumbling and heard the land scream as the nightmare tore the grounds of the mansion.

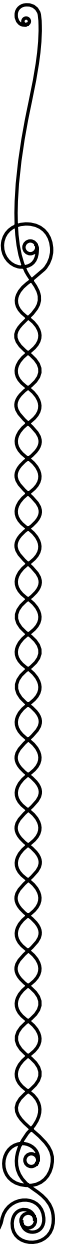
Layla clutched the present given her by Duke Mondrian, the necklace that linked her with Alera and cried out, "No! She's gone into the Dreaming!"

Each of them felt dark Glamour wash over them like a freezing tidal wave. A trod ad just opened. Not bothering to stop at the house, they drove to the back of the property, to the copse of trees that now stood bleached and twisted, all the leaves shredded and curled.

The changelings disembarked and hurried to the malevolent gate that loomed before them. Aeon reached out a hand to open the gate and felt such cold emanating from it he was convinced for a moment that he'd tried to grab a handful of liquid nitrogen. He drew back quickly, hissing and shaking his damaged fingers.

"To hell with this," Georgia cried and gunned Maggie's engine. She barely gave Aeon time to jump aside before she rammed the gate with her cab, bursting it open. Maggie gave a metallic scream and shuddered to a stop.

Georgia yelled, "Come on, there's no time to waste!" She threw herself out of her beloved cab. "I'm sorry, Maggie," she said to the brightly colored cab, caressing its battered hood. She feared it would never run again.



Doyle came around to Georgia and put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll build a daughter for the old girl," he assured her.

She smiled gratefully at him. "No time for that now. Let's get Alera back home first."

Wulf looked around the dreary, gelid landscape. "Looks a little like Norway if Norway was a hell-realm."

Fiona snorted, "I think we're underdressed for the weather."

They manifested warmer *voile* and started down the path. It seemed that skeletal tree fingers reached out to tangle in their hair, and icicles targeted them to impale them if they didn't jump away quickly enough. Although he wasn't someone who knew much of the magics of traveling, Sir Cumulus took the lead. He had spent too many years as Aeon's champion not to put himself between the duke and any upcoming danger. Even when Cumulus lost an eye in battle, Aeon had not chosen another to hold the honor of being his most trusted warrior. He had never told Aeon how much that confidence meant to him. Aeon would have laughed and said he'd earned it. His long experience told Cumulus that this trod was inimical to them all. This was no silver path, created to enact the silver ban against the Fomorians. It wasn't even a path overseen by House Balor, but a trod held by the Fomorians' children. It hated them.

Ahead, he saw a bridge covered in ice. In its center stood an icicle draped tree — the kind of spooky nightmare tree that children would cross the street to avoid on Halloween, lest it grab them, throttle them, and drink their blood. Even his staunch warrior's heart quailed as the tree moved to block their progress.

"Begone, children of the Tuatha da Danaan," the guardian rattled. "You are unwelcome here, and you may not pass."

Aeon pushed to the front of the group and spoke. "We apologize for offending you, guardian. Nonetheless, we must pass, for my ward has been taken. We would have her returned to us."

The tree coughed and made a horrid, wheezing sound. It was laughing at them. "This means nothing to me or to those who created this pathway. Those who are enemies of my allies must pay my price to continue this way."

"What price?" Sir Cumulus demanded.

"Ah, the one-eyed warrior who blindly follows his duke's commands speaks," the guardian sneered. "Hear then what must be paid in expiation of your sins against the White Court. We will call for three payments of our choice from three of you. We will accept no substitutions of the penalties, nor the ones who pay them. If you will not pay, then you proceed no further. You cannot pass without my permission. Without payment, you must turn back or stay here until you freeze to death, starve, or perish from attack by the denizens I can call to be rid of you. Are you agreed?"

"Do we have any choice?" Aeon asked.

“Not unless you can destroy me, which you have not the strength to do. I am a part of the Dreaming itself, and I cannot perish without your killing some measure of the Dreaming.”

“I say we try it anyway,” Edmund growled. “How do we know it isn’t just lying?”

“A fair question, redcap,” the guardian snarled. “But my nature is frustration, vengeance, and cruelty, not lying. Choose, or do nothing and rot.”

Aeon again stepped forward, “What is your price then?”

“The price is this: as you closed the eyes of the White Court by immuring them in the frozen trees of this forest, so shall your Sir Cumulus surrender his remaining eye and become blind as he has blindly served you, Duke Aeon of Golden Gate.”

“No,” Aeon seethed.

“I refuse,” proclaimed Cumulus. “This is a trick meant to delay us and weaken us. How can I fight if I’m blind? Name some other price.”

“I could ask for your life,” the guardian reasoned. “That would effectively blind you to everything. I have named the price. Pay it or not.”

Wulf strode up to stand beside the older warrior. “Take it from me instead,” he demanded. Turning to Cumulus he said, “Or give this thing your eye. I will heal you.”

“You will do neither,” the guardian proclaimed. “Arrogant puppy, the price is *Sir Cumulus’s* eye and cannot be changed. And your healing is useless here. This is not *your* Dreaming, nor even the mortal realm. You cannot create healing where there has only ever been torture and death. Our dream rejects you and spits you out.”

Wulf drew back, defeated. The frozen trees ringing the path opened white, soulless eyes and scratched their branches together. Were they laughing or rubbing their limbs together in anticipation of bloodshed? It was too hard to tell.

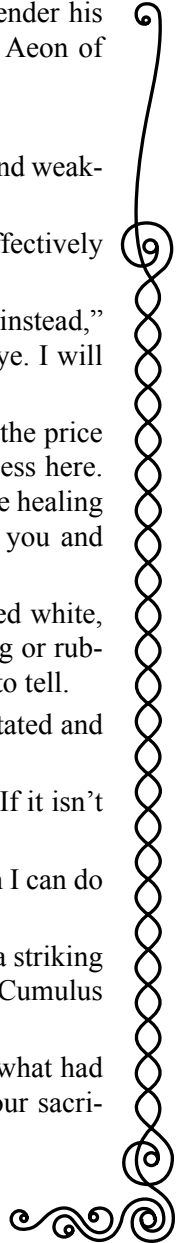
“We have only this thing’s word that it cannot be harmed,” Wulf stated and raised his axe to attack it.

“No. Please,” Layla rushed forward to grab the Aesin’s arm. “No. If it isn’t lying and we refuse, Alera will die.”

Sir Cumulus turned to look at Layla, “Always faithful, Layla? Then I can do no less.” He turned back to the guardian. “Do it, then.”

The guardian stretched forth a bone thin, white twig. Quicker than a striking snake, it pierced the Fiona knight’s remaining eye, bursting it. Stoic Cumulus screamed and fell to one knee.

The rest of the group gaped, horrified that they could not prevent what had happened. Finally, Doyle choked out, “Sir Cumulus, thank you for your sacrifice. If I can help you in some way, now or in the future, I will.”



Seeing Cumulus blinded dragged Edmund into his own dark memories. As a childling when he was following Yrtalien, the satyr Malacar was also blinded through the Forsworn Prince's cruelty. Yrtalien forced Edmund to take on the task of leading the wretched satyr around and caring for him. He'd been angry and sickened as a childling. Now, he sensed how many challenges the brave knight would face ahead of him as he learned to adapt to his new status. "Place your hand on my elbow, Sir Cumberbund," he offered. "I'll lead you into all the hottest battles and greatest dangers out there."

Surprised, Sir Cumulus asked, "Edmund?"

"Yeah, it's me," the wilder replied. "Don't be surprised if I snack on your fingers, though."

• • • • •

Aliera was colder than she had ever been. Used to the warmth of California, she shivered uncontrollably, and her lips were tinged blue. Though he felt no pity for the miserable princess, Maharag manifested warm furs and wrapped them around her.

"Why bother?" she asked bitterly. "Aren't you just going to kill me anyway?"

"I am. You will be given the greatest honor, however, for your death will awaken the third Fomorian Court. We will once again take our place in the Dreaming and the Autumn realm. We've been denied our rightful place for too long."

"Why can't we just agree to coexist?" Aliera asked. "The Seelie and Unseelie Courts cooperate at need. I even have Unseelie friends."

"You are such a child, Aliera. The children of the Tuatha have held sway for centuries, and what has been the result? In all ways since our fall, your kind have lost more ground, and we were not even on the field of battle."

"You will not believe me, but I seek to rescue all of us. The Dreaming and the Autumn World are sundered and drift further apart every day. Though there are a few connections from the Autumn World still, trods and gateways die every day. Your freeholds grow cold as your Balefires fail. Glamour flickers in a guttering flame against ever encroaching Banality. Without the infusion of our passion and the struggles we ignite, those fires will go out forever. All of us will perish as the Autumn World shifts invariably into soulless winter. Creativity dies as imagination and dreams falter into silence."

"Humans see wonders all the time on television or in the movies and explain them away as special effects. They also see and experience the wonders of modern medicine and science. Was it not the amazement created by the moon landing that reopened the ways back into the Autumn World? *Science* evoked that upsurge of wonder and creativity."

“Your fae magic is too subtle; what you evoke, too tame. It’s harder for humans to explain away *our* sheer horror, which is rooted deeply within their very being. At some point in their lives, all humans fear the dark — or what lurks in that darkness: us. We cannot be denied or avoided.”

Aliera tried to shift in the uncomfortable saddle as she listened. If she could loosen her bonds, there might be a chance for escape. Aliera harbored no illusions that she could successfully fight Maharag, but she could at least disrupt what he planned. Even if she died, she might thwart him and save those she loved.

“Why don’t you believe we can recover what we’ve lost and have a resurgence of creativity on our own?” she pleaded.

“Because you don’t work together. You can’t. Nobles frantically embrace the old ways in the hope that stale solutions will somehow keep Glamour in the world. Commoners scramble to force equality on those old, worn-out dreams of nobility hiding in their tumble-down castles. They seek to claim their own rights to freedom and what Glamour they can acquire, hoping that the nobles will share what they currently hoard for themselves.

“Not everyone is like that!” she argued.

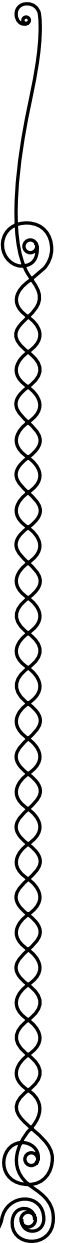
“Hah! Separated by centuries of differing philosophies and practices, noble fights commoner. Those who stayed cannot forgive the cowardice of those who fled, nor the arrogance of those who returned. Those who left, then journeyed back when the gates reopened, have no memory of why they are now in the Autumn World. Were they joyous returnees or banished from Arcadia for crimes committed there? Many of you even deserted your faerie selves to be reborn as half-human abominations. Don’t you realize you displaced a living human or took the place of a human soul that was supposed to be born? You are thieves, all of you,” he spat.

“How can you fractured, pitiful half-humans stand against us? We were once gods, and as gods we shall be again. Your heroes have gone, leaving you only the legacy of this poor, shattered world. Who now can take up the banner against us?”

Aliera hotly answered, “Do you believe that your lecture on past wars and grievances excuses my murder? You seem quite certain that your schemes will work, but you’ve forgotten something. My people are coming for me.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, princess. I chose a day when your guardian is not at home. When he does discover you’ve been taken, the trod itself will reject him and whoever accompanies him. By the time he makes it through, it will be too late.”

At the mention of others who might accompany Aeon in his search for her, Aliera’s heart leapt. *Layla!* She suddenly remembered. *Layla has the tracking necklace Duke Mondrian gave her! He said that she could locate me, even in the Dreaming. Oh please, Layla, find me soon.*





“You’re a major dipshit,” Fiona snarled at the guardian. “What more do you want?”

“Nothing from you,” the guardian replied. “You and your friends are too new to this. You don’t care enough about the princess to make payment for her.”

“That’s not true,” Fiona shouted hotly.

“Fine. Do you want to pay a price, too? This can be arranged.”

“Hush, Fiona,” Cameron took her hand in his. “It’s a waste of breath. This thing doesn’t care. By exempting us from its penalty, it’s trying to divide us and create resentments among us. Just let it play its games, so we can get on with this.”

“All right, guardian, what next?” Aeon confronted the awful tree.

“By all means, don’t tell us what else you want,” Rafael drawled as if bored. “I’m sure it will be nothing of consequence.”

“So speaks the voice of truth! For you *are* nothing of consequence, any of you,” the guardian hissed.

“Fine. If it will speed us on our way, I’ll move back, now,” Fiona grated, “since we newcomers don’t count here.”

“You understand your position at last,” the tree chortled. Fuming, the clurichaun wished she could throttle the horrid thing.

“All cruelty springs from weakness,” Doyle recited. “Seneca, *Seneca’s Morals*, if you’d like to know, and as this is so, you reveal your own weakness and your inevitable failure. Enjoy your false power while you can.”

“Proceed then, doomed fools,” the foul tree rumbled. “But remember, this is only the first sacrifice. There are two more Courts yet to satisfy.”

Beside him, Sir Cumulus drew his sword and sprung forward as if to cut the guardian down where it stood. “Enough!” he barked, “You’ve had your sport. Let us pass.”

The guardian moved aside. Layla kicked her toe into its rough bark as she passed.



Maharag checked Alieria’s bonds and tightened them. She despaired as he fixed the small gains she had made. “Escaping, princess?” he inquired.

“Apparently not,” she fumed.

He laughed aloud. “Why, princess, you *can* be less than gracious.”

“Let’s change positions and see how gracious *you* are,” she snapped.

“If you want to continue breathing, be silent and let me concentrate on opening the second part of the trod,” Maharag advised.

“You already told me you don’t want to kill me too soon.”

“I won’t, but the guardian of this trod might.”

He led them to an area where the trees blocked any forward progress. Dismounting, he approached the blockage, removed a locket he wore, which held seven small, red gems. He laid them on the ground in a pattern like an arrow pointing ahead. He intoned several phrases that sounded to Alera like an invocation. Before him, the trees silently parted, revealing a landscape so different from the one they were currently in, she could hardly understand it.

Under a black and red roiling sky, a barren land broiled. It moved like an angry ocean, cracking and fracturing as it heaved. Yet it was solid. Maharag stepped through the gate and pulled the horses through behind him. Though it shifted and groaned, the ground held firm. The bitter cold from the Forest of Lies immediately ceased, leaving Alera breaking out in pinpricks of sweat. She felt as though she had entered a blast furnace.

“This is the trod of the Splintered Mountains. It is dedicated to the imprisonment of the Red Court,” Maharag told her. “The mountains were splintered when the Red King utilized the Triumph Casque of Sorrows without opening it. Even closed, you can see how powerful it was.”

Those mountains rose ahead of them, and seemed to stretch to the sky. Nevertheless, they were cracked and tumbled in places, as if a giant had smashed them with a hammer and allowed them to crumble with no attention to where they might land.

“Where are the members of the Red Court?” Alera asked.

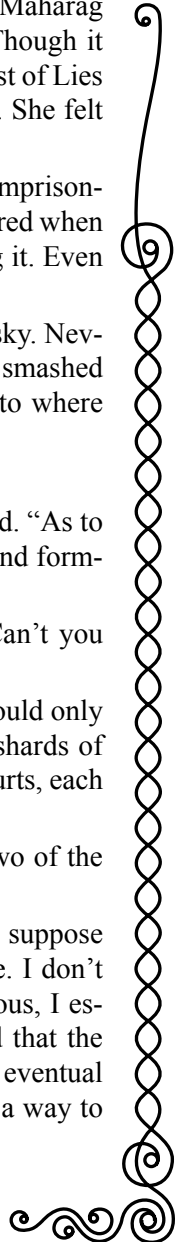
“They were imprisoned beneath the mountains,” Maharag answered. “As to where they are now, who can say? I hope they are gathering together and forming their armies again.”

“I’m still not clear on why you need to kill me,” Alera said. “Can’t you wake them up on your own?”

“No. It was declared when the Courts were imprisoned that each could only be brought to consciousness and released using the keys that are the shards of the original key to the Casque. Three keys, one for each of the three Courts, each key split into three.”

“If two of the three are now awake, that means you have found two of the keys already. Where is the third?” Alera asked.

“The third has not formed yet,” the Nightmare Prince replied. “I suppose I should explain more so you can understand and appreciate your role. I don’t know why, but when all the other Fomorians were rendered unconscious, I escaped their fate. I took this to mean that the Dreaming itself realized that the absence of our dream would inevitably unbalance all, leading to its eventual destruction. Thus, it fell to me to right the wrong. I was meant to find a way to release my kin. I have spent thousands of years doing so.”



She couldn't help it. She baited him, "Slow learner?"

"I should not be surprised by your attitude, my dear, but I'm disappointed. Do you want to know the rest of the story, or shall I just take you to the place you are to die and kill you?"

"Go on," she huffed, rolling her eyes.

He continued. "While searching for the keys, I discovered that certain beings in the Dreaming hold the Triumph Casque itself. They will surrender it only to one who holds its key. Many different combatants fight incessantly trying to gather the key shards and gain the upper hand. I didn't care about the Casque; I only needed three of the keys. I could not find them. But after centuries of searching, I instead found the Cup of Dreams."

"How did that help?"

"From my researches, I discovered that one of the Cup's powers is to transform certain things placed within it into other desired objects. There is no gift given by the Cup without a penalty or sacrifice required, though. In this case, to provide one key, the Cup required the sacrifice of three royal lives."

"That's abominable! I thought the Cup of Dreams was supposed to grant your greatest desires!"

"Ah, but dreams are not always pleasant. Some dreams are nightmares," he reminded her. "In any case, three princesses gave their lives for me to acquire and turn the bone-white key that woke my direct kin — the Fomorians of the White Court. The Cup was lost for ages after, but when it came to me again, I sacrificed three more princesses for the crimson key that freed the Fomorians of the Red Court. They awaken and don their armor even now.

"Once again, the Cup escaped me and hid for many years, disguising itself and hiding behind other potent Glamours until I found it once again. The last three royals' deaths were to release those of the Green Court, whose minds and powers eclipse all that you could bring against them. You are the last princess needed for me to acquire that key."

Their nightmarish steeds had carried them across the mangled land as they spoke. Now they stood before a pinnacle of splintered rock that stared down at them. Up close, Alera could discern that it was not precisely made of stone. Rather, as it moved, she could see scales in the great beast's form. Finally, as she took in its whole shape, she realized she was confronted by a stony dragon. Its colors changed from orange-red to vermilion to rusty brown. Its eyes, set deep into its face, glowed like coals in a wildfire.

"I greet you, deliverer," it rumbled.

"I return your greeting, Guardian of the Splintered Trod, and ask for passage for myself and this sacrifice."

"You may pass," it agreed.

“Others may follow. I charge you to delay or stop them from following us. Make them pay a heavy toll to use our trods.”

“It shall be as you request,” the red guardian assured the prince with glee.

As the guardian spoke, Alieria watched the land move to encase the trod, in effect creating an enclosed cave. She could hear rock shattering and piling itself up atop them, leaving only a small pathway through. The mounts beneath them transformed, appearing now to be mutilated lizards, squat and rocky. She had never thought of herself as someone who suffered from claustrophobia, but feeling so enclosed and far from the sky set her nerves on edge. Every groan or shift in the rocks made her startle. Would the tunnel collapse and bury them? The only saving grace she found was in the occasional small gap through which she could look out at the land and sky. Through these openings, she glimpsed a reddish sky with smoky black clouds. The land beneath the sky was broken and torn, though occasionally she thought she saw encampments or villages.

“Are those ghosts?” she asked as she watched some adults carrying bundles or buckets while smaller ones —childlings — chased one another around rock outcroppings.

“Are you so surprised, princess?” Maharag asked. “Did it not occur to you that Thallain and Dark-kin might have young? Perhaps having seen them in the horrid landscape they’ve been condemned to, you might understand that we live in nightmares every day. Can you comprehend why we hate you as much as we do?”

“I see they live in wretched conditions, Maharag, and I do feel sympathy for them.” Alieria admitted. “But there must be some way we can learn to live together rather than in a conflict that can never be resolved.”

“Your kind resolved the conflict by forcing us into never-ending slumber and exile. I have seen the sidhe solution. I do not wish to see more of it. Ever.”

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The group paced through the ice-rimed forest, starting at every sound and expecting to be attacked at any time. Edmund led Sir Cumulus just behind Doyle and Cameron, who had taken the lead. Aeon walked just behind his blinded knight, wrestling with his sorrow for his old friend’s pain. Rafael, paired with Jack October, whispered, “Such a warm and welcoming place. I’d quite like to return some time and vacation here. You?”

Jack shook his head. “Oh sure, just like the North Pole.”

Morgan, walking just behind them, murmured, “I used to love the stories of Santa Claus bringing toys to all the children. My mother told me he brought toys to everyone, not just the good ones. But for the bad ones, he’d also leave a note that said, ‘Try to be good next year,’ but I think she made that part up so I wouldn’t cry for the children who got left out.”



From up ahead they heard Edmund snort. “He never brought me anything, not even a crappy note.”

The trees seemed to move together more closely, enclosing them tighter tightly in their frigid embrace. Wulf and Tor, who were bringing up the rear and staying close to Morgan, heard the occasional crack of a shattering limb and the sound of panting following them. Soon, the huffing sounds also began to flank them. Each looked at the other and took weapons in hand, ready for an attack. Tor whispered loudly to Morgan, “We’re being hunted. I think they’re wolves. Let the others know.”

She moved closer to Rafael and Jack, relaying her grandfather’s tidings. Wulf gripped his axe and growled. *These damned Jotun-spawn even corrupt innocent animals to do their foul bidding*, he seethed.

Far off in the trees, a howl sounded, followed by several others. Aeon called out, “Form a circle, back to back. Be ready for battle.” He nodded to Layla to get in the center of the circle and took her place at Cumulus’ right hand. “I’m here, my friend,” he said, “We’ll fight side-by-side, as always.”

Cumulus drew his sword, cheered by Aeon’s confidence in him, “I will not fail you,” the sidhe promised.

Squaring off, Georgia pulled what looked like a wooden pop gun and squeezed its trigger. A jet of flame shot out the end and created a puff of smoke it its wake.

“Sweet!” Edmund crowed, “It’s a king size cigarette lighter. Let’s light these suckers up!” They all stood back to back, though it seemed as if the frozen trees kept moving slowly, insinuating themselves among the changelings, splitting them apart and sticking out roots to trip members of the group. Cries and snarls echoed all around them now, stretching nerves to the breaking point. Rustling sounded among the trees, and growls threatened from every direction. Minutes passed. No attack came. No one caught a glimpse of a wolf. Sleet began to fall, chilling them further.

“Our friends out in the forest are there. I know it for certain. They couldn’t just be a distraction to slow us down,” whispered Rafael.

“I think Rafael is onto something,” Morgan said. “Isn’t this called the Forest of Lies? This is just a lie.”

Layla felt her necklace, warm around her throat. “Yes, Rafael’s right. My necklace is pulling me onward. Alera is getting further and further away. We have to ignore this and get moving again.”

They cautiously reformed their line and quickened their pace. Sheathing his scimitar, Valmont took Leigh’s left hand, saying, “I can feel the pull of another trod up ahead.”

“That’s where we need to be,” Layla cried, “I just felt a pull from the necklace. She’s gone onto the new trod. Oh, we *must* hurry!”

Though the sounds threatening imminent attack continued, they hurried onward, sacrificing safety for speed.

Just when the trod seemed endless, they found themselves confronted with a wall of trees too closely situated to allow passage through. "I still feel her presence from beyond this blockage," Layla pleaded. "But it's getting more distant and feels weaker!"

"Ideas on how we get through?" Aeon asked. "Let's move closer and see if we can find a passage. It seems to be open onto another trod. We just need to find the gate to open it."

"Of course, since this is called the Forest of Lies, this couldn't be another lie, could it?" Rafael queried. "No way this could be another illusion like our wolfie friends. Who would try the same trick twice?"

Jack gave a bark of laughter. "A better question is: who's dumb enough to fall for the same trick twice?" He walked forward straight into the line of trees and disappeared through them.

The landscape beyond the gate seemed drawn with ebony and crimson lines and angles that made no sense. They made his stomach flip and heave if he looked at them for too long. Blasting heat assaulted him. Jack shook his head, closed his eyes, and returned through the gate onto the slippery path where the others waited.

"You have no idea how happy I am that I could just walk back through," he told them, his sweat from the furnace world freezing on his forehead. "Wait 'til you see the other side."



As Maharag and Alera continued along the Splintered Trod, the princess felt a distinct tug from her necklace. *Layla is following*, she thought. She hugged the joy of that knowledge to herself. *Please let Aeon be with her*, she thought. Then she wondered if Maharag had felt anything.

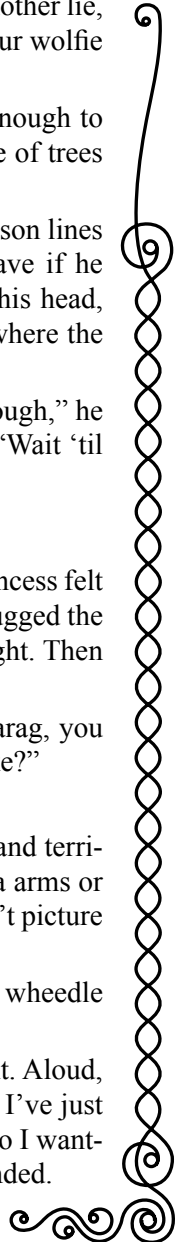
To distract him and to satisfy her own curiosity, she asked, "Maharag, you said you had disguised yourself as Yvgeny. What do you really look like?"

"Why do you want to know?" he asked.

"Because I had always heard that the Fomorianians were frightening and terrible, some as tall as trees, others the size of mountains, many with extra arms or legs or maybe six eyes. I just wondered. You seem so cultured, I couldn't picture you as too different from me."

"Flattery, princess?" he queried, "Are you hoping to disarm me or wheedle your way out of this?"

Damn, he's too perceptive, I'll have to be more careful, she thought. Aloud, she said, "Of course I want to avoid being killed. Wouldn't you? Still, I've just spent a great deal of time with you and thought I had feelings for you, so I wanted to know. If you don't want to tell me, fine." She shrugged as if offended.



He clucked his tongue. "Only a sidhe could be so naïve."

The two traveled on in silence as all around them the land outside the trod cracked and broke, groaning and spitting out geysers of steam or rivulets of boiling lava. At times, Alera felt so stifled by the heat, she almost fainted. *Stay awake!* she commanded herself. *You must stay awake to have any chance at all.*

She renewed her efforts to loosen her bonds, but after ten minutes of silence, he surprised her by answering.

"I'm what you would recognize as beautiful or handsome," he stated. "You may believe that I am bragging or conceited, but it is the truth as best as I can discern. The dream from which I arose is one of persuasion."

"Persuasion, or lies?" she shot back, not knowing why she was antagonizing him.

Luckily, he simply laughed again. "Is there a difference?"

"I always thought so. I valued your opinions, you know."

"That's the way it's supposed to be. In any case, what you would probably see as monstrous is simply our way of expressing ourselves and our purposes in our forms. One of us that is particularly large and strong may be so because she is a great warrior. In like manner, a handsome, virile form might denote one whose task is to seduce and beguile."

"Like you."

"Even so," he replied. "Does that disappoint you?"

"Only in so much as I fell for it."

"Ah, princess, don't sell yourself short," he told her, almost kindly. "I told you that you do call to me."

"Not enough to keep you from murdering me, though," Alera cried in frustration.

"No, not enough for that, sadly."

"Then do me the courtesy to stop calling me 'princess' won't you? I have a name. Use it."

Maharag raised an eyebrow. "I'll try to do that."

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"It's really hot on the other side," Jack told the group. "We'll want to get into something cooler to travel there. It's sort of confusing, too."

"How hot?" Fiona asked.

"Did you bring a bikini?" Jack teased.

"You've got to be kidding," she drawled.

"Yeah, but only because it looks really cracked and rough, like a desert or a volcanic field, as well as hot," he shrugged.

Layla pushed past them. “We’re wasting time.” She entered the gateway. The rest hurried behind her.

“Layla, we’re all worried, but please don’t do that again,” Aeon cautioned. “When Jack went through, he might have awakened something that could kill you. I would hate to be responsible for your being hurt while under my command.”

“What about when I’m not under your command?” she demanded, agitated by her stress.

“I hope to keep you safe whether you’re under my command or not,” he sighed.

Looking around at the blasted land, the group realized that what Jack had described as confusing was an understatement. The scarlet sky seemed to drip down onto a devastated wreck of broken mountains. Barren deserts embraced pools of lava or stunted stacks of pulverized stone that resembled mutilated statues. The stifling air rasped through their lungs, heavy and difficult to breathe. Geysers erupted, forcing them to shy off the path as they dared to avoid scalding water and poisonous gases.

They struggled along, with Edmund helping Sir Cumulus to avoid the dangers he could not see. Doyle and Georgia walked together, discussing new innovations they could incorporate into Maggie II when they returned to Golden Gate. Rafael stayed beside Fiona just ahead of Morgan, occasionally commenting on the luxuriousness of the foliage and the artistry evident in the fabulous mud pools. Fiona shook her head, *Pookas!* She thought. *At least he’s keeping me amused.* Then he mumbled something about how it didn’t remind him at all of dreams he used to have. She realized that he was actually quite nervous and took his hand, saying, “Mind if I hold your hand? I’m a bit scared.”

“Pooka,” he accused her with a smile, and let her take his hand.

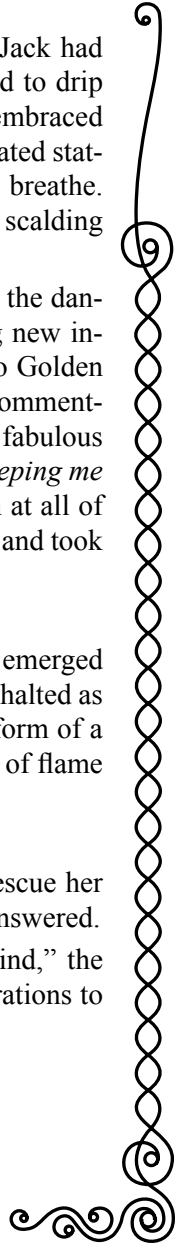
Arising from the ground before them, a great brick red slab of stone emerged from the rocky soil. Wondering if an eruption was imminent, the group halted as the splintered column took form. As they watched, it twisted into the form of a rough, scaled dragon. It opened fiery red eyes, then snorted twin jets of flame into the air and spoke.

“Foolish ones, why do you enter this place?”

“We are following one who took my ward captive. We come to rescue her and return home, bringing no malice to this land or its people,” Aeon answered.

“That means nothing to me, nor to those trapped here by your kind,” the dragon reasoned. “If you wish to pass unscathed, you must make reparations to those silenced by your pitiless cruelty.”

“What is it you want this time?” Leigh asked.



“Nothing from you, Fiona knight. Though I should take all your lives for your ancestors’ crimes,” the red guardian declared. “Instead I ask only one small fee.”

“Name it then,” Aeon cried.

“For your silencing of the Fomorian dream, one of you will sacrifice your voice.”

Morgan and Wulf looked at one another in shock, each recalling the story of the mermaid she had told at Point Reyes. Morgan stepped forward to pay the price, but the guardian turned its malevolent gaze to Aeon.

“Duke Aeon,” it grated. “Care to sing something for us with your beautiful voice one last time?”

“No!” screamed Fiona. “You can’t!” She moved forward as if to guard Aeon from the dragon.

Aeon bowed his head, but he hesitated only a moment. “My friends, I ask only one thing. When we find Alera, tell her I—” He was not allowed to finish.

“No more talking, slime,” the guardian thundered. Grasping the duke by his throat, it spat a searing line of fire into Aeon’s mouth and burned out his voice. It released the silenced sidhe, and Aeon fell to his knees, choking on the scorching heat. He might have screamed, if his throat could have allowed it. If looks of murderous hatred could have killed the guardian, the one Fiona gave it would have turned it to ash. She helped Aeon rise, then stepped back to let him stand on his own.

“And now,” the guardian continued, “you...”

“Ah shut up,” Edmund yelled at it. “If he can’t talk, we’re not listening to you either. Let us by!”

“Yes,” Wulf bellowed. “Let us pass! You’ve had your sacrifice.”

“I merely meant to say you may continue on your journey, but if you return this way, all constraints are off. I will kill you if I can.”

“Ah, quit bragging, rock brain,” Edmund taunted as he passed it by. “You’re only here because we beat your butts last time we fought.”

The dragon stared at him for a moment, then laughed as it summoned the rocks to enclose them in a cave-like tunnel. “Enjoy your journey,” it growled.

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Alera awoke to Maharag shaking her violently. “Where is it?” he screamed at her, all civility banished.

“Where is what?” she asked, coming fully awake. She marveled that she’d slept at all. *I guess you can only be terrified for so long*, she thought. “What are you looking for?”

He snarled. “My pouch. I always carry it.”

Right now, it was better to humor him than to antagonize him. “Could you have dropped it along the way somewhere?”

“I always tie it to my belt, securely!”

“I’m sorry, Maharag. It seems to mean a lot to you.”

“Actually, it means a lot to you, too,” he hissed.

“It does?”

“It contains bits of the other princesses I’ve sacrificed. I’ve saved those, along with the small part of *you* I will take, to create a monument to all of you after I free my people.”

She swallowed the bile that rushed into her throat at the thought of having him take a part of her and using it in some vile ceremony. She wasn’t happy with his keeping souvenirs from his former murders, either. “A monument?” she managed to ask.

“Yes, an expression of our people’s gratitude for your deaths. Something that brings you all together in a place that my people can come to and remember you with respect. You will be honored as the ones who restored us to life and rebalanced the Dreaming, saving us all.”

As he described his nightmarish vision as if it were wonderful and amazing, Alera felt saddened, angry, and appalled all at the same time. Then she felt a small ray of hope. “Does this mean you can’t complete the ritual?” she asked.

“No, I can do it. I just can’t build the monument the way I hoped to,” he sighed.

She sighed heavily. “Maharag, I am really in pain from being tied in this rigid position. Would you consider either loosening these ropes or taking them off? My muscles are so stressed I can barely move. I don’t think I could run away if I tried. Please?”

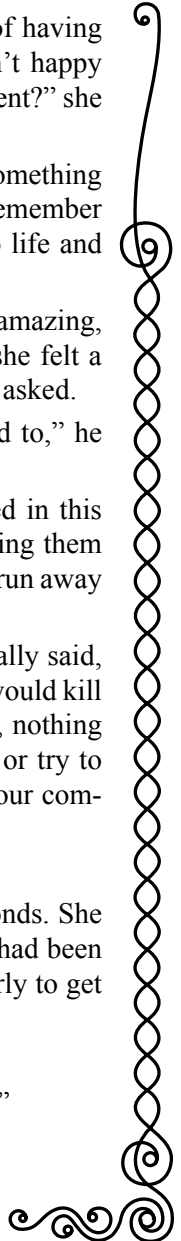
He considered for a long moment. “Even if you could run,” he finally said, “you could not escape. I identified you as a captive to the guardian. He would kill you if you tried. I see no reason to keep you restrained. But be aware, nothing you possess and none of your magic can harm me. Do not attack me or try to harm yourself, or I will have to restrain you again with no regard to your comfort. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

He dismounted and went to her. Lifting her down, he undid her bonds. She fell to her knees as feeling rushed back to her numb feet and legs that had been bound too tightly. She rubbed them, hissing, and walked around gingerly to get feeling back in her limbs.

“Thank you, Maharag. I appreciate the kindness.”

“It is not kindness that prompts me,” he returned, “but expedience.”



“In any case, I am grateful” she replied. Hoping to test out how far she could go, she manifested lighter *voile* that was also more practical than the frilly gown she’d been wearing all this while. He stiffened as she did so, then relaxed as he realized she was only changing her clothes. He helped her remount and they continued along the path. She exulted, *I can use my fae powers here! If he’s distracted with his ritual, maybe there is some way I can save myself.*



The pursuers traversed the ruined wreck of a tunnel, following Layla and trying to hurry. The eroded terrain made walking difficult as did the molten temperature of the broken stone beneath their feet.

As Alera had noted earlier there were a few holes in the outer walls of the tunnel that hemmed them in, allowing them a glimpse of the outer land from time to time. These “windows” kept disappointing them, since each promised a breath of fresh air, but the air outside was just as hot and breathless as the air within.

The group passed by an opening through which they could glimpse a village. Ramshackle, ugly houses jutted up against a blood-red sky. Despite their fears for Alera’s safety and her life, they couldn’t help but stop and stare in fascination as a group of ghastly childlings played a singing and stone throwing game, a horridl version of hop-scotch. As they played, they chanted:

*One, two, three
Ride with me
Each will be
Part of the key*

*One shows brown
Two shines fair
Three ebon black
All are there*

*Turn, turn, turn
With the bone white key
One, two, three
And the trees are free*

chapter twelve: countdown

*Four wears green
Five shows white
Six in red
They enter the night*

*Turn, turn, turn
With the blood red key
Six in all
And the mountains fall*

*Seven sings high
Eight hums low
Nine calls out
But nobody knows*

*Turn, turn, turn
With the grass green key
The last one falls
And the sea covers all!*

“What ever happened to ‘one, two, buckle my shoe, three, four, shut the door?’ Something’s seriously wrong here.” Jack commented.

“That’s no understatement,” Rafael agreed.

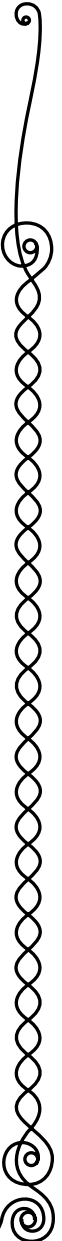
“We need to keep moving,” Wulf reminded them quietly. “Alera may not have much time left.”

When they looked to Wulf, they saw that Layla and Aeon hadn’t stopped to watch and were now some ways away from the rest of the group. They hurried to catch up.

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Now that she was able to sit upright, Alera could see that the trod was coming to an end. The tunnel opened out only a few feet away. Beyond, she was surprised to see what looked almost like a normal landscape with grass, bushes, lakes, and trees. As she and Maharag emerged from the tunnel-like splintered trod, Maharag introduced her to the new landscape, almost reverent. “This is the Land of the Silver Lakes, home to the Green Court.”

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed, amazed by the many small ponds and lakes, some set among a profusion of flowers, others scattered with lilies and lily pads. Trees that reminded Alera of weeping willow trees, magnolias, and rose trees were set among them, but they came in a profusion of colors unlike any in the Autumn World.



“Yes, just as the members of the Green Court were strange and beautiful,” Maharag answered. He seemed hypnotized, and certainly in no hurry to leave the idyllic spot. Then he sighed and motioned her to follow him as he turned away from the pastoral. Their lizard mounts has resumed their horse-forms, though they shone like glass. Walking their horses together, he guided her to an elevated area that overlooked the bodies of water.

“Where is the guardian here?” Alera asked nervously.

“She will meet us ahead as we climb.”

Their horses plodded forward. Verdant grasses and rainbow flowers formed the landscape surrounding them. The land rose, glorious with golden trees and towering silver ferns, rocks glimmering like emeralds and diamonds. Each succeeding sight presented them, with a new vista of supreme beauty. So entranced was Alera by the surroundings that it took her some time to notice she was feeling uncomfortable. At first, she thought it was because she was heading to her death, but as she traveled, she began to understand that was not what was making her so nervous and unhappy. Even the horses seemed hesitant and quiet.

Finally, she realized that she, Maharag, and the horses were the only things moving in the whole world around them. She could not smell the flowers. No ripples disturbed the waters. No trees swayed in the wind, nor could she discern any wind to move them. She saw no birds or insects, no animals aside from the horses they rode, and no one else anywhere around them. Looking up, she saw deep blue sky with motionless white clouds in it. The absolute quiet was haunting. From her first impression of its beauty, she now found it horrid, an awful parody of normalcy that sapped her energy. She felt wrung out, no longer even wanting to plan an escape. She saw no reason to go on if this was what awaited everything she knew.

Maharag had traveled here often and knew the effect the lakes had on the enemies of the Fomorian. He smiled to himself. Alera would be no more trouble during the ritual than any of the ones he'd slain before. Once he had completed his centuries-long task, the Green Court would arise from the lakes and join the White and Red Courts to crush the inheritors of the Tuathan dream. Once again, they would rule and take their vengeance on all who had opposed them.

Limp, Alera gave no resistance to Maharag as he pulled her from her horse and took her arm to lead her up a low incline. Though still dazed, she was beginning to reclaim her senses. As a child, when she had secretly switched places with Morgan, she had been forced to hold firm against the treatments and torture inflicted on her in that terrible, Dauntain-run mental health facility. Being beset by the extreme nothingness that was the essence of this place was like being put in a sensory deprivation unit or isolation tank. Now, she called upon the same strength she had shown as a child to fight back against hopelessness and despair, preparing herself to fight against whatever her captor tried to do to her.

When a portion of the grassy hill they were climbing rose up before them and took the form of a woman, Alera was not surprised. The guardian's rebuke, however, captured her attention.

“Once again you come here, Maharag, Prince of Futility. You have been told eight times before that the Green Court has no need of you. What you see all around you is illusion. When will you believe this, you who are a master of illusion yourself?”

Maharag smiled at the grassy creature whose shape flowed from that of a woman, to that of a man, then a tree, an animal, and finally an amorphous shape. “Ah, Guardian, again you test me. But this is the last one. The final sacrifice to awaken the Green Court. Do not try to stop me now. The time has come.”

The Guardian shook its head. “There is no time. There never has been. Time and movement are only present here when you bring them with you. Time is stopped; it has not moved in hundreds of years. Everything here is made of absence. Does it truly exist?”

“I will debate with you later, Guardian. For now, I mean to make the sacrifice to waken my kin.” Maharag moved to brush past the grass-hued lionness that now confronted him.

“Beware, Maharag,” the Guardian warned him. “Eight times before you have come to disturb, move, and change the peace of this place. Why do you believe that a ninth sacrifice will bring the Green Court to life? It is said that the Tuatha de Danaan went sideways to the sun when they departed. Where did the Green Court really go? Or when? Is the Court here, or have they slipped away into one tiny tick of time, not moving, stalled at that one microsecond of time when they arrived here? How would you know? Do they even *want* to return?”

“You have given all your warnings and admonishments before, Guardian. Let us go in peace. I will perform the ritual, and then you will see change. Watch and you *will* know.”

Maharag took Alera’s unresisting hand, not noticing that he was no longer simply leading her along. Her eyes were open, clear, and alert. She thought furiously about what the Guardian had just said. *Does it mean that whatever happens here is just illusionary? If it’s all illusion, can he actually kill me?* She resolved to prepare for his attack in any case. If it wasn’t an illusion, she’d have to fight.

Captive and captor reached the top of the hill, emerging onto a stunningly green meadow ringed with white, red, and green bushes and with small trees. Grass covered the ground except in eight oblong places laid out in a neat circle near the overhanging trees. These were covered with entwined red and white rose bushes planted atop each oblong. They surrounded a central area in which an open pit waited to receive a final, ninth offering.

Although she had expected no less, Alera shivered at the sight of her intended deathbed. She forced herself to focus and take stock of what she had to work with in an escape attempt, only to be cruelly disappointed by the absence of even a shovel with which to defend herself. She would have to try to grab her captor’s dagger.

“I tried to make it as beautiful as I could,” Maharag assured her. “I also protected it from intrusion. Those that I summon or who come upon the area can view it, but not enter unless they break the protective wards that I wove into its



design. No one can get in or out without my permission, unless they expend a great deal of power to do so. I wanted to keep it pristine, you see.”

He then surprised her by saying, “I have no more need of this other skin that I have worn. I would rather enact this ritual as myself.” As he spoke, he shrugged off the form of Yvgeny Varich, leaving a crumpled, faded corpse of the young man lying on the ground near the central grave as if he had just discarded a heavy sweater and tossed it onto the earth.

She wondered why she hadn’t expected him to be as handsome as he claimed he was in his true form. Tall, well-muscled, and slender, he was as pale as alabaster with a face saved from being too feminine by his patrician jawline and nose. High cheekbones and gently-sloped eyes and eyebrows gave him a slightly exotic look. His eyes were a pale blue, almost silver in color, and his long hair was shining white as well. Elongated, graceful limbs completed his beauty. He had fashioned *voile* for himself of glittering white. Staring, almost stupefied, she realized he was the most gorgeous creature she has ever seen. For a moment he took her breath away. Then she remembered his ugliness within — cruelty, disregard for others beyond himself, and a nature that found murder of little consequence so long as he gained what he wanted from it.

She startled as he raised his white hunting horn and blew three short notes on it. She couldn’t help it; she had to know. “What was that for?”

“I am summoning my allies,” he replied. “We have waited centuries for this to occur. I will not deprive them of seeing the last sacrifice and welcoming the Green Court back to life.”

“What if the Guardian is right, though? If they’ve slipped through time, will they awaken here and now? Might they be lost in the past? Maybe they went into the future. Maybe they don’t even want to emerge.” She tried in vain to sound as though she was suggesting a problem for him to overcome, not using a tactic to delay him.

“It will not matter to you, Alieria. Drink this potion, all the way down.” He offered her the same flask of juice he’d poisoned her with before. “It will lull you to sleep so that you feel no pain. I’ve no wish to treat you cruelly.”

“But you are!” she protested. “If I’m to die, I want to know it, to feel everything I can feel until the moment when I close my eyes and slip into death! Beyond that, you are exceedingly cruel to make me die when I have never experienced the act of love. Would you deny me that too?”

She began to cry. She hoped it sounded like she was bewailing her lost chance at love and not like she was so scared she could barely draw breath. It must have worked because he put away the potion. Coming near, he took her in his arms.

“Sweet innocent, if that is how you feel, I will kiss your eyes closed and capture your breath with my kisses before I finish the rest.”

Sighing, she lay back in his arms and found his mouth with hers.



The Protectors and their fellows could see an opening ahead as they neared the end of the red trod. As if to cut them off and refuse their egress from it, the ground shook fiercely. Stones fell from its roof onto them. They hurried forward, into the third landscape.

“No traps that I can see,” Doyle opined.

“The whole place itself is a trap!” Cameron corrected. “It looks *too* normal. We must be deep into the Dreaming by now. This has got to be another trick.”

“Good guess,” answered the slender figure that rose from the ground before them. She? He? *It* was human in shape, but sprouted branches and leaves for hair and peered at them with dead, flinty eyes. Its lips seemed carved from rippling water. Watching them speak for very long made Cameron want to look away.

“We give you our permission to turn back from this place,” the green guardian intoned. “Here we desire only peace. Like the one who preceded you here, you bring disruption and violence in your wake. Leave now, while you can.”

Leigh bowed. “Thank you for your warning and your offer, guardian, but we cannot retreat. Our princess, Alera, was stolen from us. We must have her back. We fear the one who came before us means to kill her, and we must contest that. We will, however, try to keep from disturbing this place as much as we may.”

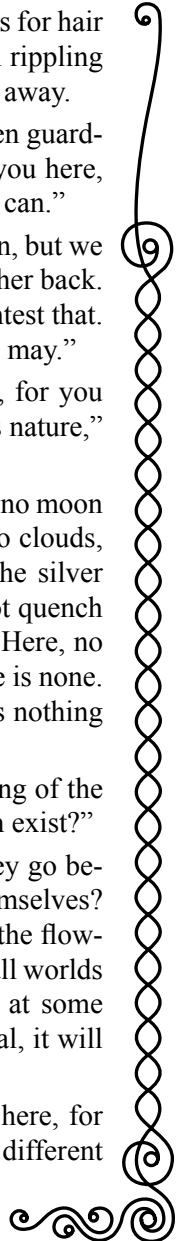
“Yet you have done so already, as has he. *You* might be forgiven, for you know nothing of this place. He has come many times, and *he* knows its nature,” the guardian mused.

“Look around you. Listen. Feel, taste, and touch. There is light, but no moon or sun, no stars. There is air to breathe, but no wind, no cold or hot, no clouds, no true sky. You may feel the ground underfoot, but it is illusion. The silver lakes you see before you are not wet, for there is no water. They cannot quench your thirst. No berries or fruits that you find can give you sustenance. Here, no animals rustle nor do birds sing. Unless you bring sound with you, there is none. This place is a static picture painted on a hole in the universe. There is nothing here for you unless you bring it with you.”

Troubled, Wulf asked, “Nothing? My people have feared the coming of the Fomorians for generations, and the greatest of the Courts does not even exist?”

The guardian laughed. “They exist. They are just ... other. Did they go beneath the silver lakes, as has been told, or have they transformed themselves? Could they be the trees and water, the earth, the sky, the blossoms on the flowers? Perhaps they’ve taken timeless forms, becoming blind and deaf to all worlds except those within themselves. Will they return? Will it be now, or at some other point in time? Perhaps if the White Court prince finishes his ritual, it will summon them; perhaps not.

“If you mean to stop him, you will have to carve your own path here, for there is none you may follow. His path is for him alone. You walk a different



way. I cannot say if your roads will intersect. He has summoned others to witness the sacrifice. I do not know if you can stop them all. We shall see.” With that, the guardian disappeared back into the ground, leaving them on a small ledge looking into an abyss as the illusion they had initially seen disappeared.

Far off upon another rise, they could see a circular path leading upward. As they watched, many creatures moved along the trail. Beasties, monsters and ogres, strange, tall spiders they couldn’t identify, and other denizens all made their way towards the top.

“Uh, anyone up to world-building?” Jack October queried.

“Come on, all you people who talk all the time, say something,” Edmund encouraged.

Valmont moved forward to take Leigh’s hand. He stood up to his full height and began: “Once upon a time...”

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As she noticed the creatures and denizens crawling to surround them on the plateau, Alieria tried to break off her kiss. Maharag allowed her to pull back only an inch or so. Nastily, he whispered, “You wanted this, princess. Are you too shy to go through with it when we have an audience?”

“Yes I am, you loathsome toad,” she snarled, wrenching his dagger from his belt and backing away. “*Don’t* call me princess, and go screw yourself!”

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Far away in the Hawaiian city of Hilo, Yrtalien heard a single, clear note ring out. No one around him in the bustling street heard it. He knew it for a summons from the Hidden King, meant for him alone. He dropped what he was doing and dashed to the trod he’d used so recently coming back to Hawai’i. After training the Ailil prince, Meilseoir had told him the call would come, and he should be prepared to fight for the right to become the Winter King. He was ready.

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“Really, Alieria? Have you listened to nothing I’ve told you? This glade is a place of death and reawakening, not of battle.” Maharag chided her.

She jabbed the blade at him, warning him back. “Then *you* die and see if you can reawaken,” she taunted.

On the sidelines, the hulking crowd that had gathered to see the sacrifice muttered and looked on, intrigued by the unexpected show. They shuffled around the wards Maharag had placed there to get better views of the grave-strewn arena.

“You can’t hope to wound me,” Maharag chided Alieria. “Give up this useless fight. Even if you could hurt me, you could not escape my wards. I will catch you, or you will die of starvation. Why not let your death mean something?”

“My death *does* mean something, no matter how it comes about. My life means even more, and I won’t let you determine when or how it ends.”

Some in the crowd began laughing at that. One ghast called out, “Is this a sacrifice or a comedy?”

Maharag sighed and moved toward the willful princess, giving up on his gentler approach as he snatched at the dagger in her hand.



“... The soft, pale grasses arose to cloak the warm, sandy earth, stretching out into a fine meadow filled with colorful wildflowers and a roadway that detoured only slightly around the silver lakes. The travelers, heartened by the nearness of their goal, hurried toward the prominence upon which the ritual was taking place. Ahead, their foes stood around the circle, forming a ring. The travelers would cut their way through to reach the princess atop the rise. One traveler could not see, but so faithful was his guide that the knight would swear afterwards that for these few moments, he saw through his oath mate’s eyes.” As Valmont spoke, what he said sprang into being around them, allowing them to cross the space between the trod by which they had entered and the glade where Alieria was fighting for her life.

While he was exhilarated by the fulfillment of every storyteller’s dream in which his creation literally became reality, Valmont worried that he wasn’t proceeding as fast as he should. He needed solid detail, but he also must hurry to rescue Alieria before she died. He sped onward.

“As her rescuers reached the bottom of the hill, they could hear Alieria challenging Maharag, lifting their hearts and impelling them up a silver roadway that appeared before them, as if by the will of the Dreaming itself...” Valmont trailed off, unable to think of enough detail to make the road spring into being ahead of them.

Layla jumped in immediately. “As it appeared before them, the roadway avoided the path the killer had created, because this one was made for life. It allowed all of Alieria’s friends and companions to easily surmount the crest without needing to fight the awful creatures on the way. Oops!” As they arrived, she bashed right into an invisible wall that hemmed her out. Although they could all see and hear inside the ward, when they tried to cross it, they could find no point of entry.

As the group watched, they saw Alieria dodge behind the roses that covered one of the graves. Maharag darted after her. His expression shifted to annoyance as the lithe sidhe dodged out of his way time and again.

“The denizens were on them before they had time to try to break through,” Layla quickly declared, “The rescue party was ready for the attackers!”

Sadly, it seemed as though their ability to create what happened was at an end. Edmund and Sir Cumulus moved as one to take on one of the spidery monsters, and Wulf strode forward to engage one of the ogres threatening Layla. Leigh pulled her sword as she and Valmont leapt to occupy two ghastrs who



flanked Aeon. The golden duke cast one more fearful look toward Alera, then turned to face the Fir-bholg threatening him. His face hardened, and he made a vicious cut toward the Fomorian minion.

A few seconds later, the companions who had not been taken by surprise moved to take action. Doyle pulled out his makeshift flashlight and taser, hoping it would work. He was rewarded with a bright sparking light that lit up a spider-denizen, knocking it down into a twitching heap. Never one to hang back in a fight, Fiona whaled on every foe she could reach, hoping to clear the way. Jack guarded her back with a conjured scythe in hand.

Morgan stood tall, fingers spread toward the sky, head thrown back, her hair a wild tangle of black. Screaming her words, she called for a lightning storm to strike those who barred their way. The combatants were almost flung off their feet by the force of the howling wind and lashing rain that answered her call. *It's never been so strong*, she thought, *but I've never done this in the Dreaming*, she realized. Then she was lost to the glory and wildness of the storm that thrashed her foes.

Tor stood firm against the storm raging around him, guarding Morgan's back with his axe and reaching out with it to wound or trip opponents who came too close. Even ogres were hesitant to approach the fierce troll and concentrated on beating down smaller warriors instead. One confronted Fiona and found a sharp sword in his way, wielded by a wrathful Cameron. "Don't even think about it," the Liam sidhe sneered as he skewered the ogre on the blade's point. "I hate bullies."

Georgia pulled out a strangely shaped wrench and went to fight beside Fiona. With her impressive strength, she could use the wrench to deliver significant damage, but its ability to spout fire at opponents cleared her path even more effectively. She called it "putting them in the hot seat."

Rafael helped by creating illusionary doubles of his friends, confusing the Thallain and dark-kin into striking at the wrong spot or misjudging just how close they were to a friend instead of a foe. While his contribution wasn't as flashy as Morgan's magic, it kept the pain done to his companions to a minimum. Having been in the Dreaming for twenty years, Rafael wasn't surprised by how strong his cantrips were, so he had enough concentration left over to notice that many more fiends were flocking in to fight them. Eventually, he and his friends would be overwhelmed. Despair begged to erode his hope, but he refused to give in. "We *will* win this!" he shouted, his voice rising above the wind, then added under his breath, "if the Dreaming drops everything else." He wished he believed it.

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Alera was tiring. She believed Maharag when he said she could not harm him. She had simply been avoiding him, knowing he was stronger than she and that he would overpower her if she let him get his hands on her. She glanced at the dagger she held. If he said it was useless, perhaps it was — on him. She saw nothing that might help her in the circle he'd made. Looking around wildly she

had a crazy idea. *This is the Dreaming. What I dream is so.* She used the dagger to saw off a thin, thorny stem from the roses atop a grave, the first one by the look of its rampant foliage. Maharag laughed aloud. “Are you going to scratch my eyes out with that?” he mocked.

“I certainly hope so,” she replied.

“Then you’ll have to come much closer,” he cajoled.

“I can wait. Can you?” She asked, gesturing toward the battle happening all around them.

“They can’t get through the wards, Alieria,” he reminded her, almost kindly. “Come, put aside this dance.”

“No,” she declared. “And don’t be so sure of what my friends can and can’t do, at need.” She darted forward suddenly and raked the rose’s thorny stem down his face. A line of red dots followed its passage as the small thorns not only wounded him but drew blood. Maharag froze in shock for a moment, allowing her to slip away again.

“So, you’re vulnerable to *something* here,” she noted. He touched his face, then looked at the blood droplets on his fingertips.

“This can’t be,” he cried.

“It’s the Dreaming, Fomorian. Apparently, it can. That’s only a tiny cut, but if you’re wrong about that, what else don’t you know?”



Above the screaming wind, bugle notes rang through the air. Tan-ta-ra! Tan-ta-ra! They sounded the attack! Up the silver roadway charged a handsome eshu in the colors of House Danaan, accompanied by an ageing boggan and a painted wooden bugler in an old-timey toy soldier’s attire. Duke Mondrian of Danaan had used his pathfinding abilities to track Alieria and Layla and to guide Fizzlewig and his chestful of toys to the battlefield. Now the chimeric soldiers, elephants, bears, lions and tigers, dancers, and bride and groom assumed their battle forms. Together, they crashed into the rear flank of the foes. Rather than mere toys, they became fearsome opponents, as they had been during the Accordance War fully prepared for battle. The bugler kept up a series of blasts to guide them. So many foes lay between the two groups that they could not join up into a united front.

Despite having bears and lions among them, the chimerae could hardly rival Fizzlewig for ferocity. He wielded his short sword with a fervor that he’d not revealed since his younger days. His assault was swift and final for several of the opponents. Monsters fled left and right to escape his fury. Still, as some fled, more arrived to swell the ranks of the Thallain.

It seemed that for every foe who fell before them, the Kithain allies found themselves facing two more. Morgan’s storm held many back and Rafael’s illusions kept his friends from sustaining serious injuries as they fought, but they made little headway toward helping Alieria.



Worse, they were all tiring and fading from their first rush into battle. Each of them was forcing him- or herself to carry on, seeking in themselves the inspiration and heart that had led them this far. Layla had stopped fighting altogether and was trying to sneak herself around various parts of the wards, looking for a weakness. She even beat on the invisible wall at one point and cried, "We're coming! Hold on!"

Another wave of dark-kin swarmed in, failing to push back the rescuers by only the slimmest of margins. Winded, muscles screaming, and arms heavy from wielding their weapons, the changelings almost broke. They were saved by an odd bit of song which wafted through the air and lifted their hearts, even as they wondered where the melody could possibly have come from.

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Maharag was distracted by Layla pounding against his wards. When Alera had unexpectedly scratched him, it made him nervous. Was he wrong? Was his ward strong enough to withstand everything the changelings were throwing against it? He glanced over toward Alera and saw her looking disheveled and tired. Sensing how close he was to victory, he shook off his doubts. He was a Fomorian, one of the original fae creatures of the Dreaming! They were merely children of the children of the Tuatha de Danaan. These degenerate changelings could never hope to best him. Smiling, he stalked Alera down, working her into a corner of the ward.

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The sky that Valmont had so carefully brought to life in his description of the roadway opened above their path as Morgan's storm ended. A pure horn call rang out, piercing the rescuers' hearts with hope and joy. All the combatants looked up, almost forgetting their embattlement. Through an opening in the sky, a golden light poured down. Riders on magnificent fae horses thundered down. Surrounded by light, their armor gleaming and swords shining in their gauntleted hands, the Riders of the Silver Court, with Yrtalien among them, hurtled down toward the battle below.

They cut a deadly swath through the enemies below, surging against the foes again and again. Duke Aeon's group fought with renewed vigor. Blades flashed, claws and teeth ripped. Screams sounded on all sides. The Protectors and their allies finally joined forces with the Riders and the chimerae. A song of joy and victory graced the air as Liam rode down to join the Riders. Once there, he lifted the horn to his lips and blew three proud notes. All around, the decimated Thallain and dark-kin who were left threw down their weapons and surrendered as their numbers became too few to continue the battle. A light-crowned rider clad in gold rode his glowing white steed down to the battlefield. The Hidden King had come.

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The King's light bathed the hilltop in golden illumination. He instructed the Riders to begin disarming their foes and moving them into an area which he

created with his own wards, where they could be more easily contained. Then he turned to the wards surrounding Maharag and Alieria. Despite her wounds and exhaustion, Leigh was already there, thrusting her Eyestone ring at the invisible barrier and chanting words to unlock it. The Stone of Opening, one of the four Immortal Eyes used to unlock Silver's Gate, caused the barrier to glow and ripple, but did not take it down. Leigh almost succumbed to tears at her failure.

"It *has* to work!" she cried. Beside her, Morgan, still with the power of her potent sorcery in her dark eyes, pushed against the ward as if she could will it to open. The rest of the group crowded around Leigh, lending her their silent support.

"Try again," Meilseoir commanded. As Leigh again touched her glowing gemstone to the ward, he took up the chant in a language that they all felt they knew — or should know — but did not recognize. Liam played a slow and stately tune, one so old that few remembered it. The music evoked a passionate longing in those present to witness it, like a half-forgotten memory of ancient grandeur. Aeon's head rose higher and he straightened, as did Sir Cumulus, whose mangled face was streaked with tears. Hope lanced forth and shattered the ward as Maharag at last laid hands on Alieria.



Alieria screamed and dragged the thorn strand across the back of Maharag's hand as he grabbed her, opening more small wounds in his flesh. He dragged her toward the open grave in the center of the clearing. She slashed wildly at him with his dagger, but that effort was as futile as he had promised her it would be. As he half-dragged, half-carried her toward her doom, right hand clenched in a fist in her hair, he withdrew a goblet from inside his tunic, turning it as if to catch her blood in it.

Sputtering, near tears, Alieria shrieked, "But that's Morgan's unicorn cup from the Toybox!" She tried to grab it from him, but he held it away from her, laughing.

"It is also the Cup of Dreams, my innocent. Your blood poured into it will free the Green Court and reunite the Fomorian against you degenerate fae mongrels. At last!"

He stopped in his tracks as his wards shattered around him. Then he raced for the open grave, determined to finish his long task, even if he was killed in its completion. All of Alieria's friends and guardians were rushing toward him. In the lead raced a brown rabbit, ears askew. The rabbit landed atop his left shoulder and began nibbling at his ear. While not hurt, Maharag began to giggle, distracted by the ridiculous attack. He could not hold Alieria, retain his grasp on the Cup, and fend off his attackers.

Seeing he wasn't doing anything to harm the Fomorian lord, Rafael leapt off him began to change forms again.

Stumbling and staggering as he tried to retain control, Maharag caught a glimpse of the shining Hidden King for the first time as Meilseoir planted him-



self in his path. The White Court prince's eyes widened, and his grip slackened on both Alieria and the Cup. For the first time, he began to tremble. "You! I thought all your kind had long ago fled!"

Meilseoir shook his head. "You never thought that if you lived and remained in the world, one would stay to oppose you? It has been long in coming, this meeting, but you are finished. I am only sorry it took me so long to discover your foul purposes and put a stop to them. Your people were lost long ago. Go and join them."

I was wrong, Morgan thought, shivering as she realized what Meilseoir must mean. *He's not one of the Siochain. He's an actual Tuatha de Danaan!*

The others had moved to surround Maharag but froze to allow the elder fae to face one another down. Resigned, the Hidden King told them, "At least in one thing, he has told the truth. None of you can harm him."

"But we *can* take Alieria from him," Tor rumbled, moving forward to yank the princess free.

None of them were prepared for Alieria's response to being freed. She moved right back into Maharag's path, beating at him with her battered rose and stabbing blindly with her dagger.

"Damn you!" she cried, "I swear by the Dreaming itself that I will avenge the others you have killed and buried here, you monster!"

All there were momentarily deafened by the response. "Heard and witnessed," shrieked out eight feminine voices as one by one, the murdered princesses' ghostly forms rose from the graves in which they'd been interred. As if she read their intentions, Alieria wrapped the thorn branch around the dagger's hilt. The thorns bit into her palm, but she held on with a deadly grip. The ghostly women clad in attire from their own times and places closed in on Maharag, reaching out to lay their insubstantial hands on the hilt of the dagger alongside Alieria's hand. She alone heard them whisper, "We are with you, sister."

Meilseoir also moved to stand beside her, laying his hand atop Alieria's and gripping the dagger's hilt as well.

"You have called forth the Dreaming by your oath. I will steady your hand as you strike."

She thrust the blade forward, burying it deeply into Maharag's abdomen. She felt the energy of the princesses and the power to match the Fomorian in the person of the king. It was a fatal blow.

Maharag groaned and bent over the wound, trying to hold his blood and viscera inside him body just a little longer. With enormous effort, he gasped. "You have stopped my bloodletting too soon. You are saved, Alieria, but have I failed? The Green Court chose exile voluntarily, so could they not return any time if they wished?"

"Yes, I die. But my blood drips into the Cup of Dreams even as we speak, and am I not royal as well? His blood swirled into the Cup, mingling with the

blood of his latest victims. A grass-green key appeared, and he painfully turned it widdershins. You have slain me, but the key is turned. With my death I free my people and bequeath to you the Cup of Dreams. May it bring you much joy.”

With his last words, Maharag fell, freeing the bloodied Cup to roll across the ground. All of them stood in silence for a moment, not knowing if some great eruption of the Green Court was imminent.

After a tense silence, during which nothing happened, Wulf gingerly retrieved the Cup. He wordlessly handed it to Morgan. She flinched at the blood that dripped from it but kept her grip on it. “My poor unicorn cup. What did he do to you?”

Sadly, Fizzlewig approached and took the Cup from her. Taking out a silk cloth and a water-filled flask, he washed it clean as he had done so many times before, then returned it to Morgan.

Aliera stood where she had been when she struck the fatal blow, bloodied dagger still in her hand. Aeon moved to take her in his arms, taking the dagger from her unresisting hand and stroking her hair. He examined her for any wounds and found only a few scratches and bruises. She was absolutely exhausted and drained. The wounds to her soul would take longer to heal.

“Aeon, tell me this is over, please,” she pleaded as she embraced him in turn.

Her guardian held her cheeks in his palms, mouthing words he could not speak, and kissed her forehead.

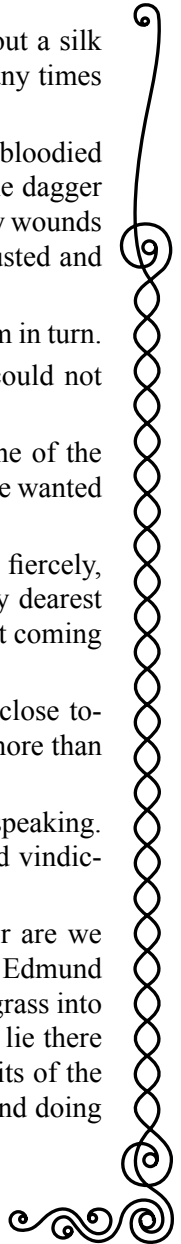
“He can’t speak,” Layla informed Aliera, her voice breaking. “One of the guardians made him give up his voice to pass through its territory. But he wanted you to hear how much he loves you.”

“No,” Aliera wailed, “No, please.” She hugged Aeon even more fiercely, then opened her arms to include Layla. “I knew you would come. My dearest friend, I knew you’d find me. Thank you, thank you. Who else was hurt coming to get me? Please tell me, Layla.”

Layla softly told her of Cumulus being blinded. The three stood close together as Aliera cried. “I wish I’d taken more time and hurt him a lot more than I did,” she declared.

“No, you don’t,” Meilseoir spoke from nearby. “That’s your anger speaking. He was the monster, not you. His death was necessary, but sadism and vindictiveness are not a true part of your dream.”

Edmund looked at the others, “Are we just leaving him to rot, or are we going to bury him?” he asked. Valmont, Cameron, Jack, and Tor helped Edmund lift Maharag’s bloody body into the waiting grave. Liam sang soil and grass into being to cover over the plot, then sang of the white prince who would lie there in penitence for the princesses he had murdered. He entreated the spirits of the princesses to keep watch over Maharag’s spirit to keep it from rising and doing any more harm.



“Cool,” said Edmund. Poking the toe of his shoe at the remaining crumpled, rumpled corpse that Maharag had discarded, he asked, “Now who’s this other guy lying here? Are we doing something with him, too?”

Aliera had the answer. “His name was Yvgeny Varich. I thought he was one of my suitors, but Maharag stole his body to get close to me. I suppose we should take his body back to his family and try to explain things.”

“Okay,” Edmund said. “Um, anyone have a shroud or something?”

“Of course,” Rafael answered, “I always carry one with me just in case I need a tent.” He handed Edmund several of the scarves he carried that served as juggler’s tools. He and Edmund covered the body as best they could.

Yrtalien went to speak to the defeated Thallain and dark-kin. He began by acquainting himself with their names and identifying their leaders. When he had done so, he asked which of them wanted to return to wherever they had come from in the Dreaming, and which wanted to return to the Autumn World. Separating the two groups, he sent roughly half back to their homes in the Dreaming with the instruction that when he called for them, they were to answer his summons in return for their lives and freedom.

To those who remained, he said, “I invite *the rest of you to accompany me and become members of my court*. I am the Winter King. We will work toward bringing about Unseelie rule for half the year, as was originally intended. You will help me achieve that goal and be accepted among us. If you agree, prepare to come with me. If you do not, you will have to find your own way in whatever world you choose. If you’re coming, follow me.”

Trailed by their former foes, Yrtalien walked over to Leigh. “This is goodbye for now,” he said.

“Yes. I don’t regret anything,” she offered, “But I am where I am supposed to be and with the person I am supposed to be with.”

“I know that now. A part of me will always wish things could have been different. But I understand. I’ll be in Hilo if you need me. Farewell. I expect we’ll meet again.” Turning, he led his group down the hill and off into the distance.

Morgan sat in the grass holding her unicorn mug. She turned it around and around in her hands, wondering how she could have drunk from it so many times when it was tainted by so much evil. She felt she needed to do something to cleanse it, for a bit of water and silk would never do so.

Wulf came and sat nearby, not speaking, just being there. After some time, the rest of the companions did the same, forming a circle that included Morgan among them. She sighed.

“I’m not certain what to do,” she confessed at last.

“The Cup is yours,” Meilseoir replied. “What to do with it is your decision. It has not left you, so it wants you to do something.”

“Maybe you could use it to heal Aeon’s voice,” Fiona offered wistfully.

Aeon shook his head and pointed at Cumulus. Alera asked, “Could anything be done for the true Yvgeny?”

“I don’t know,” Morgan answered. “It’s hard to choose just one person.”

Georgia cracked, “I could use a new cab,” which made all of them laugh.

Morgan took a deep breath, hoping she was choosing what was fairest. “Since he was the most innocent in all of this and never had the chance to do anything, I wish on the Cup of Dreams that Yvgeny Varich would be restored with no harm done to him.”

Fizzlewig came forward and poured more water into the Cup. Morgan swirled it with her finger. “I hope I’m doing this right,” she said. Approaching the corpse, she let a little of the cool liquid drip from the Cup into his mouth.

Yvgeny suddenly sat up, pulling a bunch of colorful scarves away from his face. “What? Where?” he sputtered.

The friends gave a cheer and Alera went over to him to explain. The rest of the water swirled upward from the Cup and touched on Aeon and Cumulus as if blessing them. Cumulus rubbed his eye and Aeon touched his throat. “I’ve been restored. Cumulus, have you?” Aeon asked in his silken voice.

“I have, my duke,” was the reply.

The others felt whatever cuts and bruises they had heal as well, and a feeling of joy suffused them all.

You chose to do the right thing, Morgan, she alone heard. Looking around, she saw the shimmer of a unicorn barely visible in the air. It nodded to her. For that, I answer the needs of all here. Even Georgia. It laughed with a sound like tinkling bells. Now, I must leave you, but we will meet again. Live your life in love and joy, child of the Dreaming, and tell all your friends and family to do the same.

As the unicorn faded away, the Cup too faded from her hands and disappeared.

“Time to go home,” she said to the others.

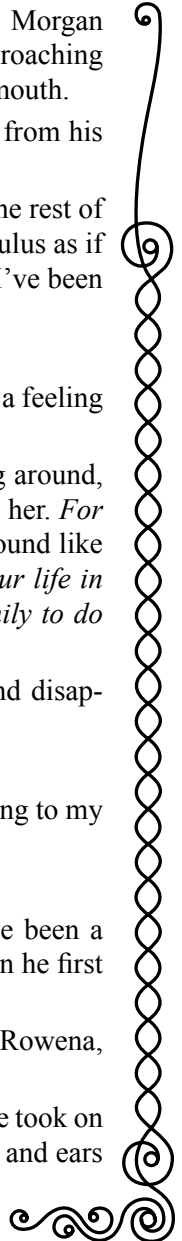
“Indeed,” the Hidden King noted. “My Riders and I will be returning to my home as will my bard.”

“Your bard?” asked Rafael, giving Liam a startled look.

“Yes,” Liam replied. “I’ve been his court bard for as long as I’ve been a clurichaun. I actually came with him from the Dreaming long ago when he first went into exile.”

Meilseoir shrugged toward the astonished Riders, especially Lady Rowena, who had always been annoyed that Liam came and went at will.

“It’s true,” the Hidden King confirmed. “He was once a sidhe, but he took on the changeling way to be born again and again so he could be my eyes and ears



in the Autumn World as the lands outside my forest and castle changed with the times. His service has been long and faithful.”

Liam bowed. “Don’t worry, Rafael, you can come visit, and I’ll come visit you too.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” the surprised pooka replied.

Liam grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll still be hauntin’ the Riders and you, my lord.”

The king smiled, “I never doubted it.” You’ve never been an oath-breaker, have you, Liam, first of your House?”



The rescuers, Alera, Fizzlewig, the toys, Yvgeny Varich, and Duke Mondrian of House Danaan prepared to take their leave of the Green Court’s lands. As they did, the green guardian appeared before them.

“You are allowed to leave this place in peace, but do not return. I am opening the way back for you where you entered. The Courts of the Fomorians know of you now, and the White and Red may come upon you sooner than you think. Whether the Green Court will join them, I do not know. How you meet, whether in warfare or negotiation may well depend upon what you do with this knowledge. Perhaps you can learn to coexist among yourselves so that when they come, you will be able to coexist with them as well.

“Go down from this hill now and you will exit the gateway to your home, Duke Aeon. I will close the gate behind you and erase it, so it cannot be reopened. Goodbye.”

As the guardian disappeared back into the hill, they walked down and found themselves walking into the wooded area behind Aeon’s palace. The two horses that had served as mounts for Alera and Maharag were peacefully grazing in the Autumn meadow. The damage that had been done situating the gate and breaking it down was gone. Cars remained where the rescuers had left them. Most importantly, a brightly painted, fully repaired taxi purred as Georgia approached it, hardly daring to believe. Tears in her eyes, but a wide smile on her face, she looked at the bright sky and smelled the San Francisco air. “We’re home,” she crowed joyfully. “Who wants a ride to the Toy Box?”

Author Bios



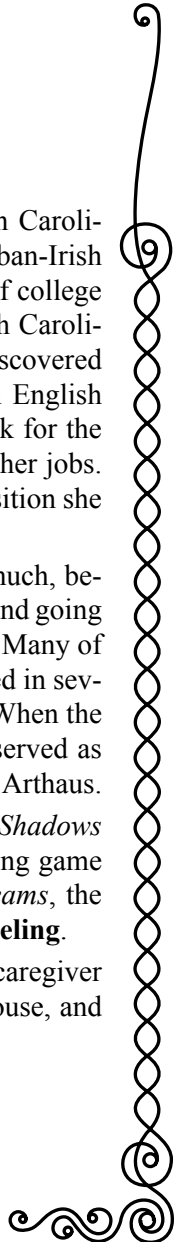
Jackie Cassada

Like her partner and co-author, Jackie was born in western North Carolina far too long ago. She considers herself an Appalachian, albeit a Cuban-Irish Appalachian. After a decade long stint in the Boston area (four years of college and six years working in Harvard Square), she returned home to North Carolina, craving the mountains of the Blue Ridge. A life-long reader, she discovered role-playing games in 1978 and never looked back. With a degree in English and a specialty in Victorian literature, she was overly qualified to work for the Buncombe County Libraries as its Acquisitions Department, among other jobs. In 1984, she became the sf/fantasy columnist for *Library Journal*, a position she held until 2013.

In the mid-1990s, she started writing for the games she loved so much, beginning with *Rage Across Appalachia* for **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** and going on to write for most of the White Wolf Storyteller System® game lines. Many of her books were co-authored with Nicky Rea, with whom she also played in several bands and composed the score to a musical version of Pinocchio. When the **Changeling** game line moved to Arthaus Publishing, she and Nicky served as developers for the line until its end. They also developed **Ravenloft** for Arthaus.

In 1995-1996, Jackie wrote the *Immortal Eyes* trilogy: *The Toybox*; *Shadows on the Hill*; and *Court of All Kings*. The three novels had accompanying game books and tied in with **Changeling: The Dreaming**. *The Cup of Dreams*, the fourth book in the *Immortal Eyes* trilogy, celebrates 20 years of **Changeling**.

Jackie lives with her partner near the top of a mountain, acting as caregiver for their seven incorrigible cats: Puddin', Pixie, Fae, Jo Jo, Mister, Mouse, and Lily — all rescues.



Nicky Rea

Named for two queens of England, Nicky Rea was born much smaller than she is today in Western North Carolina. She was adopted by her Banal parents and given their last name (which she retains). She chose the first name of Nicky (short for nickname) when no other nicknames seemed to fit. As a rebellious kid, she ran away from school in the first grade, so it's no surprise she eventually got a college degree in Drama.

She moved to Boston where she worked for Harvard and played in several rock bands. After one humongous snow too many, she moved back to her western Carolina mountains where she played in rock bands, folk rock ensembles, and traditional Irish and British Isles bands. This was when she got that bachelor's degree.

She also wrote for various TSR® lines such as **AD&D**, **Spelljammer**, **Al Qadim**, and others, as well as for White Wolf® (**Mage**, **Vampire**, **Wraith**, **Werewolf**, and most notably **Changeling**, which she also developed for a time). She has also written for other gaming companies, co-designed the *Mage Tarot*, and co-developed **Ravenloft** for a time. Many of her works were co-authored with Jackie Cassada, gaining them the title “the dreaded, two-headed Asheville freelance monster.”

Nicky lives in western North Carolina with her long-time companion and seven demanding cats.

Author special Thanks



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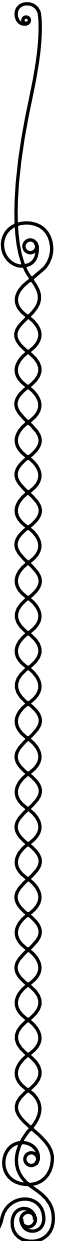
Thanks to Ian Lemke, whose love of **Changeling: The Dreaming** as its first developer inspired us to live up to his standards when we, in turn, took on the job as co-developers.

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Mike, Jim, Joe, Tyler, Craig, Jeff, John, Jay, and many, many others — thanks for carrying our heavy gaming bags up and down the stairs, and for being unflinchingly kind to a pair of grumps trying to hold onto our dreams.



Two decades ago, sidhe changeling Morgan Daniels watched her oathmates cross through Silver's Gate and enter the faerie homeland of Arcadia. Now no longer a childling, Morgan hears a call, letting her know it is time for her friends to come home.

In Arcadia, Morgan's oathmates engage in a battle to return to Morgan and the Mortal Realm they left behind. A new quest awaits them, one for the elusive and mystical Cup of Dreams.

In the meantime, drawn to San Francisco by a mysterious call, another group of changelings gathers at the Toybox Coffee Shop. Their task: defend the freehold from a series of incursions by servants of the changelings' ancient enemies.



Combining Celtic lore with old ballads, this sequel to the Immortal Eyes Trilogy reunites old friends and brings together new ones in a tale of adventure, romance, trust and betrayal that is both timely and timeless.

