

If It Makes You Happy, **KEEP IT**

Clovers in Kind

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(sleepvines)

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**The following authors are responsible for this
book:**

Winn, Vaughn, Hatchet, and of course, Kell Clover.
Each had varying levels of involvement in every step
of the process. It's hard not to, when you share a
head.

Content warnings:

This story is intended for mature readers. Sensitive
content includes violence, grief, undue prejudice,
blood, sustained injuries, coerced sexual assault,
substance abuse, emotional and physical abuse,
implied parental abuse and neglect, abduction,
depression and dissociation.

On DID:

Because the condition is an unavoidable and daily
constant for us Clovers,
we wanted to try our hand(s) at writing characters
who happen to have Dissociative Identity Disorder.

We based much of this portrayal on our own
experiences, albeit with several differences for

convenience's sake. It's an inherently subjective experience regardless.

You'll probably get the gist of it as you read this story, but if you would like to learn more about DID, please visit <https://did-research.org>.

Here's to ourselves, 'cause I love you all,
and to those who kept us going.

And hold on, and hold on, hold on for your life!
-Pat the Bunny, *Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of
Your Fist*

Chapter One

Elliot Ronan knew he was doomed from the moment he opened his laptop. He could only draw a blank on what to write in the text document before him, which reflected in his glasses as a pale, barren sea. Fingers hovered over the keys, a few ideas rattling limply in his head as the emptiness of the page called forth latent hunger to bubble up in his throat. The text cursor was the only blemish on the screen's white surface, blinking with a mute patience.

He dug the ball of his palm into his cheek, thinking. *A captain, a captain...* He wanted to write about the ocean. Thoughts of its enormity and chill swam through his mind like leviathans churning leagues below. Occasionally a hint of an idea would surface, promise flashing across its scales. Then, before he could catch it, it would slip back into the hadal murk and be lost.

"A mystery...? A scandal...?" He mused, ruminating on choosing a theme. At least he knew it would take place after the invention of sonar, so he

could use it for some scene or other, but he needed more than just a setting.

Fortunately, Elliot was not alone in his literary pursuits. Unfortunately, the co-writers that shared his body were having just as much trouble getting anything done.

“A murder mystery maybe.” said Ramona, piping up. “The captain could be a killer. A ship’s the perfect place to do it, since no one would find the body.” She was the kind of person who liked stories with a sense of thrill and urgency, both things he wasn’t exactly gunning for.

He had not asked for her company.

“That’s been done. I want something more subversive.”

She beamed with possibility. “Maybe an artifacts smuggler then. Or a werewolf.”

“...A werewolf.” he balked.

“Yeah!”

“I’m going for historical fiction.”

She thought on it, gears turning. She pictured a man with a gruff voice and a weathered cap pulled over a furtive pair of eyes that scanned his hunting

grounds; his ship *Sea Dog*. “I mean, who’s to say you can't have both?”

“Myself. Arthur, what do you think?” He called out to his other companion, a quiet presence who spent most of his time watching the other two run in circles. Arthur had a level head and an empathetic nature, and this was more than enough to condemn him to the role of conciliator.

He considered for a moment, brushing a lock of sandy hair from his temple. He had no need to, save for the way it made him look thoughtful. Much like Ramona, his appearance was nothing more than the conjurings of a mind tying a face to his voice within the headscape they shared.

At last, he found his words. “She has a point, you can do whatever you’d like without restriction.”

“Restriction is certainly a way to describe preference.”

Arthur continued. “...but I understand you don’t want to complicate things. If you’re really out of ideas, why not try out a short draft with the fantasy element and see how it goes?”

Elliot’s patience twinged. “I’m looking for a *grounded* narrative. I’m not including a wolfman.”

“I think we should read more maritime accounts in that case, it could help inspire something.”

“Possibly...”

Ramona skewed her mouth. “I get you don’t like the werewolf thing but you seem stuck lately. Really stuck. Don’t you wanna brainstorm a little?”

Elliot turned on her. “Well, let’s see. Every time *you* suggest an idea it’s far too outlandish or misses the point. There is no mighty kraken, there is no wild island, and I can *feel* you thinking about the possibility of a ghost ship. No.”

“Aw come on... People love that stuff.”

“Some people also love realism, and I am one of them. Go write your own story if you’d like to play around.”

“Maybe I could if you ever *gave me the time to,*” she huffed. The hazy visuals of the headscape didn’t always offer a clear view, but it was clear she was sulking. Elliot had endured this routine for a while now. The last time he’d given her a window to write, she got too engrossed in watching a nature documentary during research, and nothing got done.

“Are you going to bother me this entire time, or let me accomplish a sentence or two?”

“It’s not like you were doing that anyway. Same with this morning. Oh! And yesterday and the past few weeks, *and...*”

He held his face in his hands, fuming. “You’re *insufferable*. Leave me be.”

She was satisfied with pestering him, but still deigned to be petty. “On it, don’t bother asking for ideas,” she said, and receded back into the mental murk.

“She was just trying to help, Elliot,” said Arthur.

“Then I don’t want her help.”

“I think you should give her a chance. You don’t have to use her ideas, but at least she’s giving you a shot.”

He groaned. “Maybe it would be better if she kept to herself. Less distracting.”

“You know that isn’t true. You need her.”

“Do I now?”

That earned him a concerned look. “You know how you get when she’s gone.”

Elliot avoided his eyes, as green as the void around him. “Why don’t you go make sure she doesn’t disappear on us, then?”

Arthur knew when he was being dismissed, so he didn’t press him further. With a silent exit, he left him alone to his work.

Elliot proceeded to sit in front of a festering white screen for all of an hour, close his device, then take a long, hot shower without the satisfaction of having earned it.

He tried to imagine it was seawater raining down on him, squeezing it out from his hair as desperately as he wanted to squeeze out ideas. He even changed the temperature to cold. No luck. The momentum had left him.

It had been a couple months since he got it in his head to write a *real* story. He’d done far more writing in his youth, sunk deep into it to escape other things. Bleaker things. There was a part of him wishing he could get that back again, the motivation of life nipping at his heels, but it was for the best. Now he could take it more seriously, create elevated work. At least, that’s what he told himself.

The shower was over with an anticlimactic clunk. There was barely a crumb of soap left, the water was losing its warmth... Elliot wrung his thick, cinnamon snarl of hair like the end of a broiler hen's life. Wasn't the rote activity of cleaning himself supposed to stoke his creativity? He only moped about his lack of progress and Ramona's interference instead. When his fingers suddenly snagged in his hair, the movement just about smashed his head into the shower wall. He couldn't bear it.

With his hairbrush a weapon, he took out his frustrations. He pushed it with aggressive force, as if that would do anything but pain his scalp, before he set aside his seething and brushed gently down. Each knot he untangled was an exercise in patience. The especially fretsome ones swallowed a great deal of focus. He worked until he simply stood there, plowing satisfying grooves through his hair like it was a track of wet soil. He liked the smooth motion from the top of his head to the tips wrapped 'round his knuckles.

Finally, he relaxed himself enough to give up brooding and do something better with his time.

As it would turn out, his best option was giving up the reins to another. Elliot decided that Arthur could stretch his legs and spend some time *fronting*, which was the trio's term for driving the vehicle that was their shared body. To switch was to retreat out of the metaphorical cockpit and let someone else become the pilot, an effective way to rest after a day full of stagnance and emotional sludge.

Art took the mantle gladly and opened his eyes to an afternoon of downtime. He fried up an easy lunch of toast and scrambled eggs, then read by the big window he liked with some music on. Occasionally the fatigue of following a book would draw his eyes away, and the scenery outside would become far more interesting than the paper in his hands until he circled back to craving sentences.

Once he took his fill of printed adventure, he was restless. He leaned back in the armchair and gazed at the world through the glass upside-down. The press of his neck into the board beneath the chair's upholstery was less than tolerable, but he didn't care. He was getting up soon anyway. The life

out there had him captivated wholly, his heart was set on going out today. It's not that he felt *cramped* in the old house at all; he loved the slate blue walls and humble trim, the hand-me-down furniture Elliot's grandmother used to occupy while she told her fairy-stories, those corners spiders peered down from, unbothered in their webs. Memories of running through the halls warmed him, even with their distance. Visiting grandma had been one of the few landmark joys in their life and now the house was *theirs*. Still, he itched to go out. Elliot had kept them here the past three days, and Arthur had a fondness for the outdoors that could not be challenged.

He shrugged on a light overcoat, patiently laced up his converse shoes, and savored the breeze that hit him as he spilled outside. The smells of summer hit him in a thick waft. The flowers had that rich sort of scent that clung to his nose, and there were plenty in the garden by the door. They were tended to well enough by the rain, the sun, and visits to the village center that they didn't threaten to wilt. For a minute he searched for pollinating insects, found at least one fuzzy little thing, and left content.

The park, or at least what the residents of Alderhill *considered* a park, was a stretch of clearing within a grove that stood a little ways off from some of the residential buildings. It had its necessary fare of picnic tables, a bench on the far side below a broad poplar, and a trash bin standing stalwart near the entrance. There wasn't much infrastructure in the village. It was old, remote, and nestled beside a mountain with a dense forest, so they made do with what they could manage. Arthur found the lack of traffic, noise, and asphalt pleasant, a departure from the city he was confined to prior. He breathed in the calm as he sat under the poplar's shade.

As always, he kept an eye out for park-going creatures. There were a pair of kids squatting in the grass gawking at bugs. One of them, a girl no older than eight, yelled when a bug scuttled up her arm. The other giggled and cupped it. The pair continued digging through the green after its release.

The sharp bark of a hound drew his attention away from them. It loped around with a pinecone in its teeth, bounded up to its master and deposited the slobbery thing in his hand. Before the toss was even complete, it was already a length across the park

again to jump and enthusiastically miss the catch. While the whippet was a darling sight, its presence was sure to drive away any of the more interesting beasts Arthur had seen sniffing around the park's fringes on less busy days. A misfortune. At the very least, the beast was well behaved, and he enjoyed watching its gray body ripple across the grass. He recognized the owner as one of his neighbors. A pleasant man really, his name was something like Anton. Even Elliot liked him.

He recalled a brief conversation they'd had about the animal. It was a pull from his late dog's litter, a spritely little thing with no regard for personal space. A lap dog in a sighthound's body. The name escaped Arthur now. He'd been too distracted stroking its head and fending off its explorative nose. He'd never acclimated to dogs, but at least he didn't harbor a fear of them like Elliot.

Arthur lingered there on the bench a while. The planks of the seat were worn to a comfortable smoothness. It was one of his many favored spots to idle. The old tree kept him company while the summer-sweet grass underfoot cushioned his heels, and the sounds of his neighbors occupied the air.

Despite the fruitless writing session earlier, he'd been having a nice day of his own. *It'll get easier*, he thought, *if he stops pushing himself so hard. He might just break.*

He considered checking on Elliot, but decided he could use more rest. There was catching up to do. Especially with the amount of coffee the man was keen on putting into the body, Arthur was sure they would never have a caffeine-free bloodstream again. Still, he was concerned about his headfellow, and Ramona for that matter, but she was probably fine enough to leave be. She wouldn't stay down for long.

The afternoon became early evening, and it was time to head home. The sun was trailing an orange wake behind it, gently dragging the light away. While in a poetic sort of mood, the clouds that blushed pink below the yawning dark gave Arthur a smile. He took his time ambling up the road to the house despite feeling his stomach growl. Especially because it was a Friday, and on Friday nights the sound of some string instrument would echo from somewhere in the mountain's direction. It was one of those things he had just accepted about the place, that someone would take to practicing their

instrument in the woods. He waited for it eagerly as he walked home, no wristwatch to measure, and only heard the first few notes as his palm met the doorknob. At least he could crack open a window and listen along, inside.

It had been a little over a year since the three of them moved here. When Elliot's grandmother passed on she left behind her estate and accumulated savings to his mother. It happened to be that his mother was a 'metropolitan at heart', though they suspected she just couldn't stand the village. His father was a wreck of a divorced absentee, so the inheritance moved to Elliot. He was desperate to leave his mother and that stale swathe of rectangles anyway, it all lined up well.

Here, he, Arthur, and Ramona could live alone in the old house like it was an extension of their head.

Chapter Two

Today was errand day. The population of Alderhill was a tight-knit community who took care of their rural village like a pack of herding dogs. Almost everybody had something to do, and if there was nothing, they'd find *something* to fill that time. The place was mostly home to older folks whose parents had settled the area, and their children, and so on. To integrate into the village well, the Ronans had learned to lend their help to their neighbors every weekend. Mostly from a sense of purpose and social stimulation, but doubly for a lack of schedule.

The docket was simple. Feed a cat, feed some plants, feed themselves. Well—groceries were supplemental, not exactly a first priority when neighbors pushed extra eggs and baked goods their way with a gusto that frightened the Ronans. There was plenty of surplus, so they could get along without much in the way of income. Padding that was their grandmother's life savings. Almost a year and a half after moving to Alderhill, they were still getting used to the concept of comfortable living, let alone the reality.

The cat they promised to tend to belonged to a lady named Joanne, who lived in a bungalow down the road. She was busy with her market stall on weekends and had to get up early to prepare. This meant her darling feline was left wanting for a breakfast she could not supply, and the poor thing never ate without company. It was great then, that Elliot was a sucker for cats.

“Paprika?” he called out as he swung the door closed behind him. The little furball could have been anywhere. The sheer amount of furniture and décor taking up the home was impressive, and terribly comfortable. It bordered on clutter. “Ri-ika...”

There was a tinkling sound down the hall, and a little curious face poked her head out from around the corner to look at Elliot, eyes as big and expectant as shot glasses. Paprika was as cute as she was daft, with a small pink nose and fur as ginger red as Joanne’s hair.

“Mrrp?”

“Ahh there you are. I’ve got your food, come.” He shook a kibble-filled baggie he had picked up from the side table by the door, and poured it into her bowl. She trotted over to the food and, after a

brief stare at Ell, began munching. He stroked her fur gently as she ate. The morning's grogginess still clung to him like a coat, and it was hard not to feel sleepy with a cat around. He had considered adopting a cat for himself, but he saw Paprika often enough that he got his fill. Besides! He didn't have to deal with litter, and that was a blessing.

He waited patiently until she finished, leaving his shoulder bag on the floor and reviewing what he needed from the market while he waited. The *chk chk* of her eating punctuated the silence as he looked around the kitchen. It was full of kitschy things like a rooster shaped jar on the countertop, a hand-woven tapestry on the wall beside a painting of a barn... He'd always assumed Joanne had just grown up on a farm. She was built like a ranch hand anyway, with broad shoulders and well-tanned skin. They didn't talk all that much outside of the weekly outings and chance encounters.

Once Paprika had enough breakfast, she sat on her haunches and swished her fluffy tail. Elliot patted her on the head, ruffled her ears, and stood.

“Bye for now. I have things to get done, but I’ll say hello to her for you,” he said, and picked up his bag.

“*Mrow.*” she mrowed.

“You too.” He slung his bag over his shoulder and left.

It was one of those mornings that could drag even the most curmudgeonly of souls outside. Not sweltering, not chilly, even parts perfect for a walk and going fishing. Picnic weather. An emerald cardigan draped over a white button-up and jeans made for just the right outfit. Elliot was feeling slightly better than yesterday, letting the pleasant air soothe him as he rounded a bend towards the other house.

The yard was shadowed by a collection of trees and surrounded by a gated wooden fence. The gate was always left unlocked. That was the kind of place Alderhill was, you could leave your door wide open and no one would mess with your things. If they did, they had the whole village to answer to.

One of the trees was a willow. Its fronds touched down gently in a curtain over the stone slate path running down the center of the garden that led

to the door. Cast over it all was a dappled sheen from the leaves above. It was almost as if the light had become flowers; gleaming spots that swayed in likeness. He swore he could feel Arthur's presence lurking in the background to drink it all in.

Gil was the man that lived here. In his garden, wildflowers and raspberry bushes grew in tandem. His worsening arthritis meant he could no longer water his collection as well on his own. The Ronans agreed to take care of it for the sake of helping him out, of course, but the free berries he gave them was a welcome reward.

Elliot peeked around, but the old man's lawn chair stood vacant. He could still see a depressed outline in the backrest. It was odd not to get the morning greeting; usually he'd be waiting in the garden or shout a hello from the window. *Maybe he's at the market too?* he thought, *I'll just get started.*

The watering can had been left sitting beneath the hose faucet on the side of the house, like always. Watering a garden wasn't the most thrilling activity, and Elliot couldn't hold an ounce of story-planning in his head, so he decided to take this opportunity to check in with the others.

Anyone there?

The can sloshed as he filled it, a wet, metallic echo.

“Hello Elliot.”

So Arthur was around after all. A row of primroses received a generous dousing before Elliot spoke.

“Hello, liking the view?”

“Absolutely,” Arthur responded, “I love this time of year.”

That got a rare smile out of him. “We both do.”

Violets, lavender, and vetch rubbed shoulders. They had a predictably nice smell. *Drink up.*

Arthur had a kind sort of smile. Moreso felt than seen, a warm and fleeting thing. “Do you mind if I go with you today?”

“I don’t see why not. I’m teetering on the edge of boredom anyways...”

A flicker of red caught Arthur’s attention. “Oh, don’t forget the poppies.” He moved their shared arms over to water them without much thought, before Elliot could catch up.

“Hey *careful!* You know I prefer you ask-”

“Sorry, they came to my attention suddenly. I thought I’d help.”

“-before you wrest motor functions from me. You keep doing it.” It took Elliot a moment to register what he said. “Well, alright. But ask.”

“Okay. May I water some of them?”

He felt his own grip temporarily return to the handle. It was an ephemeral sensation of transfer that never really lost its peculiarity. The exact same nervous system was responsible for every motion, every twitch, and yet sometimes it felt so alien.

“Go ahead, thank you.”

Elliot felt Arthur’s will to move fill his hands, again, like a shifting of tides. The poppies received a nourishing shower in concert with some daisies. He was audience to his own body moving without him, an event which continued to baffle him. Even after his diagnosis, his dissociative disorder remained surreal.

An antsy feeling crept up on him, and he awkwardly jerked the can back to reaffirm his control, giving a patch of grass an unintentional sip. “Ah...” he gasped.

“Nervous?” asked Arthur.

“Yes, sorry.”

“It’s alright, it was sudden.” He smiled again, and extended a gentle, mental touch. “You should do the rest.”

Elliot sighed. “You’ve had enough?”

“I had the better half of yesterday,” he replied. Typically Elliot had most of the Ronans’ hours to himself, either hoping to write or to simply keep a handle on what he considered *his* life. Arthur enjoyed what he could in between.

A pang of guilt stirred within Elliot. “I suppose so. Let’s say today is ours, though... To share.”

“Sure, if that’s what you’d like.”

What was the weekend market if not buzzing with faces? Fresh goods and handmade soaps gave a homely impression of the busy clusters of stands taking up the square. The cacophony of smells—herbs and flower arrangements, fermented cider, a cigar that hung from a man’s lip—thickened the air. Conversation trickled through the hum of activity that accompanied these sensations. A mother

shouted for her child not to wander. They could hear coins settle on a counter some paces away, and the back and forth haggling between vendor and buyer. A dog bellowed somewhere unseen. The ambience never came to rest, not on the weekend, when all the people who had something to give and something to get collided in a froth of commerce.

Elliot decided to catch up with Joanne if he could find her.

“Where is it this time...” he mumbled, not quite to himself.

“The end of that row was last week’s spot,” Arthur supplied, “check there?”

Joanne did not double up on her stall. This time she was set where a lady with scented candles had been prior, and she waved down Elliot as he approached. Her wares were mostly fabric things; quilted coasters, woven bracelets, and quite alien to the world of textiles, parsley. He’d noticed a long time ago that her window planter brimmed with the stuff.

She was in a bubbly mood. “Hey Peapod, how are you?”

Elliot playfully rolled his eyes at the affectionate nickname. Joanne was one of the few people that knew the Ronans *like that* and she was nothing but kind about it, if only confused. The best they could ask for, really.

He said, "Good, good. Morning chores are all taken care of as usual."

"Did Rika behave?"

"No, she held me by the shirt collar and demanded I feed her wets from now on." A beat passed, then Joanne snickered. He continued, "she was polite as usual, yes."

"Thank you again dear, which one are you...?"

"Elliot," said Elliot.

"Thank you." She put her hands together in an appreciative gesture.

"Busy day I take it?" It was very clearly a busy day, but conversations needed some kind of prompting.

She flicked her chin up affirmatively. "Yep! Actually sold more of last week's leftover bracelets, and Winona came by for more parsley, so we had a chat. Also had Stephen come 'round..."

"*Stephen.*" Elliot spoke the name like it was a lump of wet rot on his tongue. *Stephen* was a crotchety man who disliked all. Picture the sort of person who has been touched by something terrible in his life, and has never since let go. Who's actions are wholly dominated by the waking memory of it. For whom every breath toward him is a hushed slight, and every hello is mockery, and every kindness is danger. The kind of man who sours at the sight of others happiness. There was a day when Arthur lingered to admire the color of his house, and did not know anyone was home. Not until the door flung open with a *bang* and Stephen shouted a volley of curses his way.

He'd been a better man before his brother had gone missing, according to what they were told. Loss could do horrible things to a person.

Joanne's robust smile faltered. "This time wasn't so bad at least, he just sort of...grunted at me when I said hello."

"What, like an animal?"

That's insulting to animals, thought Arthur.

"Like he had somethin' better to do. He just glared at my stall and left. Didn't even look at me."

“Figures. People like him were all over the place, where I’m from.”

“*Sigh*—I’ll keep trying. He’s in there somewhere.”

Elliot wasn't so hopeful. “Good luck with that.”

“Thank you. By the way, I’ve got something for you. Hollon-” she reached into one of her many pockets, (she was the kind of woman who sewed additional pockets onto her clothing), and produced a colorful woven bracelet. Shades of green made up its weave, braided in echoes of emerald and sea, pine, fern. Elliot was hesitant to touch it, like it would unravel into thin air.

“...For me?” he asked.

“Who else?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

She laughed, “for all of you! You’ve kept my kitten company while I’m away for a while now, I’ve been making this in my off time. Kept my hands busy.”

Elliot was, yet again, confronted by the fact that small kindnesses were returned heavily, here. That and the idea she had been thinking of him idly

enough to consider making a *gift* was...well it was extraordinary.

Though he wasn't quite as shocked, Arthur was happy to receive the bracelet. Stirring into consciousness somewhere behind the two boys, Ramona offered a sleepy "*I dig it.*"

"Thank you so much Joanne..." Elliot wasn't sure what else to say, so he untied the bracelet's knot, and fastened it around his right wrist then and there. His arm was thin, but the bracelet held fast, never slipping over his palm. He could even pull it tighter if he wanted to. Perfect.

She admired it too, proud of her work. "Of course, you've been good to me," she said at last. "Now don't let me keep you, go on and enjoy the rest of your weekend!"

With an enthusiastic wave of her hands they were shooed, and landed somewhere in the corner of the market where jars upon jars of preserves had been set. If not for the fact the contents were firmly sealed, they could have savored the smell of peaches, pickling vinegar, raspberries, and countless other gooey edibles. The formidable tower of mason jars and fruit was interrupted only by a tired face

who clearly had other places to be. They were possibly just watching the booth for a relative. Ramona liked their piercings. Preserves were not on the shopping list, so Elliot decided not to bother them.

The layout of the market changed every week on a first-come-first-claim basis. Meandering through the rows and asking other people for directions was the best way to navigate. Sure, it wasn't conveniently static, but he was more than thrilled to let go of the mind numbing monotony of convenience. Of orderly grocery chains and superstores. They hadn't even seen a fluorescent light since they moved to Alderhill. No faint smell of rubber-worn asphalt saturated the stone and dirt roads, no endlessly droning vehicles besides old cars and hauling trucks. Not to forget, of *course*, the one and only self proclaimed taxi in town. Advertisements were relegated to newspapers and the radio.

It took some getting used to. Leaving behind a metropolis for rural living was a shift that demanded effort. A single taxi-car replaced all transit, and there was not a shop nor amenity for every available need.

If one was injured, he either had to hope the doctor was not occupied, rely on his neighbor, or tend to it himself. Packages took a considerable while to arrive and to depart. Electricity was scarce and generator-driven, and the Ronans were fairly certain that there were less than four computers in the village. Of the ones they had seen, there was a computer in the library, which was a building about the size of a classroom, another in the clinic, and their very own laptop.

The first few months had not been easy. Neighbors kind enough to show them the ropes were amused to watch the 'city kid' acclimate.

Despite it all, though, Alderhill was more of a home for them than anywhere had ever been. That was more than worth the work.

Chapter Three

There wasn't much to look for as far as personal groceries went. All they needed was honey, soap, and a few of those sweet buns they craved every now and then. The soap was almost more of a treat than the buns, as the Ronans had discovered the virtues of handmade soap upon their arrival and *swiftly* swore off the commercial stuff. They couldn't refuse creative fragrances, and, well, Ramona found the girl who made the soaps cute. *Really* cute. She hoped to ask how it was done, sometime.

Instead of making a beeline for the relevant stalls, Elliot decided to take his time. Despite spending most days holed up at home, wracking his brain for ideas, he *liked* being out and about. Especially if it meant he could pretend, for a little while, that he had an interesting life. Talk to people. Have them look at him like a living being.

A pair of children looked starry-eyed at a stand full of wooden toys and figurines, a reminder how much of a time capsule this village was. An animal carved from a scrap of lumber was enough to impress. The stand itself was straight out of a

holiday postcard, stacked with whittled creatures upon a red tablecloth. Funny little horses with wheels and manes of yarn gazed back at the world with painted eyes. The children were pointing at others like them with excited chatter, and one of them reached as high as their tip-toes would allow to pet a rough-hewn cow. Elliot remembered the whittled bird perched in his grandmother's sitting room every time he came across this stand.

The next stall was piled high with cookies in baskets and boxes. The smell was as distinctly cinnamon as autumn, despite the summer season. Passing it by without purchasing a single cookie was painful. Elliot reminded himself he was already after a baked good today, the buns. While he stared wistfully, the baker caught him and gave a knowing look. Elliot politely gestured as if to say *sorry, I won't be graced with your cookies today.*

There was also a jeweler, and it was a shame to Arthur that their booth faced away from the sun. Elliot was more interested in the craftsmanship and make of the pieces, rather than the potential glimmer they would have cast, had the sunlight greeted their facets. Some of the pieces were made

of polished stones and quartz, others colored glass. A few were protective amulets related to old village myths, something about warding off fairies and other malicious creatures. He remembered his grandmother considered them *“trivial at best, a fool’s trinket at worst,”* but he considered it a quirk of her storytelling. It was just jewelry with a story, after all. Arthur wanted to linger, but the body kept moving.

Finally they arrived at the stall where honey was sold. It was decorated with paper hexagons that had been nailed up in the morning, and a white tablecloth. Jars, heavy with sweet amber and blackberry red, stood patiently to the left and right. There was an air about the person who sold honey that made Elliot keep an extra pace away. There was a sort of distance to them; their eyes an overcast shade of gray, and they stood as if they weren't all there, hands resting feather-light on the counter. Not wanting to shirk the grocery list, he hesitantly approached the living ghost.

“Hello,” they said rather abruptly, but without a hint of urgency. “I remember you.” Their voice was like spiders’ silk.

This was not what Elliot expected to hear.

“Likewise. You’re, ah, here every week.”

Sometimes he saw them at the library too, nose deep in an almanac or an insect guide, but that was about as social as a heron sighting.

“Is it the pure kind you are after, again?” They asked, gesturing to familiar gold. A tangle of auburn hair dangled over their shoulder with the movement.

“Plain, yes.”

“I will let them know you still like it. They are flattered the taste is good with you.”

Them meaning the bees kept in their apiary. The Ronans may not have known the beekeeper’s name, but they knew that they habitually ‘spoke’ to their bees. Arthur thought that was sweet, odd as it was. Ultimately harmless.

May I drive? Arthur asked silently.

...You may. Came the reply.

Bodily control flowed covertly from one man to the other, and Arthur stretched his fingers in and out within his pocket as he adjusted.

“Please do,” he said aloud, “I always use it for tea. It soothes my throat.”

The person before him grew an understated smile. "Very good, they would want to know. And it is not too potent?"

He shook his head. "No, it's just fine. You can tell them they're doing well."

"I will." They thoughtfully selected a jar and set it down with a muffled *clink*. "Here, for you, I request eight."

Arthur had a feel for the way they spoke. He reached into his wallet, pulled out the appropriate change, and said "request granted, thank you."

Elliot, watching, nakedly thought: *well isn't that formal of you.*

That remark was ignored.

"My thanks," they said.

The jar was nestled snugly into the Ronans shoulder bag, and with a goodbye, they were onto the next set of stands. The bread and bun stall was conveniently near. Having a decent time, but not quite overflowing with energy, the brothers did not want to visit every single stall at the market. A good handful between relevant booths was enough. They picked up a couple parchment-wrapped almond buns with a quick exchange of greetings and money, and

moved on. There were flowers, lemonade, teas, baskets, lucky pendants—so many things to take in on the way. The last item on their list was soap, and they knew that meant Ramona would want control, or at least a front-row seat.

Arthur braced himself for her arrival. “Thank you for letting me front for a while, Ell. It was nice getting fresh air today.”

Elliot, likewise (and begrudgingly) ready, said “you’re welcome, I’m glad you could carry that interaction earlier. That beekeeper weirds me out if I’m honest.”

“I know. I like them though. They appreciate their insects, that’s a good sign to me. I wonder what their apiary looks like.”

“A bunch of hive boxes and flowers, probably.”

“Probably.”

Ramona had already been conscious since the bracelet. Arthur found himself rubbing it against his wrist fondly as he mentally reached out for her. She took his unseen hand gladly.

Sure, Ramona could have tried to socialize *outside* of the few opportunities provided by the weekend market, but a combination of nervousness

tied to the prospect, and Elliot's insistence on doing more worthwhile things, meant she only had small chances to hit it off with the soap selling girl. She was damned if she wouldn't try.

At the helm for once, Ramona took a sharp, savory breath of air. *This is my moment. Come on.* In her mind's eye, she was a robust, handsome girl with a winning personality. The body she was inhabiting was a little over average height, sure, and had a voice she could pass off as husky...but it was more on the scrawny side. *Gentle*, as Elliot's grandmother would put it. Built like a willow tree, not a pine. She swallowed that fact and approached the stand, acting about as casually as she could muster despite her nerves.

It was a cute stand really. Decorated with what looked like handmade posters and colored ribbons wrapped around the wooden beams, the soap displays were perfectly in place. Each bar was a pastel brick laced with herbs and cloudy white edges. Young and with the curated fashion sense to show it, the girl had to be somewhere in her twenties. She was a pretty little thing. All black curls, worn denim overalls, rich copper skin, and a face that said *ask*

me about my extensive knowledge of the soap making process. We can kiss later, if you want.

Ramona started with “hey there,” momentarily forgetting she was mainly here to buy soap. It took restraint not to lean on the counter like a sleaze.

“Hey,” the girl said casually, “can I interest you in-”

Ramona continued her sentence for her, a thing that had played through her head multiple times. “-Artisanal, hand crafted, luxury soaps, made from mostly natural ingredients and body-safe dye?”

Elliot *hated* that move. It was so cheesy.

The girl was taken aback, but amused. Bingo. “Haha! What the hell, do I know you?”

Ramona grinned, putting on the charm. “Would you like to?”

“Pfft. Seriously, have we met? I feel like I’ve seen you before. Also please tell me you actually want soap, I have a lot to get rid of..”

Sweet relief, it was going alright so far. That was her main concern. “Yeah, I came here for your lavender and haskap scent actually.” Elliot and Arthur, spectating all this, were thankful she remembered which one they wanted.

“Great! I have that on hand.”

Ramona continued, “and yeah we’ve sorta met? I come here once in a while to restock our- my soap, not that it makes me any less of a stranger.”

“Ohhh that’s right. I thought I knew your face, ha.”

There was a pause.

Part of Ramona was screaming inside. The line between awkward and fine was smudged and her previously amazing plan began to falter. Still, she couldn’t give up now.

“So, what's your name?” asked the girl, which caught her off guard. This was a difficult question, so usually the Ronans would default to ‘Elliot.’ But hey, if she was gonna shoot her shot with this girl, she’d be telling her about their situation anyway.

“Ramona, yours?”

She received a thorough glance. To be fair, it was an odd name for someone who, outwardly, appeared to be a rather reedy boy. She didn't blame her for taking a closer look, at least there was an expression of curiosity on the girl’s face and not total confusion.

"I'm Relle. You're new here? New-ish?" She made a so-so motion with her left hand, to gauge.

"By about a year and some change, yeah! Been settling in well though. Alderhill's pretty nice."

"Man, I moved here ages ago with my dad. I can say the same."

"No way, I thought everyone else that lived here just grew out of the ground or something, you know?" Someone else from the outside world, what luck.

"I feel you, fresh blood's hard to come by... Everyone's been here like, forever."

Relle was devastatingly relatable. Maybe Ramona really had a chance. "Isolating, right?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. At least I have my dad."

"Glad he's here for you," she said, trying to sympathize.

"Thanks," Relle replied as she reached for a paper-wrapped bar. It was even tied up with some purple twine, color matched to the scent. Fancy stuff. "Here's your soap, did you happen to memorize the price too?"

Shit, I should know this.

“Uh,” she said, floundering, “ twelve..?”

“Ten, it’s ten. Haha.” Relle brushed some stray curls behind her ear and unlatched a small wooden box beside her. Ramona pulled out the wallet and fished out a bill, mind whirring. *How do I wrap this up?* It would be a little weird to just keep visiting the stand in hopes of stoking a friendship, wouldn't it? There had to be another way.

“So, Relle, I was wondering...” Immediately she felt a regretful pang, the likes of *fuck, this is exactly what it sounds like*. The girl was intrigued, and maybe even rightfully wary. Ramona turned the bar in her hands, fidgeting.

“Yeah?”

“...How do you make these? It’s good soap, we- I like how it leaves me smelling after I shower, and, uh, I’ve never actually thought about how soap is actually *made* until I saw yours. Was thinking, *holy moly, you can just make this at home?* And well, *uh*, if you’re okay with showing your process..?” she was fumbling it. *Oh god*. Elliot cringed at the attempt, and Arthur quietly offered to console her after being inevitably shut down...

“Wait, really?” asked Relle. “You actually wanna know?”

Ramona was flung into an explosive excitement. Of course she was trying to hit on this girl, but she could not possibly resist the simple joy of learning something new. “YEAH.”

The boys were pleasantly shocked.

She snickered at the awkward blurting and tucked away the cash. “How about this: you can have my number, we’ll figure out a good time, and I’ll show you how it’s done. You can give me a hand, since I got orders outside of town to get through.”

“Yeah that’s—wait, out of town?”

“Yep. Friends and fam that like what I do, and some online orders. I just pack it up and ship it out. You wouldn’t believe how many people want this stuff once they find out you can have something more exciting than a plain white factory bar. Handcrafted stuff is in right now.”

Ramona smiled sheepishly. “I see why. It makes things feel more...genuine? It’s cool.”

“Yeah, thanks, that’s pretty much why I like making these.” Relle had pulled out an extra soap

wrapper at this point, scribbling on it with a ballpoint pen.

“Well, I’d be happy to help.” She did a little awkward salute that made Relle chuckle and Elliot slap his incorporeal forehead.

“Great, it’s kind of a pain in the ass managing all this on my own, dad’s too busy with his own work y’know?”

“I get you.”

She shrugged. “Everybody’s gotta do something, though. So we don't go crazy.”

“Yeah...” too bad the ability to exercise my hobby is in a chokehold.

A glare from the gloom.

“Well, nice to meet you Ramona. Be seeing you, hopefully.” She slid the number-adorned wrapper over, and Ramona tucked it into her bag. *Score.*

“Oh! Yeah, you too Relle. Glad to finally uh, make your acquaintance?”

“You’re some kind of dork huh?”

What?? she thought. “Haha, you know how it is, I don't get out much...”

This is a goodbye! Just go! Get out of here already!

Relle gave an okay sign and a knowing look.

“You good. It’s refreshing.”

Another beat passed. Ramona was unsure what else to say. Breaking things off was the hardest part.

“Well I gotta get going, see you later?”

“Later.”

The soap was tossed in the shoulder bag as she wheeled around and half-sprinted out of there. She was practically steaming from the interaction. It could have been worse. It could have been *so much* worse. But by some miracle it had gone okay. Pretty alright even. *Phew*. Despite yesterday’s shower, Ramona was convinced she needed another. Only, she wasn't sure if she could handle the feel of the imperfect soap in her hand, lathering it against her palms and ruminating over the conversation again and again and...

“So let’s be clear,” Elliot said, interrupting her racing thoughts, “if you and that girl become friends, I must be introduced.”

"I was planning on it. Just don't commandeer my hangout, buddy." It had been a while since she'd pulled a *Buddy* on Elliot. He had seniority, sure, but she was like big sister to him, and rubbed that in his face when she could. There was a bitterness in the fact that even now, he couldn't spare her the time alone to reflect.

"Tch. I won't. All yours," he said tersely.

"What's got *you* so sour?"

"The fact you left such a ridiculous first impression using *my* face. We'll have to explain everything again, and you know how risky that is. '*Oh by the way, I hear voices in my head!*' Surely *that* will win her over. Ugh. We got lucky with Joanne."

First of all, rude as hell. Second of all... "*Our* face. Why is it all sharesies with Arthur today, and *I'm* on borrowed time?" By the second, the pleasant outing was beginning to tense in an all too familiar way.

He said dryly, "It's embarrassing to watch you, is why."

"That's unfair," Arthur chimed.

Elliot rolled his eyes, which made their actual eyes twitch. "What if it went poorly? Ramona would have been upset, she'd feel awful and stupid...then *you and I* would be judged by association." He shuddered at the thought of being disliked for actions that weren't his own

"And yet you didn't stop her, did you?"

"Hey, I'm still *right here*," said Ramona. Her footsteps fell heavily on the road gravel.

"All I would like is an opportunity to introduce myself, *properly*, if this girl decides to stick around. I'll handle the conversation about our disorder. I don't want-"

"You're so obsessed with how people see you! God, I can at least admit I nearly bombed it, you don't have to spell it out for me by whinging in my ear."

Arthur brought things to a pause by putting his hands between them. "Hey... You're in your right to meet Relle as yourself, Elliot, I'd like that too. Just don't turn this into another fight, please. I think it went well actually." Then he turned to the other. "And Mona, bringing someone new into our life

affects all of us. You know he doesn't like being left out."

He had a point. She sighed, and lowered her voice. "Alright, but I don't either."

Elliot simmered. Arthur was right. The lack of control bothered him. He *did* want to make friends, but the danger of looking like an idiot in the process was always riding on his back.

At times he wondered how someone as impulsive as her had crawled out of his own brain.

Ramona was staring at the ground while she walked away from the market, attention centered on the conversation going on in the headscape. Colors passed by in a slow blur; dandelions flashing yellow with their serrated leaves below, green and brown where dirt met grass and the occasional stone. Voices and bustle faded further behind with each step forward. It was nothing but scrolling scenery. Limply processed, dampened by inward focus.

"So what do you guys think of her anyway? I never really asked."

Elliot got over himself for a moment and cooled. "She seems...nice. I wouldn't actually mind having her around."

“That’s a surprise,” Ramona quipped. Arthur gave her a look she knew meant *Hey*.

He continued as if she hadn't said a word. “Seems there’s some common ground as well. Around our age maybe. She seems to be a fellow refugee of life in the city.”

“Totally, I can smell it,” she agreed.

Arthur was relieved they could put things aside so quickly. It was easy for those two to set each other off. Incredibly so, since childhood. He had learned over the years there were many ways to cut arguments short, but he had yet to find a method to get them to repair broken bridges. At least for now, they’d changed tune. He could relax.

“I think it’s good for us to know someone with similar experiences,” he said, “...and I have to admit I’m deeply curious about the soap thing too.”

Elliot feigned disinterest, but caved.

“.....Likewise.”

They chatted onwards about their thoughts and wonderings surrounding Relle. Where she might have come from, what other hobbies she kept herself busy with, her potential taste in music...there was so much to learn. Even Elliot, fussy as he had been

earlier, discussed how he might make a nice first impression. All things considered, it was a nice direction for the conversation to flow.

Even so, it was a beast of a distraction. With the outside muffled through a layer of distance, Ramona didn't have time to react to the sound of footsteps coming her way before she stumbled into the source with a *Thud!*

She was knocked to the ground from the impact. The figure gasped and outstretched a hand towards her, and all she could manage was to stare at it through dizzy eyes, coming-to from the jumble. The voice that came with it was unfamiliar, and maybe a little too enthused for being caught in a collision.

"Woah! Sorry about that, didn't see you there."

Chapter Four

The man they'd bumped into didn't have a trace of familiarity to him.

He could have been a tourist, but no one really visited Alderhill for a getaway. It was such a small blip on the map that it could hardly grab anyone's attention. That and the only means of access were through winding service roads, by air, or the one rickety passenger train that still ran like a trickle across the countryside, billowing lonely smoke. They could halfways picture this person looking out a window, watching the land go by, but it was as improbable as doing it themselves. Maybe they'd just never crossed paths before.

This stranger was blonde, a brighter shade than his sun-touched skin, with thick wisps of hair framing his face and obscuring his ears. It was especially unruly in the back, where it fell down over his nape. Around his shoulders laid the fur-lined collar of his black jacket. In comparison, his pants didn't have as much personality, draped around his legs like an afterthought. He peered at her curiously from behind his honeyed sunglasses, eyebrows

raised. It was like he'd been rummaging around a thrift shop before they stumbled into one another.

The lenses washed his eyes in a striking sheen that held Ramona's gaze as she searched for something to say.

"Uh...it's no problem. I wasn't watching where I was going," she said, responding to his apology. Elliot decided it was time for him to navigate the situation, and pushed his way to the front. Ramona didn't have the wherewithal to object. She let him through, convincing herself it was a token towards his earlier requests and letting her finally meet Relle.

Elliot centered himself with a breath. Then, he gingerly took the stranger's hand and rose to his feet. "Thank you."

"Of course! You were knocked clean off your feet, you expect me to kick you too?"

"Ah...I still feel like I should apologize, I ran into you."

"Nah, no need. Didn't hurt any, and I'm always happy to meet someone new! What's your name?" It was odd how cheerful this man was, turning a rather awkward encounter on its head.

"Elliot Ronan." It came out tense.

He cocked his head. "Huh, you from around here, Elliot?"

"Only on a...technicality. I was born here, raised somewhere else." The situation was accidental if his memory served correctly. His mother's water broke early while visiting the village, and trips to see his grandmother came later on. He didn't feel like elaborating.

"Interesting." The stranger eyed him like an exotic. "I'm 'Hill, through and through. A tried and true local."

"Really? What's your name?" Elliot asked.

"Cillian," he said. It was with the same cool you'd feel after a light breeze. He extended his hand for a shake, wrist cocked lazily downwards. It was taken in turn with a clumsy, stiff motion, loosening after a couple waggles. Elliot drew a breath. He was glad things weren't going poorly so far.

"Nice to meet you, Cillian." His voice had warmed now, relief smoothing it over.

"Same to you. Care for a drink?"

A rare invitation. It would be a waste to refuse, especially if the Ronans were on a socializing kick.

The fellow seemed nice enough, and looked about a similar age...there was only one problem.

“I don't drink.”

In fact, they couldn't.

There was a period in their life where Ramona took the full brunt of life in Elliot's place. When the going got too tough to push through, she turned to alcohol. He bitterly recalled her binges and dull, sickly days. It was a numbing poison disguised as an escape, used to take the edge off of her hunger and pain, but liquor wasn't medicine. Ramona had to stop for good when it landed all of them in the hospital with hepatitis.

Cillian raised his eyebrows. “Not a drop?”

“*Dry as bone.*” A staccato riposte, as if being asked: do you *like to lick bathroom tiles for fun?* He followed up with “...It's medical.”

Cillian thought for a moment, then hummed a note of eureka. “A walk then? I know a nice path.”

Elliot remembered the groceries laying patiently in his bag. They rested beside the notebooks and pencils, a pocket thesaurus, expired butterscotch candies and too-soft mint gum. It was much like a junk drawer, full of odd ends and little

wasted things. It was an old bag too: a hand-me-down from Elliot's grandmother. Sometimes he wondered how much of his grandmother he was becoming.

The fact remained that they were already on their way home. He considered asking for a rain check. Then again, the Ronans didn't have any other plans for the day... *Surely* he could stomach a brief walk. Internally he checked in with Arthur and Ramona, who both had well enough reason to make another friend today. It was good exercise besides.

"I don't see why not," said Ramona. "I like this guy."

"Could be a nice opportunity," Arthur supplied.

Then, aloud and to the new face, "Sure," said Elliot, "let's go for a walk."

"Great! This way, keep close," Cillian said. He nodded his head in the right direction and merrily shoved his hands into his pants pockets. He turned and led the way confidently as if he were a travel guide. Long, youthful strides made up his gait. Was he just like this, excited to spend his time with complete strangers, or was he caught on a good day, giddy from some incredible news that only he knew?

Whatever the case, he seemed to know exactly where he was headed.

There wasn't much reason to stop himself, so Elliot followed along.

They walked for some time. The route took them near the familiar park, onwards still past a collection of sparse houses, and most notably in the direction of the mountain that loomed over Alderhill like a great guardian. It became clearer to the Ronans that Cillian intended to take them for a woodland jaunt. To suspect anything less than a stroll was a mistake. As the trees pulled closer, and the path grew less paved, Elliot half considered pulling away and letting the man walk himself into the woods alone. They weren't in fit enough shape for a hike. Ramona however, instilled with a sense of spontaneity, stayed strong. She wanted to see where this was going. If there was even a destination to begin with.

Arthur was also enjoying himself. He closed the body's eyes and let the sun glow through, red and overwhelming, alive. When they opened again, it painted all the darkest corners and shadows a tingling green. Nature was so dear to him, and any

excuse to be out surrounded by it was one to take. It was even better to share it—he suspected Cillian to be someone with high spirits and a similar keenness towards the outdoors. They'd only just met, but there was something in the man's manner and word that demanded interest. An inexplicable charm hovered about him.

Elliot didn't think he was one for impulse. A major departure from schedule typically bothered him; an inconvenience at best, a day-ruiner at worst. And yet, he felt himself walking nearly in tune with the stranger, catching up to him whenever he fell behind. It could have been the passive influence of his headfellows' curiosity, but there was something underneath pulling him along. He couldn't put his finger on the feeling. He didn't really want to.

He figured he'd strike up a conversation, they'd been quiet for a while aside from Cillian's whistling.

"What was it like growing up here?" he asked. He wondered how his life would have differed if he had been raised in Alderhill.

Cillian's melody stopped abruptly, and he wheeled around. He did not cease walking, which he

carried on doing well enough backwards. "Nice, mostly. Not a whole lot to do. Can get a little...dull, you know." He had a habit of gesticulating alongside his words, flicking his hands this way and that.

"I understand. It was the same where I grew up as well, at least here you have some greenery."

"No green? What'd you have then?"

"Ah... Tall buildings, concrete... It was awfully noisy. You couldn't walk a quarter of a block without some smell finding you. Couldn't stand it."

Cillian was wearing a peculiar expression. Perhaps he'd never been to the city before. "I see, was it dangerous?"

Dangerous? He thought on it as they stepped further into the trees. Pine boughs dangled as if to stroke their heads and tall, thin, grassy patches tickled at their legs. The canopies' shade washed over them heavily and let its dapple-glow pepper them with sunlit kisses. The difference between memory and present was an eon. It might as well have been another world away. In all the time the Ronans spent surviving their old life, the city had never been more dangerous than their own home. Strangers did not corner them like their father. Car

tires did not screech with nearly the same contempt as their mother. It was all just background noise. "I suppose so," he said.

"Hm. Better off here then." Cillian turned back around, facing forwards again. It occurred to Elliot how strange it was that the man had not stumbled once in all the time he had been advancing in reverse. Maybe he was just very familiar with the path.

"By miles."

"Wonderful," Cillian said, "I take it you like the little village? Got any family there?"

Something about the phrasing was off in some small way, but it didn't matter to him right now. "Yeah, and I used to. My grandmother lived here for her whole life. She adored it."

Memories of her smile flitted through his head. How bittersweet...the old woman who had painted warmth into his childhood in fleeting summers and postcards was forever gone. She was wonderful, but she would never meet all three of the Ronans as they grew to be. Maybe for the best.

He had never actually heard about his grandfather, though. It was one of the topics that

would make her go very quiet and distant, as if trying to recall a dream. Then she would move on from it like the questions had never been asked. Elliot always figured he had gone to war, or didn't bother staying to raise an accidental child. His mother refused to talk about it too. Prying anything out of *her* was impossible.

"She tell you any stories?"

He gazed to the side of the trail, at the swaying fiddleheads and scattered stones, reminiscing.

"She was a natural at them. It's why I've taken on writing."

"A writer..." Cillian chewed on the thought. "Tell me what you do."

Suddenly, Ramona had something to say.

"Adventures!" she proclaimed. That was what she liked the most, and she was going to make it Elliot's problem.

"...*In historical fiction,*" corrected Elliot, trying to wrangle the mouth away from her. He stomped through a tangle of tall plants. The underbrush was far thicker now.

“And fun shit, like monsters and mystery, and horror-” she retorted, before he succeeded and shook her away like a tick.

“...But nevermind that,” he said, exhausted. Masking her interjection was pointless.

Cillian swiveled his head to look at them, as if to be certain his companion was right in the head.

“Interesting taste.” His voice was as agreeable as ever, only betrayed by his puzzlement.

“...Certainly.” Elliot glared inward at Ramona, who stuck her tongue out at him. He nearly tripped over a rock in turn.

“And you, any family?” he asked, after catching himself.

“Ehhh...” the man leaned to the side, reluctant to answer. Eventually he admitted “...in a way, yeah. Not *family* family, but there's the community.”

“Oh ah, my condolences,” said Elliot. There was a creeping, foggy feeling as he walked onwards, but he shrugged it off. He was just a little tired from being out all day, that was all.

Cillian made a noncommittal gesture. “It’s fine. Just how it is.”

The conversation lulled as they neared an old beech tree. Its smooth gray bark and gnarled branches upheld a thick cover of leaves above. It was an ancient looking thing, sturdy and dense, roots in a motionless wriggle through the soil. Whispering clumps of green clung to its limbs like moss to a boulder. A set of chimes was hung from it as well, the faint breeze tinkling through. They approached it in reverence; it was far bigger than all the trees surrounding it. The side of it was well worn. Cillian gave it a lingering look and motioned for the others to follow in kind, but the world had become heavy. Elliot's vision began to swim, head hot and full. He tried to hold himself steady, flail an arm to catch the tree's solidity, but Cillian stopped him before he could prop himself up against the beech.

"Hold my hand here. The roots are tricky." It sounded wrong. Muffled. Like the man was speaking underwater.

"What..."

"Come along." Cillian gripped him by the arm as he swayed on his feet. *"Damn Threshold—sorry."*

"I...what are you talking about..?" It slipped out of his mouth like a tadpole as he was pulled

forwards. It felt like there was a faint, thin membrane in the air. Like walking into a warm room from the cold, a barrier of nothing but air. Yielding, soft, but pungent. As he slipped through, everything began to clear. His head throbbed as lightness returned to his senses, and the strange flash of ill sloughed away. He was disoriented, tingly, and wholly unsure what had happened. He looked to his companion for an answer. Anything.

“Not lookin’ so great there,” Cillian said. “How many fingers?”

It took him a moment to swallow the phlegm in his throat. “Uh...three.”

“Right, you’re well then?”

“Maybe, but what the hell was that?” asked Elliot. *Something is wrong. This is wrong. Where am I?*

He gestured to the beech. “Passage.”

“What?”

Cillian grinned “We’ve made it past the Threshold. I always forget this part...you’ll get over it. Just breathe in an’ out a little. Move with me.”

There had never been a time in Elliot’s life where an explanation so obtuse had been flung his

way. *Threshold? Of what?* He only understood less, and contemplated the likelihood of the man having hit his head on the way over. Or worse, the possibility that Cillian was embroiled in something far out of Elliot's understanding. With clarity seeping in, a spume of doubt and muted panic frothed from his subconscious.

And where were the others? The mental scape was only a smear.

He looked around, realizing he was in the middle of the woods with a man he had only met earlier today. There wasn't a familiar landmark in sight, and why would there be? They'd never gone on a nature walk this far. Now *lost* with a stranger. He suddenly felt betrayed by his own naïveté, having just followed the guy like a lamb. Helpful and friendly as Cillian appeared to be, years' worth of *stranger danger* lectures wriggled back into his head. It was bewildering. Idiotic. The brightness of the sun struggling through the leaves above faltered, despite being at its apex only moments before. Moments, however, were an unreliable measure. *How long was that walk? Why did we come here?*

“I...don't understand what you're talking about,” he panted, trying not to let the dawning realization that something unnatural could have happened get to him. The effort of walking all this way was catching up with him. He felt it in his knees and throat, an ache that pounded in pace with his heart.

“Oh! That's right. You haven't figured it out yet.” It was as if nothing was really amiss, wholly nonchalant. Cillian patted Elliot's shoulder, and lazily flicked his tail.

Tail?

“Figured out...what exactly?” Something was out of place here. Dread and curiosity bubbled in his head. Cillian smiled.

“That I've taken you.”

Chapter Five

Amelia told her grandson many things.

Don't go near the treeline after dark. Don't play in still waters. Don't go chasing a hound with no collar, and, really Elliot, don't talk to the man who speaks in rhymes if you meet him.

Rules slid off him like rainwater. He was a boy driven by reason and purpose. It was always *why*, and *what happens if I do?* The only thing more dangerous than curiosity was mystery, so she settled on telling him stories.

There are things in those woods, she would say. Things that want you, and will stop at nothing to get you. They can play tricks on your senses, make like lanterns in the darkness, invite you to dances and chases that go on and on until your years leave you. They roam among the blackberry bushes and ponds, the foothills and dens, the places where light will never touch and where shadows dare not linger, *watching*. Clever things, these monsters are, cunning creatures that know a hundred ways to take everything from you, and make you *theirs*.

In her tongue, a fairy was an intelligent, deadly being.

Instead, Cillian was a moron.

“Wait! *Wait*, I can explain!” he cried. It was no use, he revealed the game too soon and Elliot was already storming off.

This was the last thing the Ronans needed, so now they were going home. Unfortunately for them, the boundary was not there no matter how many times Elliot waved his arm around to feel for it, and the beech remained unchanged. Just a big tree, unremarkable woodland, and...whatever ‘Cillian’ was.

“Where is the path?” His firm tone was betrayed by the quake in his throat.

“Not that way,” said Cillian, catching up.

Elliot turned, greeted by more trees and greenery. It was as if his memory had simply smoothed over any landmarks along the way, so there was nothing to trace back on. They hadn’t even been walking a trail, had they? No wonder such an ache shot through his heels. “I can’t believe this, *where the hell are we?*”

“The Hill,” said Cillian, approaching. “I took you through with me, ‘cause otherwise you would’ve

got all turned around. You wanted to walk didn't you? I thought I'd make it interesting."

"You stay *away* from me, you—you *thing*," he took a step back, dagger eyed. Cillian's lop ears and long tufted tail unsettled him. He didn't trust a man with animal features as far as he could kick him. "And what do you mean '*the hill*'? We're on flat ground."

Cillian stopped in his tracks. "Woah now, I don't mean you harm, It's just the name of this place. These mountain-side woods."

Elliot grew frustrated. "And what is *this place*?"

Muffled thoughts pressed against his own, like a mirror's touch, and he recognized the echoed question belonged to Arthur. He felt around and caught a blur of colors he found familiar. It grabbed hold in return.

"Hold on, bear with me," said Cillian, "See for yourself, you're not home anymore, but you're not all that far. It's 'fairy' country. *The Hill*."

"Fairies aren't supposed to be real. You—you're just messing with me."

"*Supposed to be*?" Cillian said, with a taste of offense.

“Show me the way back home. Now.” Elliot’s voice was dark, shaking as if beliefs he thought he buried deep were crawling back up and through him. His grandmother had painted countless narratives about these supernatural creatures and what happened to people who were stolen away. The dangers of forests and lakes. They were just stories to him, but he had always carried a seed of that fear in his heart.

“Hell, you’re no fun. I’ll get you home tomorrow morning, yeah? Just stay at my place for the night, it isn’t all that safe out here and you’d keel over sick passing through the Threshold twice in the same day. It’s meant to keep out your kind.” Cillian’s tail lashed in disappointment.

“How do I know that’s not a trick?”

Frustrated, the fairy raised his voice. “Because I don’t wanna watch you *chuck your innards*, you-”

Before he could finish, a crow erupted into flight from a nearby tree, announcing its presence with a shrill caw. The sound was answered by more distant caws, and after following its kin over the treetops, the crow was gone. As loud and close as it

was, it didn't do much more than annoy him, but it startled the pants off of Elliot.

"F-fuck, fine. But you better follow through on this. *Promise me.*" Elliot punctuated that last bit by shakily jabbing his index in his direction. He felt Arthur's muffled presence stroke against his own, attempting to soothe him from the shock. He was slowly becoming clearer to view, and that itself brought Elliot a modicum of relief.

Cillian raised his hands in defense. "Fine! Alright, I... I promise. Let's get going."

It was dark in the woods. Under the thick canopy and waning afternoon, everything was cast in an almost-daylight where shadows twitched with motions that weren't there. Wings fluttered out of view as a woodpecker migrated from its perch and began knocking somewhere far. Rich earth sunk unevenly beneath their shoes. The foliage was thick between the clusters of trees surrounding the travelers, but there was more than enough open space to feel exposed. Every little rustle made Elliot

jump in his skin. Thoughts of specters and beasts stalked his vulnerable mind, and Ramona *really wasn't helping*.

"Maybe grandma was right," she said, pacing in the headspace, "all those stories could be *real...*"

She, like Arthur, had found her way back to presence. They had all been separated by that same mental miasma, which she blamed on the 'Threshold.' Now they were huddled in each other's company.

"Conjecture. We only know of Cillian," Elliot said, clinging to his skeptic's comfort. A twig broke beneath his shoe, making him flinch. "—I-if he really is one of...*those*, I mean."

"Counterpoint, he said it's '*fairy* country.' What makes you think he'd be the only one?"

"Well he could have lied," he said, "either he's the only *thing* out here, or a maniac in costume. One using the local superstitions as an excuse..."

"Okay, so he put on a costume he just happened to have in his back pocket while we weren't looking? Maybe you're the one with some screws loose, Ell. He's a real life fairy."

"Well, at least I—"

“Please,” said Arthur, “we both know you believe him.”

Elliot ruffled. “It’s good to question these things, belief doesn’t stand up to evidence.”

“What more evidence do you need?”

The green gloom whorled in silence. Outside, the trees had become black spires against the dimming light. There was no distinction between their jutting trunks and the dark forest floor. Arthur’s stare was unavoidable.

“Look, if I have to accept we really are in the hands of the supernatural...” Elliot hung his head. He wanted to bury the conviction in his grandmother’s words. The reverence with which she spoke. His confidence was crumbling, and he knew deep down he didn't even believe himself.

Arthur put a hand around his shoulder. “I think we’ll be alright. He doesn’t seem malicious.”

“I think *stealing people* is fairly malicious.”

“He offered a walk and we walked,” Ramona interjected. “Like yeah, it was misleading but-”

“Exactly, a deceptive invitation. That’s what worries me.” He glared at her, for once more

frustrated at himself. "I don't want to *live* one of grandma's stories. You know how they end."

She and Arthur shared a look.

"Listen Ell," she said, "I know for a fact you're more scared of what's in the dark than this dork. That's why we're following him again. So hear me out."

"Ah, fine..." Elliot needed something to focus on instead of the all encompassing unease. His body was beginning to tire out, familiar soreness creeping up his legs, but his mind was restless.

His eyes drifted to Cillain, still leading the way a few paces ahead. He seemed to be in an okay mood at least. Though there was a little less pep in his step than before, as if the confrontation earlier had deflated him. Elliot had no faith in the creature, but with the growing shadows, and all the nasty possibilities they brought, he kept close. It was either the potentially-a-murderer fairy man, or the unknown. He did not choose the unknown.

"Okay so," Ramona started, "these things grandma told you about, fairies, monsters, whatever. If the stories are true, she's met with them before."

“...Yes?”

“And she lived.”

He remembered the scars, though. Pale streaks and faded punctures his mother claimed came from a dog. “At what cost?”

“Who knows,” said Arthur, “but whatever she encountered definitely wasn’t Cillian.”

Elliot quietly watched their strange host again. He walked with an odd certainty despite the shade. When the daylight exhausted its last red breaths, Cillian brushed his hair out of the way and finally slid his sunglasses off of his face, folding them and stowing them away in some pocket. It was a perfectly casual thing to do, and the humanity of it struck Elliot. He briefly considered the man could be putting on an intentional act, aware he was being watched. From behind Elliot couldn't meet his gaze. He wondered if Cillian’s eyes, unfiltered, were as freakish as the rest of him.

Maybe it would be stranger if they weren't.

Elliot felt conflicted and stupid. First, for having to come to terms with the existence of fairies today, and second, for following one so blindly. If his grandmother was right all along, he had failed her.

At the touch of something hard underfoot, the Ronans glanced down. From what little they could see, the trail was adorned with stones at this point, sunken into the winding path to form a walkway. It was framed with horsetails and flowers, some growing in the fissures of soil in between. The *clud-clud* of shoes on stone was a welcome percussion. There was something comforting about a defined path, despite everything; a reassurance that people had touched this place.

Then came the posts, which were tall gnarled sticks driven into the ground—or grown from it, judging by the lack of any cuts or breakages. They had rounded edges peppered with leaves, and shelf-fungi that grew in such a way as to face their smooth underside forwards like signage. And signage they were, as words were carved into each face. Thankfully their eyes had adjusted well enough to read them now. *Mound's End*, *Mound's Head*, and *Bracken* were displayed on one of the posts, etched in a modest hand and painted to stand out. Probably directions, if anything.

“We’re getting close, coming up on Mound,” said Cillian, rapping a sign with his knuckles. Both

his voice and the percussive sound stirred them from their thoughts. If Cillian was feeling talkative, maybe now was the time to ask a few things.

Elliot, less than brave, started “so, ah, Cillian... Let’s say you *are* a fairy.”

“I told you already, and try not to be too loose with that word here. Call us ‘hill-folk’. It’s better for your health,” he said, as if it didn’t really matter to him. “Carry on with your questions, I’ll keep my word.”

Elliot didn't understand why the distinction was important, but he didn't have the fight in him to argue anymore, and he hardly wanted to upset the only fellow who knew what he was doing around here.

“Right...*hill-folk*. Why did you bother taking us? For what purpose?”

At this, Cillian paused. Then he laughed. It was a dry laugh.

“Because I’m bored as *hell*.”

Elliot stopped walking. “*Bored...?*” he mumbled.

Cillian turned to face him. “Don’t you get bored?”

No response. Even the sight of Cillian's bare eyes, with their muddy sclera and golden rings, didn't pierce through the thick disbelief. Of all the motivations Elliot had pictured, simple boredom was not one of them. The idea of being nothing more than a glorified toy made his head spin.

The fairy tilted his head. "What, did you think I was gonna eat you?" This time his laugh had more warmth to it, like he pitied the fear in Elliot. He shook his head. "I wouldn't do that, that's terrible."

Internally, Ramona shook him. "Hey, Earth to Ell. Did you hear him? We're not gonna die."

He remained a limp statue, staring at the ground. All this time wasted. His knees ready to buckle from walking so far. Just for some attempt at entertainment.

"Dude, come on, this is good news. Stop zoning out for a fucking minute."

"Ramona, be gentle with him..." said Arthur.

She continued. "If you don't say something in the next two seconds, I'm driving."

Elliot didn't object. She pushed past him and took on the mantle of controlling the body. They wouldn't get out of this situation by doing nothing, if

getting out was even necessary. It wasn't very urgent, in her opinion, if all their 'captor' wanted to do was *chat*.

"—sorry, I just needed a moment to take that in," she said aloud. It occurred to her then to check their pocket, and patting it revealed they hadn't brought their mobile phone. *Well, it's not like there's a signal out here anyway*, she thought.

"You looked pale as a fishes' belly for a second," Cillian noted. "Did I really scare you that bad?"

She shrugged. "I was told fairies do worse than eat people, so..."

"No, no, not me anyway. I won't hurt you. I just...wanted somebody to talk to, you know? The lack of anything to do on my own is killin' me. Company helps." He said it apologetically, as if he wasn't *really* a kidnapper.

Ramona had to admit she was probably the world's biggest nutcase for wanting to take another chance on him.

"I get it," she said, for lack of any real response. Despite his methods he seemed earnest. One night was hardly an expense, she could stand to

keep him company for a bit. Maybe he'd be fine if he got all this out of his system.

She blinked as something caught her eye from the shadows. There were lights through the trees ahead, small and twinkling and warm. They were spread out quite far from one another, and at first it was hard to make out their origin. Then it dawned on Ramona that each glow came from a series of dwellings, each decorated with different kinds of growths and decor. Many had simple doors fitted into their frames, structured and wooden, definitely pilfered from elsewhere, or woven out of boughs and grass. For one tree, bulbous at its trunk, beads were inserted in patterns along the bark's grain. Other homes had coats of paint, flowers, and one even boasted a smattering of pinecones. Some of these dwellings were set into the curve of small mossy hills; dens dug out of the landscape itself. The stone path split this way and that, wandering off into the darkness to more homes.

"Ahhh here we are," Cillian sighed. "This is where I live, you should be fine here."

Both Ramona and Arthur were charmed by the various hill-folk homes. It was a far cry from the

architecture they were used to, but it was cozy all the same. It was as if all the natural structures here had simply agreed to become pieces of shelter. Cillian noticed the impressed look on their face, and smiled. "You like it?"

"Yeah," Ramona whispered. "Cool."

"Mine's over this way," he waved her further on, and led them to a tree as thick as a shack. Strangely enough, it had a garden gnome standing watch. Cutlery in various degrees of wear were plastered onto the tree itself like war medals, and a length of rope was slung around its circumference. Hanging from the cord was a plastic milk jug containing a handful of coins, and a headless stuffed animal, among other pieces of junk. He greeted the lawn ornament with "Hello Doug."

"Wait, is he...real?" Ramona began to ask, eyeing the thing. She didn't trust its glassy thousand-yard stare.

Cillian snorted. "Of course not, he's stone." He tapped it gently with his boot, like he didn't feel mean enough to kick it. "I stole him."

"From who?"

"I dunno, a neighbor of yours probably. Everyone is a neighbor of someone there."

"Oh. What's with the name?"

"One could think I stole *that* too," he said, ominously. Ramona's face skewed in a somewhat scrutinous direction, which pleased him. After a disarming chuckle he clapped her back and said "Relax, you won't have that kinda stuff here. I got it from a newspaper. What would I do with somebody's Name anyway?"

"You had me for a second there."

"Good!" He swung the door open and slipped inside. For furnishings, he had a thick table peppered with nicks and scratches, and two chairs made from relocated stumps. There were various knickknacks scattered on the tabletop, and a retro drinking glass that looked like it belonged in a garage sale. There was an assortment of bulky things tucked under the table too. The light in the room came from a handheld lantern filled with some kind of fungus emitting an amber glow.

Arthur wanted to give it a closer inspection, but their eyes kept moving.

Impressed into the walls were cabinets, a shelf that could pass for a countertop, and there was a single leather suitcase sitting in an unoccupied corner of the dirt floor. As for places to sleep, Cillian gestured towards a pile of fabric and pillows that could *almost* be considered a couch, and a loft up above that contained a crude bed.

“Make yourself comfortable.”

Ramona flopped down on the almost-couch and blew air from her cheeks. It was nice to get off her feet after the long trek. It felt like the body’s legs would snap off, nevermind their sore throat. “Thanks.”

“I have to ask,” he said, situating himself on the chair and propping up his chin on one hand, “there’s something different with your attitude now, what’s changed?” His tail flicked back and forth with interest.

“Mmm...” she mused, “do you want the truth, or the short answer?” *Fuck it, why not make this interesting? Elliot sure wouldn't.*

He shrugged. “I’ve got way too much time on my hands.”

Chapter Six

Cillian leaned back, arms folded over his chest. He was between a semblance of understanding and complete confusion. They had been talking for the past twenty minutes, getting nowhere. “Explain it to me again,” he asked.

“I’m trying,” said Ramona, “but I’ve already explained it twice, dude.”

“Just one more time, I think I’m getting it,” he said, not all that close to getting it.

It was never an easy thing for the Ronans to come out about their multiplicity to the rare few individuals they trusted. It was an especially difficult task when the recipient of the news didn’t know a thing about psychology, or the workings of the human brain. Ramona begrudgingly considered paging Elliot, who was leagues more eloquent with the subject, but he was indisposed. Arthur was also unavailable—he had gone to get some rest instead of watching her fail to explain.

“Okay so, forget the peas example. Not my best work.”

“Forgotten.”

She put her hands out in front of her like she was holding a box. "Great. Pretend you're in a car. You know what a car is?"

"Course I know what a car is!" he said, with the tone of someone who had seen one or two of the beasts and considered himself an expert.

"Great. So you've got the driver's seat, with the wheel, the passenger seat, the other extra seats, and the big ol' window at the front, right? Currently you're at the wheel, looking out the window. Pretend the window is your eyes."

Cillian's face screwed a little. He really seemed to be thinking, and she wondered if he had ever been *inside* of a car before. "I'm picturing it," he said at last, hands pushed out as if to clutch the wheel. The poor imaginary wheel was being held incredibly wrong, but that wasn't important.

"Now," she continued, "imagine there's a passenger beside you. And there's a few people behind you both."

"Oh..." His tone downturned, like he'd been caught by the rightful owners of the car and was prepared for the worst. Ramona was getting an interesting impression of Cillian's life.

"It's fine, they're just here to wait their turn to drive. You can switch seats and let someone else do it sometimes."

"Why?"

"Sometimes you don't wanna drive."

"So what does this gotta do with *you*?" he asked, arms still held in 'driving' position. He looked a bit silly like that, but he was earnest.

"My body's like that car." She patted her chest for emphasis.

That was lost on him. "What?"

"Uh. Okay. Nevermind the car thing, I'll be direct," she said impatiently. "There are other people in this body who can drive it around. I'm one of three."

"I don't believe it," he said, "you don't look like a car."

Ramona groaned. "It's a metaphor..."

The pieces slowly clicked together in Cillian's head. "So, I was being scowled at earlier by...*not* you? Some other passenger?" His tail lashed in thought.

"Yeah, yes," she confirmed, exasperated.

“And he—he’s a *he* right?—Is somewhere in there?”

She tapped her head. “That’s right. To both questions. He’s in here, his name is Elliot.”

“But I thought *you* were Elliot, ain’t you?” he asked. It was a fair question, considering he’d only received one introduction.

“No, I’m Ramona. Friends call me Ray.” No one called her Ray, she’d made it up on the spot. Then again, she didn’t have any friends.

Except for Relle, with any luck.

“And the other one, the third?” asked Cillian.

“Arthur. He takes care of us.”

Something clicked. Cillian leaned forwards and poked Ramona in the chest. “Ohh you got three souls! That’s it,” he said. He was taken with the idea.

Elliot would have corrected Cillian thoroughly, but Elliot wasn’t the one talking. Ramona thought it made them sound cool. Awesome actually. “Bingo! You got it. Good job. Three souls crammed in one body. We’re pretty much siblings.”

“Interesting...” he cupped the sides of his face and stared into the middle distance. At this, she

realized he had pale, splotchy markings on his cheeks. They were present on the backs of his hands, ears, and tail too, as if the sun's dappling had stuck to his skin. His eyes rose to consider Ramona. "I never met anyone like you before."

"And we've never met a man with animal ears," she replied.

He pinched his dangling ears like he had forgotten about them. "Something for us both to get used to. Though, I did promise I'd get you home..." He hung his head, unhappy. "Just when I make a promise like that, you turn out to be fun after all."

Ramona felt a kick of disappointment. She'd begun to realize that as sudden as it was to be stolen, she *really* wanted to learn more about the fairy, to see what else was out there. This was only the appetizer.

"So, what does the rest of the Hill look like?" she asked, wanting to go home with at least *some* knowledge tucked away for her own sake. If anything, she could tell a cool story some day.

"Nothing special, I haven't even seen it *all* anyway. Mostly woodland—a ridiculous amount of trees if you ask me. And there's Mound, which is this

place, the Court's here, then there's Bracken further out..."

As the two carried on back and forth for a while, exchanging questions and revelations, Elliot remembered himself. He had gone unconscious at some point after Ramona had pushed him to the wayside. He was groggy, and vaguely upset, so he sat himself in place to jog his memory. He thought about the lights, the tree-houses, the gnome (which he did not like very much), and the current conversation. At some point it reached him that Ramona had gone and told Cillian about their condition, and he felt like he had put his hand on a hot stove. It wasn't even a particularly big deal, but there was a time in his life where it was dangerous to give other people the impression he worked *differently*. The reflexive anxiety was enough to tug him towards the front.

"...fun guess, but no, I didn't absorb them."

Ramona and Cillian had apparently been discussing the origins of their unique arrangement.

Well that's certainly a statement to come back to, he thought. At the very least, he was relieved to know that Cillian was only interested in having a

guest, instead of the many other frightening assumptions he could have come up with.

Speaking of eating, there was a seed of hunger fostering in the body's core, and Ramona hadn't noticed.

"Hey," Elliot whispered internally, "if you're going to ramble idly with him, at least remember to eat."

She was startled by his sudden appearance and took a second to process. "Oh. Right. Thanks Ell."

Quickly she pulled one of the almond buns out of the bag, which had been set aside on the 'couch' beside her, and unwrapped it. It was smushed flat, but fine to eat.

Cillian stared intently. She waved it slightly, and surely enough his gaze followed. After another moment he caught himself and blinked. "Heh... been a while."

"Since?" She took a bite of the bun. It was soft, sweet, and the almonds had a satisfying crunch. Seeing his desire for it, she tore off a piece for him. He took it gladly.

“This one time I met somebody in your village with a bread stand and they gave me a little. Said I could have more for some coins; been collecting the things for a while now, but I can’t tell which is which. I keep losing count.”

“Do you fairy people not have bread?” she asked. *And why not just steal it, if stealing people is on the table?*

Elliot hadn’t considered something like Cillian could visit the market too. The longer he proved not to be a threat, the easier it was for curiosity to overtake his worry.

Cillian shrugged. “We do, but it’s not the same. And for the good stuff I got nothin’ worth trading for.”

“Boy do I get that.”

“Trading is hard out here without anything good to swap off. I heard it was a lot easier before the war, when you could either go rummaging for outside things, or deal goods with humanfolk directly, but that’s before my time.”

This piqued Elliot’s interest. “A war, you say?” he asked, taking hold of the mouth momentarily.

“Oh yeah, lasted less than a month but it changed everything. Blue-coated men and their guns, dogs, fire, slaughter... They used iron on folks, the burns were awful.”

“That's terrible,” said Ramona.

“Aye but they got what was coming to them in the end.”

As much as Elliot was still on guard with Cillian, his particular interest in history took priority. He was about to take the helm, but he saw the way Ramona looked at him and hesitated. “*Do you mind* if I switch in and ask some questions?” he said, within the head.

“You know, I do actually. I mind. But go ahead.” She folded her arms, a blurry image of distrust.

“Alright then,” he said, and assumed the body for himself. He found the seating arrangement awkward, something like sitting on a beanbag chair made of loose laundry.

In Cillian's view, Ramona closed her eyes, adjusted her posture, then peered at him with a look that could cut stone.

“Hello,” Elliot opened with, “you’ve caught my attention.”

Cillian blinked. “Oh, Elliot, yeah? How sudden.” His surprise soured upon recalling what had happened earlier, but he quickly remembered his sense of hospitality.

“Correct. I’m keen to know about the history of this place, could you tell me?”

Cillian took a moment to debate it, Elliot’s previous hatred fresh in his mind, but decided it wouldn’t hurt. “...Aye. I was told we had unsavory humans stumbling into our grounds with intentions of killing us hill-folk off, and they started messing around as they saw fit. They were violent, scared witless at any unfamiliar thing. Especially when they ran into the Nameless.”

“The Nameless?” asked Elliot. He had never heard of such a thing. It was positively ominous.

“Oh yeah the uh,” Cillian snapped his fingers to ascertain how he’d describe the concept. “You’d call them monsters, yeah? They don’t have a *Name*, a self, in the same way we see it. They got an empty self instead, and they wanna fill it. It’s what we call dangerous beasts. Folks and things that don’t care

what they're preying on, 'long as their bellies are full at the end of it. I never seen one but Cairn—I mean, our king has. He keeps them away."

Elliot felt a kernel of dread drop like a stone into his insides. He wondered just how terrible the creatures must've been to have their own title.

"I see. So they took out that fear on your...people?" He hesitated to say that last word, like it was some kind of admittance.

"Exactly. That village of yours used to be a lot more in the know. Folks would ask us for help, give us things. 'Til the Nameless took too much from them anyway, and they sent the men with the blue coats and weapons."

"Sounds...brutal," said Elliot. He thought of the few firearms he'd seen around the village that he'd assumed were for killing foxes or hunting game.

"It was. I still hear stories. But they don't tell the stories the same over there, do they?"

Elliot shook his head. "My grandmother had other things to say about fairies. Warnings mostly. What to look out for...what to avoid... all the nasty ways someone could go missing and never be seen again..."

“Well that explains a lot! All pleasant when I’m humanlike, all bitter when I’m not. If I’m a monster, why the trust now?”

Elliot’s breath hitched in his throat as he searched for a justification. “You *did* take us.”

“That I did, without a scratch on you, too. But you could’ve said no to that walk.”

“I don’t think we reasonably could have expected *this*,” he said, tone sharpening.

Cillian stood from his seat and walked over to a cupboard, talking over his shoulder. “Definitely not, but that’s the fun of it. Meeting new folks can be a surprise, yeah? In the end I can’t say I’m innocent by your standards, and you can’t say you’re innocent by mine.”

“But-”

He pulled out a jar filled with small bundles of cloth. “You were very rude to me, mister Ronan. Tea?”

Elliot shifted in his seat. “Ah—I suppose so, thank you.”

“Good, this stuff’s been layin’ around too long,” he said, and pulled out an empty kettle from under the table, as well as another jar filled with

little shiny stones. They were black as tar. "I'll take you home as soon as I'm able. Just don't do anything stupid if you see me again, alright?"

"Yes, ah, got it." Elliot was rapidly reassessing how to feel about Cillian. He seemed bizarrely human in demeanor, or at least could act like it. Despite the whole kidnapping, if it even *was* one by definition, the fairy was offering shelter and information.

Ramona watched Elliot scramble to form a secure opinion with gratified patience. She hadn't seen him this confused and intimidated in a while.

"I don't got much in the way of milk and sugar," Cillian said as he rifled for a couple of mugs.

"Oh- I have honey," Elliot said, and pulled it out of his bag. He stood and placed the honey down beside the kettle with a *clink*. After a pause, he said "as a gesture of...apology, this is yours. Take it."

"*Honey!* You're not off the hook, but that's quite the peace offering. Convenient, thanks." Cillian unscrewed the jar full of dark pebbles and dropped a stone into the empty kettle. It made a pleasant *plink*, and suddenly the kettle began to emanate muffled burbles. He watched the steam billow out in

front of Elliot's dumbstruck face with some satisfaction. Then, after the mugs were arranged accordingly, he plopped a bag of tea in each, and doused them with water that had grown boiling hot in the span of only a few seconds. "Let it cool first, you might scald your tongue right out of your throat otherwise."

"H-how did you do that?"

"Do what?"

Elliot stared at the kettle, then at the stones. "You just made water out of nothing. *Hot* water out of nothing."

Cillian grinned, forgetting his small grudge. He knocked the kettle's side with his knuckle. "Found this thing in an old cabin, fixed her up, gave her a Name, and now she likes me."

"I don't follow."

"*Lake* here fills with water when I want her to." He rattled the jar of pitch black pebbles, and screwed the lid back on. "And these are salamander stones. They light on fire when they get wet. *Never* put one of these in your mouth, or you'll be burning from your insides out in only a breath."

Ramona turned to Elliot with an expression that said *that rules*.

Elliot himself was deeply mystified. Some flicker of interest stirred in Arthur's unconsciousness, but he did not wake from his rest. It was filed away for later in the dank little crevices where pending knowledge was kept. All Elliot could think to say was "That's ah, fascinating. Does 'she' speak to you?"

Cillian patted the kettle's top. "Not really. She's a halfways thing. Like if a cat was meant for making tea instead of rubbing on your ankles."

All he could imagine was metallic purring. It was charming in a way, yet he still didn't understand whether the kettle was truly alive or enchanted somehow. He decided to ask other things while he watched his tea swirl. With mild annoyance he found he did not have an implement for stirring the honey in and woefully considered using a pen. Thankfully Cillian's home was equipped with basic utensils that *weren't* busy decorating its outside. There was soft clinking as the men shared a wooden spoon between their drinks. A memory surfaced as the herbal smell rose.

"You know, in some stories you're not supposed to eat 'fairy food' because you'll become trapped forever. Is that true?" Elliot tapped his fingers on the table as he sat down.

Cillian's ears perked slightly, like he hadn't heard that one in a while. "Nah, that's silly. If you eat our food it means a little bit of the Hill is trapped with *you*."

"So...what does that imply?"

He smiled and took a sip. "Our home makes a home out of you. You might feel a little funny but it's nothin' too bad I think. It's not like you take one bite and your Name's sold."

"Is this safe to drink??"

"Plenty safe. I wouldn't poison you, I'm not *that* wrong in the head."

Ramona, internally, said "you should *absolutely* drink it. If we're leaving so soon I'd like a real experience." For one, she wanted to get a rise out of him. For two, she really did want some freaky fairy shit to happen to her, who wouldn't?

(*Plenty* of people, Elliot included, but that's besides the point.)

He chose to ignore that. The mug sat steaming with an incredible aroma. It was a challenge to resist, not for any nefariousness, but because he was quite thirsty, and had always been an avid tea drinker. Elliot peered at the dark liquid for some time, letting the bubbles drift and bob around. Obviously he didn't want to experience any ill effects, but it had been a while since he'd had anything to drink, and Cillian *was* being a good host despite the fuss... He blew on it to test if it was really there, really a liquid, more than he did to cool it down. *I suppose I should.*

After a couple minutes of cooling, and more idle talk, Elliot raised his cup and took a careful sip. Sweet, a little tangy, a relaxed blend he almost found familiar. The taste lingered when he pulled away.

"Is this chamomile?" he asked. The taste was surprisingly average.

"I think that's what the flower's called, yeah. It grows around here."

"So, wait, is this even--"

“There’s another ingredient too,” said Cillian, answering him before he could ask. “Dunno what you call it but it’s lullroot. Helps me sleep.”

“Oh, are you insomniac?”

“I get restless,” he said, also taking a sip. “So yeah, ‘fairy food.’ You’ve been warned. Enjoy.”

Within the mind, Ramona uttered “*Nice.*” Elliot put a hand to his forehead and kept sipping. His mind was a jumble of conflicting emotions. At least the warm drink helped smooth out his nerves, if anything.

The rest of the evening was spent on small chat and more history questions. Elliot learned that lullroot used to be traded around as a medicine, alongside other prolific herbs and substances from the Hill’s grounds. Trade that stopped with the war and all the devastation it brought. Cillian didn't want to talk too much about the conflict itself, focusing on what little he remembered about folk medicine and local flora. Elliot put his initial worries aside to talk over tea. Eventually, once Cillian had heard enough about human pharmaceuticals, and the two of them grew very sleepy, they stopped to rest.

After emptying *Lake*, Cillian went and threw down a blanket and pillow from his loft, snickering as his guest fumbled to catch them. He kept an additional pillow and thicker blanket for himself. Then he clambered down to throw a cloth upon the fungus-lantern, and the flameless light was smothered with no complaint. In the darkness, he climbed back into his comfortable hole and promptly wrapped himself up like a caterpillar in a cocoon. "G'night. Was good talking, Ronans."

Elliot wrestled with the blanket to get it the right way around and cover himself properly. He had undressed slightly, still sporting slacks and his collared shirt. The shoulderbag had been moved to the floor, so he could sprawl on the pile of fabric restfully. He looked up into the darkness, seeing the faint outline of a drowsy Cillian. "...You too, good night. Thank you for the tea and lodging, despite things."

"Aye," the fairy replied dully, and drifted off.

The blanket was finally settled, and Elliot wiggled into a more comfortable position. He turned on his side, cheek buried in the rustic fabric of the pillow and closed his eyes. He let all senses withdraw

into the headspace, checking to see if his headfellows were there before he slipped into rest. They were both asleep in the mentally constructed bed they all shared, as he would soon be. Ramona's dozing face was a sight he couldn't bear to look at, so he nestled in beside the peacefully unconscious Arthur instead.

Good night, he thought, a silent sendoff. Then everything melted into a dark, dreamy nothing.

Chapter Seven

They jolted awake at the sound of a brief, crisp knock on Cillian's door. From what could be seen outside of the loosely curtained windows, the morning sky had already risen. Whoever was at the door was insistent, as the sound came again shortly and with a heavier hand. Cillian was already scrambling down the ladder to the door, tripping over his tail in the process. Clearly he was not used to knocking visitors.

"Comin', *comin'!*" he said, swinging it open. On the other side was a small figure donned in a soft orange cap, which one could mistake for a large mushroom at a glance. There was a rolled parchment held under their arm, and a feather tucked behind a long, hare-like ear. Their face and body had the look of a squirrels', save for their cream colored fur and bright ochre eyes. They had raised their other hand to knock once more, but flinched away when the door swung inwards. Cillian flinched too, but for a different reason.

"Hello!" the creature said, quickly adjusting themselves. Their voice had a more mature lean than

the Ronans expected. It was tinged with the same accent that tumbled out of Cillians mouth.

“Hm, what’s the occasion?” He eyed the thing up and down. They were a messenger and secretary by role, and one he recognized at that. They were twitchy, almost impatient, and shifted their feet every so often as if stillness was a foreign concept. The Ronans had risen to peer over his shoulder and get an eyeful of the visitor. Cillian had a feeling he knew what was coming.

The messenger unrolled their parchment. They cleared their throat, more for the sake of announcement than clog, and read aloud: “The King requests the attendance of Cillian of Mound, and the Name in his charge, at the Court. As soon as possible.”

“Damn it, not *again*,” he said, groaning. He’s really got it out for me.”

The messenger tucked away their notice. “Y’know the rules, Cillian.”

“Was it the beech? I didn’t even touch it. Come on. It’s unfair for a tree to spill without even being touched.”

“I can’t confirm. All the same, he has his ways of knowing, or he wouldn’t be in charge. Surely you’re not forgetting? It’s all for safety.”

Cillian rolled his eyes hard enough to see stars. “I’m not forgetting. I’d just appreciate knowin’ exactly what I did to get his attention this time.”

“You left without giving notice again, which you *know* doesn’t leave you unnoticed. Then, according to the report, you were quite loud after you passed the-” The messenger caught the eyes of the peeking Ronans, and squeaked. “Oh! Oh dear...”

“Heyyy,” said Ramona, who in the jumble of dreaming had landed herself awake. Arthur was with her, quietly looking with interest at the messenger creature. They were both groggy. Arthur in particular had the sinking feeling they wouldn’t be making it home that day, and tried not to focus on the excitement lapping at him beneath the waves of it.

“Don’t mind them, they’re harmless,” Cillian assured.

The messenger looked uncomfortable, and shifted their gaze. Something inside them had startled, and their tail made frenetic swings this way and that. “I-I’ll leave you to prepare,” they said,

looking like a ghost had tickled their spine, “Come to the Court as soon as-”

“Possible, got it,” the fairyman said, and abruptly shut the door. The Ronans had been hanging off his shoulder to stare at the messenger and the slam had them stumble back. Cillian was in a nervous mood. His tail lashed the way an angered cat’s does, the puff of fur at the end of it sweeping the floor with each flick. If one looked closely, they would have seen the hackles that prickled up from the nape of his neck. He stood there, grip tight on the handle, facing nothing but wood.

“What was that all about?” Ramona asked. It was clear he was in some kind of trouble. Arthur wondered if their abduction was an illicit affair from the sound of the conversation.

Cillian sighed, and let his hand slip off of the door. “I messed up.” His voice hitched at the end. He knew when he was caught.

“I’m gonna need more to work with here, bud,” she said, hand on her hip.

He turned slightly, mouth sealed tight as if he’d stubbed his toe, then said “I thought I could sneak around him this time... I was wrong.”

"This time?" asked Arthur.

Cillian was losing hold of his composure. He tapped his foot restlessly. "I figured I could bring someone along without him sending anybody my way. Just for a visit, y'know? Good fun. Fuck...I'm gonna have to talk with him." For only a second, they could have sworn the glint of his teeth had a sharper lean.

"Who's 'him?'" Ramona asked.

"...The King."

She folded her arms. "So, we can't go home because you've landed all of us in court?"

"We didn't sign up for that," said Arthur, bewildered.

"*Me neither!*" His hair was clenched between his fingers, bunched in strands. "He'll be pissed. Hell. What'll he say now..."

"Yeesh. We should get moving if it's serious," she said. From how he was acting, she got the impression they were gonna skin him alive.

"I *really* don't want to," he said. Despite that, he was already kicking on his boots and unpocketing his shades. He waited for Ramona and Arthur to

shoulder on their cardigan, shoes, and grab their bag so they could all get moving. Then they were off.

It wasn't a difficult trek to the Court, especially not in the daylight. It was as simple as following the same meandering path as before and all the signposts along the way, now with surer steps. Arthur indulged in the scenery around him. A cascade of both recognizable and foreign trills heralded the dawn chorus, filtered by wind-rustled leaves and faraway burbling water. If not for the foreboding meeting ahead of them, lingering pains, and a few mosquitoes, the walk could have been serene. He tried to pretend it was.

That was what Arthur knew was supposed to be good at, anyway. Stick to optimism when the others wouldn't. Find the silver lining, and if it wasn't there, make it. He kept his head in the clouds, focused on the world outside his thoughts. He was to remain calm. If someone had to stress over particulars, it was Elliot.

...Who was unconscious.

Though, there was no reason to wake him, was there? He was getting more of that precious rest he so badly needed these days. If it meant shouldering a little dread for the man, Arthur could try to weather the proceedings. Still, he found himself wary without the assurance of home. Pitifully few distractions kept him from the creeping unease. None of the Ronans had ever been so deep within a forest unless it was through a screen. Hours of past documentaries patched gaps here and there, and the occasional foray a few yards into the bush sowed a sense of familiarity, but now they were in the thick of it. He had trouble telling natural from not, mundane sway from unknown presence. The sun shifted between the leaves. Sometimes a patch of shadow would flit past. He told himself they were only birds and squirrels, it was almost certain, but he had trouble tearing his gaze away.

The walk bored Ramona. Arthur was awfully quiet, and Cillian wouldn't stop muttering sharp nothings under his breath, which left her with no one to bother. Every glimpse of something out of place would hold her attention completely until it faded back into the sea of shuffling green. Most

interruptions were unremarkable. The idea of something truly watching them entered her head when she caught a pair of eyes in the shade of the canopy, and the feathers that trailed behind their disappearance. Arthur flinched, but the two of them lingered on the space where the creature once was, Ramona's excitement rising.

Of course she knew the woods were dangerous. If not for the fairies and whatever the 'Nameless' were, there was the issue of bears, wolves, and the ticking time bomb that was Elliot without his illusions of productivity.

Ramona had always been the protector, in a way. It was she who dealt with their parents getting physical, who stood between the roughness of the world and her cerebral brothers. She took on the task of living when Elliot collapsed trying. Threat was her routine.

After so long living away from it until now, she found she craved it.

Finally they came up on the incline of a hill, one large enough to make the name *Mound* make some sense. It wasn't particularly towering or steep, but it was the first real change in terrain since they'd

crossed over into this place. That alone carried weight. Stone markers and poles dotted the way, affixed with the same kind of sundries plastered all over homes like Cillian's. While Arthur wanted to take a closer look, they had obligations to get to. He would save it for the way back.

Cillian marched like a dead man walking. There wasn't a thing in the world that could cool his dread. One foot after the other up the curve of the land, one step closer to another mess he'd caused, another lecture, another loss. One step closer to *him*.

The Court itself was formed of a clearing, crowned with trees, hemmed in by logs, stones and bushes. The canopy above was parted, letting more light shine down on the circle of grass. Serving the role of a podium was a slab of mossed-over stone. The little pale messenger from before was now sitting at a similar stone, as if it were a table, a crude notebook laid out between their claws. They were in a mode of preparation, making marks here and there with a blue feather quill. Other unknown spectators peered from the green, half hidden by the foliage. Their eyes shone like hunger itself. They

shuffled amongst each other, voices hushed lest they disrupt the proceedings. Above it all was the King.

The King sat upon a throne of sturdy wood, grown of a thick tree that had been bowed to its side. Nothing of its structure was bullied into place by saw and nail, yet between its boughs and grooves, it was engraved with interlocking patterns and intricate vignettes. Great detail had gone into the dancing figures upon its surface. There were three perches surrounding the King, two of which were occupied. The creatures on them appeared to be like peacocks in appearance, dressed in brilliant blue contours that flushed cream from their bellies to their throats; though they had the faces of hounds, framed with the scarlet of a cockerel's crest and their furred, drooping ears. Their long tail feathers were ruffled in anticipation.

The empty perch was soon filled when another of these cohorts wriggled out of the surrounding curtain of leaves and tossed a rather careless apology to her fellows. She straightened up, and when she cast down her stare upon the fresh arrivals, Ramona swore this was the same beast that

had been following them before. Cillian grumbled at the sight.

The King himself lounged in nonchalance; one leg held cocked up over the other, his head resting upon his knuckles, and the other lain listless over a curve of wood. This was the air of a man who had all the time in the world.

Ramona and Arthur studied his eyes. Each was the gold of sap in the light, smothered beneath the unamused weight of his eyelids. His features fell somewhere between stag and bull, but the horns framing his stoic face were grown in the curve of a ram's; composed of bark and mottled with fungus. He was wide set, thick with softened muscle.

Smoothed back from his forehead, his hair had the appearance of dark, cascading roots that fell neatly over his shoulders and back. His legs, oddly, were much the same: bunched together roots that originated somewhere beneath the hem of his pants and flowed downwards into a neat cluster of what, generously, could have been toes. He wore a fair blouse, something that would more readily belong in an antique closet than the woods. *Just where do these creatures get their clothes...?* Thought Arthur.

“I see you’ve brought your quarry, Cillian.” he spoke with a rich timbre, deep and direct. He had the same accent Cillian bore, but far more understated, as if he had no reason to rush the words. “Take your stand and have him introduced.”

A twitch crossed Cillian. He glanced at his companions, and took his stand behind the makeshift podium. He rested his hands on its moss, and fiddled with it before finally saying “well, these are the Ronans.”

“I see no others,” said the King, leaning slightly as if he could catch sight of a straggler left unaccounted for.

“That’s the thing, they’re all tied together. One body, three Names.”

The King raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “And this is the truth?”

Cillian set his jaw.

“Aye.” He gestured at the Ronans, standing there beside him rather awkwardly.

Ramona sheepishly offered a wave. Arthur was beginning to regret his choice to remain present.

“Explain to me how this son of man is threefold in Names.”

Cillian tossed his thumb behind his shoulder. "They were a whole and now they've been separated. That's what they told me. Three souls."

"Is that so?" The King turned sharply to the human trio. The gossamer insects that flitted around his shoulders gleamed with his growing interest.

Elliot found himself stirred awake. He was pulled from the muck of his slumber and could scarcely get his bearings, irritated that he had lost his hold on consciousness yet again. He did not have the faintest idea of what was going on. Arthur was saying something about a court and trouble, but the words did not pierce the film of grogginess that coated him. He was slow to review the collective memory pool at first, but the sight outside, of tens of fairies and the makings of some serious conference, spurred him to make haste.

Still taking in their predicament, and now aware of who was driving, Elliot gripped Ramona's incorporeal shoulder and urged her to stall while he thought of what to do. He got the inkling they were on some kind of trial. Loathe as he was to have her be the mouthpiece, he needed more context.

Ramona kept her composure as smooth as she could while he and Arthur went over the morning's events. "Yeah. That's close enough," she answered.

"How?" The King asked. An eager glisten wet his eyes.

"Uh. Well..." she realized that there was no ready explanation the fairy would understand. How do you say 'there's something up with my brain' without saying *'there's something up with my brain'*?

She rubbed the back of her neck, searching for a simple allegory. "So...do you know what a car is?"

The King's brow furrowed with unfamiliarity. "I'm not certain I do..."

Elliot had seen enough.

"Nevermind. One moment your, ah, highness," he squeezed out past her as he hooked his palm on the side of her shoulder and thrust her from control. He didn't give her a second glance before he turned to Cillian and whispered, sharply, "Elliot speaking, what do your people know of the brain?" He couldn't stand to watch Ramona of all people explain their situation to a king. Not like this.

Even though it was a relief to get out of explaining everything again, she didn't take being

pushed aside lightly. Arthur had to hold her back from hooking her fingers into the imaginary fold of Elliot's shirt collar to *jerk* him backwards. She bit her tongue and let it slide. *I guess it's for the best.*

Cillian's mouth quirked. "I dunno if it'd really help you."

"Humor me." He was sure that the Court and its ruler were serious business. Especially considering everything his grandmother had told about such things was grave. He had to represent their case, and do it well.

"The brain holds thoughts and memories, right?"

Elliot rolled his hand to prompt more. "*And...?*" The pressure of the King's gaze behind him made him impatient.

"And what?"

"There's more to it, it's an immensely complex organ, and pulls all kinds of stunts to keep itself intact," he said. "Is that widely known?"

"You wanna know what they think?"

"Yes." Elliot was earnest.

Cillian looked around, to the King and his shimmering cohorts waiting expectantly, the

observed observers behind the leaves, the orange-capped messenger and their scratchy blur of a quill, and whispered back “Most of ‘em are sure all your thoughts come from here—” he tapped his head, then his chest “—or here. And all *he’s* read of your human writ is your stories, not your medicine. Far as we have it, thoughts are thoughts, and you either got a good head on your shoulders or you don’t. That’s the length of it. So no.”

“...Okay. Got it.” Elliot was forming a grain of an idea. Without high hopes he turned back towards the King and put on his best impression of an ambassador. “I apologize for the delay. The explanation is—”

He was cut off right away. “You are not the Name I was just speaking with,” said the King, eyeing him. “I can tell.”

Struck, Elliot stood there without a word coming readily to his lips.

“May he continue?” Cillian was quick to ask. His tail whipped anxiously back and forth behind the podium like a tethered snake.

“He may. I am interested in this arrangement.” The King was leant forward, palms together and elbows perched upon his knees.

“*Well you see,*” Elliot said, having held his breath, “like Cillian told you, there are three of us housed in this body, but it wasn’t always this way. The other, ah, ‘Names’ were split off of me in a sense—it’s a...relatively uncommon function some humans undergo to save us from emotional harm.” It was an explanation lacking much nuance in Elliot’s eyes, but it would do.

“Grief, anguish, that’s enough to shatter you?” asked the King, who spoke with the grit of a man who knew both things very well.

“Typically abusive violence.” said Elliot. As much as he felt it would be a justice to dive into a detailed discussion on the ins and outs of their condition, the ever evolving understanding of it, and the particulars of traumatic experiences, it would be wasted here. Brevity was key.

“I see.” The fairy grasped his chin thoughtfully. “For what reason have you arrived at our home?”

“We were enticed to walk with him. Next thing I know, we're here.”

Cillian tugged at his ear uncomfortably.

The King wasn't surprised by this information. “And I am speaking with the first of you, the eldest?”

“You are.”

The King straightened up, as if he only just remembered his position and the gravity it carried. “Then the responsibility falls on you to receive my terms.”

Cillian braced himself. His sunglasses were a shield to him now, the only thing keeping his eyes from directly meeting the King's. He knew exactly what was coming. Past a growing itch in his throat, he said “I-I can just put them back, you know, easy! How about that? I promised them I'd get them home by now and my word is a *serious agreement* might I **remind** you Cairn—”

One of the cockerel-hound cohorts, who had a stern countenance and the deepest blue, barked. “Do not speak out of turn. Continue if you will, sire.”

“Thank you, Amaranth. Now, *three Names* have been taken into the Hill, adult humans at that,

by an utterly reckless member of my count. No request made, no permissions granted, and not so much as a hello. Need I continue, Cillian? Or would you like to hear all the ways in which you've gone and defied me this seasantide alone?"

"No. Carry on." Despite his efforts to sound stable, he was a lit firecracker inside of a pot. His appearance had distorted alongside his emotions, something he was desperately trying to keep in check. Flickerings of sharp ends and roused fur rippled into being as quickly as they disappeared. He clutched at one of his sleeves and dug his claws in.

"What are your terms?" pressed Elliot. He tried not to let it show that Amaranth frightened him. Hopefully, he could get this over with without being imprisoned, executed, or something equivalent. Besides, he couldn't stand to look at Cillian's undulations.

"My terms," repeated the King, directing his attention back to Elliot, "are that you are to stay here for the rest of your mortal span. You may live among us, go where you please, but never leave the Hill, nor attack anyone without well enough reason. Cillian will be your personal guide and protector, and

carry out communal affairs with you until he is dismissed from them. He too will be barred from leaving the Hill until he completes his service. I will be so kind as to let you know there was once a bloody conflict between our kinds, and I act in the interest of safety, not malice. Understood?"

There was murmuring within the audience. His cohorts spoke amongst themselves and the messenger, who was now acting as a court reporter, writing as fast as they could manage. Cillian looked about ready to die. A thin trickle of red escaped his right nostril.

Elliot had endured all too many surprises thrown his way. Whatever case his self preservation had to argue was smothered by the fury of a man who couldn't take it anymore.

"The rest of my life??" he cried, "I have things to get to! And you're telling me I can't leave? What will I do with myself??" He stuttered for a moment, gesticulating at nothing. "This—this is ridiculous, was getting tricked into being stolen not enough?"

A cohort with a much softer voice and frilly coat of feathers said "settle down, he is offering you mercy." It was with a nervous sort of strain.

Amaranth was not so forgiving. "Bite your tongue! You're being extended grace the likes of which you do not understand. We could have you thrown to the wilds for all I care. Far worse things roam beyond our grounds, I assure you."

"We won't, however. Technically you personally haven't committed a crime," the other was quick to add.

Arthur shook his head within the headspace, clinging to Elliot's wispy outline. "*Please, don't do this. Stay calm,*" he begged. Elliot was too wound up to notice. His presence burned hot to the touch.

Ramona watched, content to let Elliot dig his own hole deeper if he thought he should be the only one to have the floor. If he wanted to dedicate their freedom to slaving away at his pet project he could choke on it. She was bummed about the whole being-abducted-forever thing and missing out on her shot with Relle, but she would live.

"*I understand you are upset,*" said the King, who had an awful twitch in his brow at this point. A moth circling his head stuttered its wings in accord. His fingers drummed on his armrest.

“Of course I’m upset, that’s unfair! *Beyond* unfair! Why can’t I go home if I haven’t done anything wrong?” he was pacing now, and Cillian watched him walk back and forth with an expression of increasing ill.

The King’s gaze ignited. The insects circling his head became erratic as he rose to his feet, and his throne creaked as it shifted to accommodate the position. He flicked his chin up in dominance and snarled, “*you* want to tell *me* what’s unfair?”

This stopped Elliot in his tracks. He had a brief moment to think *oh. That was too far.*

“*Unfair* was torched glades, mangled trees, homes gutted and destroyed. *Unfair* was the slaughter of a generation. Weapons that did not discriminate, lesions from cold iron, hunting hounds and gunpowder. You are ignorant to a *lifetime* of suffering caused by *your* kind. The truth was left on this side of the divide, and you, from across, think it’s even appropriate to cry *unfair* to me?”

There was a funeral-silence over the audience. Some turned their eyes away in painful memory.

“He’s young! He don’t know what he’s saying,” Cillian said, desperate to salvage the situation. “He

couldn't have possibly been around for the war. He don't mean that kind of harm by a thousand miles, Cairn."

There were ants under his skin and eels slithering through his nerves, but he successfully made the King pause. He wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand and grimaced.

"*Very well,*" the ruler huffed out from his flared nostrils, and swiveled his stiffened face away. It was a heavy effort to right himself from the exhaust of anger, and he gripped a branch for balance as he returned to his seat. "...I think it's generous to offer what I have. It is not my place to put you to death, as much as it is not my concern to protect you from hungry jaws. I can hardly stand to look at you, when all I see is the progeny of violence, but I am not cruel. All the same, the least I can ask of you is to respect my wishes. I don't keep you here to torment you."

Elliot burned. Though Cillian had saved his hide, he didn't want to roll over and accept a lifelong sentence. "I recognise what you've been through is devastating... I can't imagine the wounds you all carry. I apologize for my outburst. *However,* I assure

you we are not those same aggressors, and no one will suffer if we go home today. How can I prove that to you?" His attempts at bargaining felt more like stumbling around, but he held strong.

The King hesitated, a glimmer of sympathy chasing his rage, and Cillian took that opportunity to pipe up. "Hey, I got an idea. Let me speak."

"You're out of *turn*-" started Amaranth.

"Proceed," the King said solemnly.

Cillian breathed one of those sharp *oh thank goodness* breaths and cleared his throat. "The outside world has us nearly forgotten. No one's afraid of us in the same way anymore, not nearly. And, *you* may be interested to know, the Ronans do stories."

The King turned his head to face Cillian a sliver. He was wary, but that glimmer had returned to his eye.

"...maybe this is our chance for resolution, yeah? They could yield a kinder harvest for all of us." His tone had downturned into that of a challenger; losing his freedom to leave the Hill wasn't a concept he could stand, but even worse somehow was the prospect of the Ronans falling under punishment. He

wanted them to stay, but at the cost of misery? That didn't sit right.

“Such as?”

Cillian continued. “You know I’ve visited the village for a long time, and I’m far from dead. It’s peaceful as a meadow there! I’ve been trying to tell you for *years* now. The humans there don't smell like smoke and death. The ones that still mind us folk leave us things, nice things, like the *old* old days. Days I didn't even get to witness, but wanna.” A foothold in his arsenal, he bravely swept his arm to the audience. “You know how much *you’ve* missed that, you long-lived ones? You want it again? To see a young devil like me and your weanlings have a taste? Maybe these Ronans could tell stories. *Inspiring* stories. Ones that get kids putting out milk and honey, musicians playing our dancing songs, minglings I only ever dreamed of...*without* all the fear! *Tell him!*”

At first the King was aghast, but he simmered and drew in a breath. Some memory must have surfaced at the concept, a grief that pulled at him before he set it aside. There was an uproar of talk

and discussion from the onlookers that couldn't easily be made out.

The throng was rife with dispute. Some bellowed in disapproval, claiming the defiant fairy was a fool and a hopeful idiot. Others made their voices known, siding with his argument and demanding he go on. Cillian flinched when a particularly sour fairy shouted "*lying cuckoo!*" and heard echoes of the sentiment within the audience's fringes.

"Some of you keep yourselves tucked inside this place all your days, you'd learn a fuckin' thing or two if you stepped out! Give it a chance!" He earned more jeers from that, but they were outnumbered by hurrahs. He coughed as something trickled down the back of his throat. His time was running out.

"Hey now, settle down!" said the cockerel-hound who had arrived late, "order, the lot of you, order!" With the beat of her wings and a bark, the crowd quieted.

Ramona's heart stirred as she witnessed the cacophony. She harbored a warmth at the idea of humans and fairies interacting with one another. She pictured these odd creatures, with their animal faces

and piercing eyes, brushing shoulders with her people. Would they get along?

Arthur hoped so. His nerves were in tangles, but the prospect gave him a sense of calm. He turned to Elliot, who found it hard to deny an escape opportunity, and decided he was going to play along. They could all agree on that decision.

Collecting himself enough for a question, the King asked, “how do I know they won't make targets of us again? There are still real monsters to contend with in these woods.”

Cillian grew bolder. The King could not deny the hopeful hum of his crowd. This he knew. He'd won something. He turned to the Ronans. “Well, would *you*? Even if there are dangers, here?”

“No, not if you mean us no harm.” Replied Elliot, who had also cooled down. “Cillian spirited us away, but I suppose we're...alright. Really, if we had any news upon our return, it would be that we just got lost on a hike.” He knew he was saying this *after* blowing up at Cillian for taking them, and that he was still fucking miserable, but no one needed to know that.

After a long and considerate pause, listening to the whispers of his cohorts and the murmurs of the audience, the King said “I have new terms, in that case.”

Elliot said tersely “I’d like to hear them.”

“*Thank fuck,*” Cillian whispered under the heat of his breath.

The King folded his arms. “You will prove to me that you can walk among us charitably, and in doing so craft a tale. A tale that conveys my people kindly, one that might sway the hearts of those who fear us, and you will tell it to me upon its completion. If you succeed, I will grant you passage home, and may your tale inspire wonders upon your return. Should it fail to garner sympathy even then, dismiss it as nothing more than a fantasy. If you refuse to complete this request, you will be staying here until you leave this life for the next. Cillian’s duties will remain the same, to lend his services to residents of the Hill in need and be your personal guide, mentor, and guardian. Remain by his side.”

Cillian glared, forgetting social consequences in the face of his increasingly ailing state. He coughed and it came out red.

The King caught on, and sighed. "...And his promise to take you home is waived, should you agree to my proposal."

Elliot felt a jolt of purchase. As a writer, with interest in the historical at that, this could be a breeze. Just go around, talk to fairies, take that information and in essence craft a sunny account of this place. Easy enough.

He met eyes with Cillian, who had taken his own relief with a heavy dose of salt. Elliot had half a mind to pat him on the back for that speech.

Then, his focus returned to the King.

"I," Elliot started, then remembered he was speaking for a collective, "We gratefully accept your new terms. Thank you."

"....Accepted," said Cillian, through a set jaw.

The King had grown tired of his own fury and left it shelved. "Good. Now, what am I to call you?"

Elliot hesitated, then bowed slightly. "My name is Elliot Ronan, and the other two are Arthur and Ramona. We all share a surname; you may consider us siblings if that helps your understanding."

The King nodded in turn, and crossed an arm over his broad chest. "I am Cairn of Mound and Oak.

Now we are properly met, and this agreement has become official.”

The orange-capped messenger piped up from their seat. “All documented.”

“Then we are adjourned,” he said in a judicial tone. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed his cohorts, who flew from their perches to do whatever the fairy King’s cohorts do; the reporter, who scurried away quickly with the notes and their distinctive cap clutched close; the host of assorted hill-folk, and the meeting itself. After all the pitter patter became distant, it was only the Ronans, Cillian, and the King left in the Court.

Long suffering Cillian, who resented being dragged through the ordeal, was exhausted. He spat out a clot at his feet.

“Thank you,” he said coldly, as if he had been granted a backhanded pardon. In a way, that was true.

“Don’t forget you are more than responsible for your own inconvenience,” said Cairn, still stern as ever.

The corner of Cillian’s mouth twitched. “I know, I know.” He shuffled his feet, looking for

something more to say. "Just think about what I said. My ideas could hold big changes for us."

His countenance softened. "I suppose so. With the discussions you caused... I'm inclined to give you a chance, but only if I am assured. I've seen the conflict that scarred our Hill with my own two eyes; I see it in my sleep, in my waking memory, and yet I miss the days you brought to mind. Before it all, when I was only oak."

Cillian allowed himself only a moment to hope. "Aye, when we were seen in a kinder light. Our kinds ain't so different. It could happen again."

"I want you to be right, but without further evidence..." Cairn sighed. There were many years behind that sigh. Without his cohorts and the authority of the Court in action, he looked lonely up there in his seat. The insects that haloed his head were like the convocation of a porch light. Elliot almost felt ashamed to stare.

Cairn caught his gaze with his own. "You, human of three Names, I have a word of advice."

"Yes?" he felt bare, with the full attention bearing down on him. How else was he supposed to

feel, standing before the King of a world he was thrust into without warning?

“Be wary where you tread and what you engage with. Especially outside of our fair Mound.” With that, the King gave a pointed glance down at Cillian. The fairy uncomfortably adjusted his shades.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Elliot.

Cillian halfheartedly clapped him on the back. He’d calmed down significantly since the height of the meeting, but he didn’t look Cairn in the eyes when he said, somberly, “so we best be going then.”

The King gave a nod of approval. “You are dismissed. *Take care.*”

Chapter Eight

Steam curled upwards like a winding serpent from *Lake's* spout. They had made it back to Cillian's house and left all appearances of gratitude back at the Court. A stiffer blend of tea, flavorful, spiced, and frankly the opposite of sleep inducing, sat whorling in their mugs. Cillian had his feet kicked up onto the table, and was leaning his shoulder against the curve of the wall.

"...and that's not all," he said, continuing a tirade Elliot had been guest to for a while now, "It used to be just fine for me to go in and outta the Threshold like a minnow, but the moment I bring a human with me it's over? He don't get it, damn sap-blooded heap, he's never even *been* out there. I got needs he don't understand."

Elliot's face was buried in his arms. He was slumped over the table and bogged down with *inconvenience*. What felt like an easy way out of this mess back in the Court was now a monumental chore ahead of him. Tangles of dark hair were woven between his fingers where he'd been clutching his

head moments ago. He wasn't really listening to Cillian for the most part.

The fairy continued. "You know I really would like to improve things for Mound too. I'll admit, I said all that to save my skin, but not enough folks give the world outside a shot. It's a fine place! Too many of 'em are afraid to venture out like I do."

"I don't know, some of it isn't as nice as you think..." said Elliot, who had his fair share of the outside world before Alderhill. "At least the village is nice." *God, if only I was there right now instead of this confusing place.*

"Aye, the village is a pleasant place. If only he could see that."

There was a moment of pause, the likes of which bubble up when someone has finally exhausted their store of complaints. Cillian blew on his tea until he couldn't bear blowing any more, and took a sip that was still a lick too hot. Elliot remained folded over. Ramona's presence nearby to his own was pungent, and he couldn't stand it. She, on the other hand, was enjoying his wallowing with the pettiness only a sister could wield.

Elliot didn't know what to do with himself. An urge nagged at him, to be productive, to accomplish anything at all, and he just couldn't heed it. What *was* there to do? His computer was some miles away, his neighbors could make do without his help, and he was reluctant to start the task Cairn had given him. The pressure was stuck.

"I'm going," he announced flatly, closing his eyes to switch out with another Ronan. Within the headspace, he strode toward their bed and shook Arthur awake. The man roused in a blurry state.

"Hey, I'm *sick* of today. You're in charge for a while," Elliot said, before flopping onto the bed, and wrapping himself in imaginary blankets.

Arthur had been napping to cope with the idea he may never go home again, and with that disturbed, he wasn't in the best of sorts. Elliot hadn't left it to negotiation, however. He was left to make the most of it.

A moment later, he was at the helm.

He came to, to find that Cillian was poking him in the shoulder. "You alright?"

Arthur fended off the prodding, and sat up, his mussed hair thoroughly curtaining his face.

“Hello,” he said, sweeping the unruly mess back behind his ears, “I don't think I've spoken to you directly.”

Cillian tilted his head. “Are you the third one?”

“If you mean Arthur, yes.”

He noticed the warm mug beside him and grazed it with his fingers to check the temperature. Hot, but not painfully so. He dared a sip in the hopes it would wake him further.

“Nice meeting you then.”

Arthur didn't seem to hear that. “...Are we going to be okay?” he asked, with all the sincerity of a lost child tugging on the shirt of a stranger.

“Oh, uh, I dunno, probably,” he replied. “Just stick around, I'll do what I can to keep you safe.”

“Thank you...” he replied, uncertain.

Cillian raised his hands. “I'm sworn to it, no need for thanks.” He took a swig of his mug to punctuate.

Arthur followed suit with another reserved sip. He was having trouble ascertaining what kind of state he was in. There wasn't enough of a buzz to spell anxiety, nor was there the heaviness of disappointment. He carried a formlessness within

him. The smell of ozone without a storm, a confusion of emotions that couldn't decide where they belonged. Not *nothing*, but a something with no designation.

Then Cillian choked on his drink, and a droplet of concern greeted a blip of amusement. It shook Art from his detachment. "Are you alright?" he asked, colored by a laugh as he reached across the table to pat his back.

"I'm good..." Cillian croaked. He chased down the irritation with a humbler drink. "Careful there. *Lake's* still hot."

Arthur leaned away from the kettle, seeing that his elbow had hovered close to it, and withdrew his hand. He had the fledgeling need to chase whatever small burst of chemicals burrowed through his brain fog. "So, what do we do now?"

Cillian's nose wrinkled, and his eyes wandered off. "As much as I don't wanna, I'll be helping 'round Mound tomorrow. You'll be coming along due to the arrangement you and yours agreed to today," he said.

Arthur's eyebrows sank. "You say you'd like to improve things but when it comes to the actual doing..."

"Hey, I never said I *like* to work. I just want things to be better."

"I don't think that will accomplish much," he replied. Idle goodwill was only worth so much after all.

"Well now I'm being put to it, so I've got to accomplish something or the oak is gonna have some choice words with me."

That last part tickled Arthur's interest. "What is Cairn's connection to oak?" he asked.

Cillian's ears perked up in surprise, and for a moment he looked like a floppy-eared puppy. He hadn't heard a question like that in a long time. Then he took a downturn. "That's a handful..."

Arthur waited, watching the fairy as he took another mouthful of tea.

Cillian didn't want to disappoint.

"Now, take this with some salt, it was before I ever was." He firmly set his mug on the table as he started. "Cairn's a great deal older than I, but he's still younger than a lot of the folk here. The war was

on, hunts, hounds... fire an' everything. I've been told since I was small that Cairn crawled outta the *heart* of that battle. There's a big old oak tree where the Court now stands, and-

"He's older than the Court?" Arthur asked.

"I'm getting to that."

Cillian leaned an arm on the table as he spoke. "...*Anyway*, that tree, the oak, was a beloved thing. Its patch of ground was a place for meetings and big ol' celebrations, and for sanctuary, before it became the Court. The tree grew fat on all that love, got thick and healthy off it. So, when the humans in blue coats came to the Hill and decided to burn it to the ground, the oak wasn't gonna let that happen."

He had assumed the tone of a storyteller, gesturing with his free hand, flicking his tail this way and that in a spirited manner. "Hill-folk were hiding, then. There wasn't anyone to protect them, and there wasn't anyone to protect their grounds. So you know what happened? The oak shed its coat. It became one of us, as wakeful trees do when they're dying or...bored of being trees I guess. He drove away the humanfolk, and started driving away

Nameless too. Cairn was an oak tree, now he isn't. Simple."

Eager to know more, Arthur had leaned in close. He had his fingers wrapped around his mug to keep them still. "How did he do that?"

"Drive them away? Well you've seen the bastard, he's a big boy and all--"

"No no, how did he become one of you?" Arthur asked, rapt.

"That's a tricky one. Each tree's different... They live for so long, but they live a different life, yeah? Between Name and Nameless, between aware and asleep. Some just decide to start walking around. It's a rebirth. The Cairn we got now ain't the same thing as the oak was."

A shiver traveled throughout Arthur's body. The fairy had his complete attention. He stopped nursing his drink to retrieve the green shoulder bag, grab a spare notebook and a pen, and plunk back down in his seat to take notes.

Cillian watched, a smile creeping across his face as the man before him rushed to write down everything he'd been told. He couldn't help it, it was a treat to have such an invested companion sitting in

his home. The pen was a blur in Art's hands, and Cillian knew he had done Mound's history some amount of justice. As much as he couldn't *stand* Cairn's expectations, and was quick to call him all kinds of names, he had a reverence for the man that extended beyond his years. There was a bittersweet pride in retelling the events as they were told to him many, many years ago.

How he missed being small. Mound didn't have much in the way of children, and it took a village to raise the wild kids that cropped up now and then. Memories of being surrounded by warmth and the guidance of kin, of play and chase and fleeting friends, came to him as he considered bygone years. Cairn didn't look a day different since then. It was a spring's thaw of nostalgia, a mound of ice hard beneath a sentimental glow. If only it could come back painless.

He entertained Arthur's questions like a performance. He didn't know everything, but he'd be damned if he didn't make it interesting. The human hung onto his every word, even if they were the most mundane, most basic, most flavorless details of the Hill he could possibly speak of. He dressed them

all in the same mystique, no matter how dull. To an outsider who didn't know any better, it was a banquet of otherworldly knowledge. To Cillian, it was like pretending pinecones and acorns were enchanted baubles. At least every detail was true.

Cillian told him about salamanders and their fire, who's stones he used to heat his tea. How older fairies said the creatures crawled out of the embers humans left behind and swallowed the flames to keep for themselves, or so it went. Arthur wrote it down with a hunger for more. Cillian told him which kinds of mushrooms you can eat, you *can't* eat, and which ones get you high as a cloud. It was all cataloged on the spot. The more he spoke, the more he realized his conversational partner was far more interested in the creatures and plants of the Hill than he.

He'd only come to know these things so well from a lifetime in Mound and far too many adventurous decisions. You learn exactly what to avoid if it can give you a nasty burn, or has you following voices that aren't there. There was a time he had waded up to his chest in an eddy, sure somebody had been drowning, only to realize it was

a trick on his ears. He never found the source of it. This he told to Arthur, quietly recalling how his teeth had chattered when Cairn wiped his nose and squeezed him 'til he could hardly take a breath. He was quick to leap to another story, after that.

Soon enough an idea occurred to him. It was around noon at the time, daylight at its brightest. It was the safest time to go screw around outdoors and teach the Ronans a thing or two. Pick some raspberries, look for adderstones, do something *fun* before being bogged down with the work ahead of him. Maybe if he could help these humanfolk appreciate the area, it would make things a lot less boring for him, and far more tolerable for them. Why not ease their worries, make some good out of it? There was even the possibility they might change their minds and...*stay*.

After all, Cairn had waived his promise to return the Ronans. Before, even if they *had* changed their minds, he would've had to drag them back to Alderhill or risk getting violently ill. A poorly thought out promise was at best a small pitfall and at worst a knock on death's door. It was a rule written into the very being of him, though he knew not why, that a

promise was a vow, and a vow was sealed with blood.

All of his promises had been clumsy slips of the tongue. Very painful slips.

Cillian guarded this condition closely. He'd been caught by unfinished promises before in all their viciousness; they dug hooks in him, reeled muddy clots out of his throat. Ran unseen flames and needles through him. Broken, vengeful things, promises were. They didn't forget. His mistakes had earned him caution.

Humans weren't as careful with vows, not any that he'd seen. The first time he had ever abducted someone he'd been careless, *stupid*, infatuated completely with the company of his prize. He hadn't seen a human up close before. Five slender fingers and gentle skin... They were a marvelous mirror. He was more himself than ever, basking in the glow of a changeling's first catch.

So easy to fool, back then, letting the human get comfortable pulling him this way and that. When his pet found an opportunity to escape his hold, he was asked for a simple promise.

Swear you can make me happy.

He was thrilled to! How nice it was to be bound by a task like that. Where was he to start? What would they do together? The future he always wanted was so, so close.

It didn't take long to realize the truth when *I swear it* tasted of iron.

About a year or so had passed since that promise nearly struck him dead, and his captive had left him alone to writhe, when he was ready to try again. Surely it was just a bad pick, and he had held on too tightly. He couldn't even remember their Name anymore. Each day was a little warmer than the last. It was time.

So he made sure the next human he stole was better. A curious boy who insisted he follow the fairy wherever he went. He was far more careful with this second catch of his. Cillian held his heart in a cage. Though, while he didn't dare show it, his fondness for the creature was beyond measure. He did not restrict him to his hollow, let him roam and explore, always with the trust he would return. The promise to keep him safe passed his lips without much thought. Things were well.

Then the human boy known as Walter Hawthorn met his end in the jaws of something they both did not understand.

There is no describing what Cillian became in the sorrow.

He could never swallow his need, it overpowered every other living urge of his, led him through chance after chance after chance.

And now, he was sure this was his last shot.

Dragonflies hummed over the tepid waters of the pond Arthur and Cillian rested beside. It was a short walk from the fairy's home. A sizable thing, the pond was enclosed by bracken and reeds with a film of algae coating its surface in broken clumps. There was a *plonk!* as a stone plunged through the surface and sent green ripples across the water. Cillian was responsible for tossing rocks, because he didn't know what else to do with himself.

Arthur twinged with each toss, but he didn't have the heart to speak up. Instead he quietly imagined minnows swimming out of the way, into

murkier and less disturbed waters. It eased him somewhat knowing Cillian was listlessly aiming for the middle, and not the edges. Often, the edges were where fish liked to rest in the shade.

If the Hill had any peculiar fish, Arthur wanted to see them, but Cillian insisted it was *'all tadpoles, fry, and bugs'* in the pond. He didn't really mind watching those instead. It was better than nothing.

He sat with his knees up, fingers threaded through the grass. The air was sweet with the smell of humid green. It was refreshing having the body all to himself again. Sure, the peace was interrupted with awkwardly spaced *plonks*, but there's always a concession for something.

Cillian glanced over at him between picking up a stone and half heartedly chucking it. He found the Ronans were tricky to parse with all their switching-around, but he was starting to recognize the differences between each of them. Arthur was quiet. He didn't initiate much, didn't take up any more space than he needed to, and had only come out when Elliot was spent. Cillian figured he would've made a good tree in another life.

The two of them flinched when Arthur turned his head and their eyes met. Clearly he hadn't expected Cillian to be watching him.

"Uh, hey?" said the fairy.

Arthur's gaze lingered. "...Just looking at you."

"Why?" He'd been gawked at plenty of times, but this was different.

Arthur leaned back slightly, letting his palms budge with him. "I don't know what you are."

Cillian felt his face tighten. He was lucky to have his shades on, or the man would have seen his pupils sliver. His tail thwacked on the grass in one short motion. "I'm Hillish, like I told you. Fairy, stranger, whatever you call things you don't understand. Ain't that good enough?"

The one solace of living under Elliot's mother had been the family cat. Arthur remembered studying its body language; the meanings behind all the slow blinks, tail swishes, flattened ears and hackles. Cillian wasn't all too different. Arthur averted his eyes, thoughts of eye contact and solitary predators flickering through memory. "Sorry, I'm only curious. You can't all be the same species can you? The King had a deer's face." Arthur raised

a hand in front of his nose and pulled back through the air, gesturing a snout.

Cillian's mouth wrinkled. "*Species?* It don't go like that here."

"I...don't follow."

"We got Names, Names are what we are. Our shapes come from our parents, our roles, our choices... I came out my mother this way, Cairn came out of a tree, but we're both folks like an' like. I guess you got your common types and all, what with some of us having certain...habits..." He trailed off, threw another stone into the pond, and shrugged. "Forget it. I don't wanna talk about it." His attitude grew curt. The patches of smooth white freckling his cheeks bristled, and he curled his tail around himself.

"Alright," said Arthur. He went quiet after that, and pulled his knees to his chest. He didn't want to upset him.

The fairy clutched himself close in a prickly mood until ruminating bored him. He stole another glance at his companion, whose head was tucked away. This wasn't how their outing was supposed to

go at all... A long breath passed before he figured out what to do about it.

“Hey, Ronan boy,” he said, “how about I show you something?” He raised his tone to something more pleasant and inviting. It would be better in the long run if his companion kept his sense of wonder. He could use that.

The interest was immediate. “Yes?”

“Come close.”

He scooted over, until Cillian said “good, now watch.”

The fairy got very close, then faced him head-on. He took off his shades with one hand and with the other he smoothed back his hair. Arthur could see again that his eyes had an animal quality to them; amber irises cradled by an umbra of sclera. The proximity of their bodies wasn't comfortable, but his need to find out was more pressing.

Cillian's face twitched, then rippled like an insect in molt, yet the skin did not slip. What was beneath shaped itself anew, a reedy face emerging from the shift. Freckles manifested across his nose bridge and cheeks, his hair darkened with brown and fell to his shoulders and further still. His nose

became angular and straight. Left untouched were his ears, which still dangled from the sides of his head like an old pair of socks, his body, his strange eyes, and his teeth, which retained their canid points. Arthur recoiled slightly as Elliot's face stared back with a grin.

There had always been mirrors around and he knew *intimately* how their shared body looked, but it was like seeing his headfellow in the flesh. Just... wrong.

"You're—you're a shapechanger," he said, breath caught. After adjusting himself, he couldn't help but cup his hands to what wasn't quite Cillian's face and study every detail. There were errors, of course, ones that could be easily missed by anyone else.

"Aye," said the fairy, "but it's just a trick."

It was incredibly strange watching that voice come through Elliot's lips. "A trick?"

"A pretty good one if you ask me."

Arthur stroked his cheek. He was a warped reflection come to life. "*Fascinating*," he whispered. "Is this how you've pretended to be human?"

Cillian turned his face to the side, remembering his punishment. “Mhm...but I won’t need to pretend for a while now. Lookin’ just like a human has fuckall use if I’m stuck here. Could get me harassed, at that—well, it already *has* without any glamor. Some folks are bothered enough.” He pouted, then, and said “Ohhh I miss going out already.”

“Ah...” Arthur remembered the conversations about the war, and the fear that these hill-folk held for humankind. The Ronans’ appearance could be an uncomfortable thing, couldn’t it? “If only we could do the same. Those people at the Court seemed angry...”

A grin flashed across Cillian’s face like lightning. His skin shuffled back into something more like himself; his hair fluffed back up to its usual blond, and like milk poured into loose coffee grounds, the freckles were all washed away. It was as quick as a reflex. He grabbed Arthur by the shoulders and shook him once.

“What if you *could*?” he said. He had no way of knowing it would work, but if anything could win this potential friend over, it was worth a shot.

Arthur's brows arched. "Show me," he said, with the virgin hunger Cillian was hoping for. He was ushered towards the pond's edge eagerly.

"Alright! *Drink.*"

Arthur peered at the murky water. He furrowed his brow in confusion. "...Why?"

He squeezed his head in beside Arthur's face, cheek to cheek. "Our water's potent. It cycles through this place again an' again. There's a chance the more Hill we put in you, the more you could catch onto the simple trick I showed you. '*Fairy food*', yeah?"

Arthur went still. The idea provoked some deep and silent part of him. A tug pulled at his chest, and he put his hand to it lightly. Desire was foreign at this scale. It pushed back when he reached for its usual leash and pressed harder when he winced. He could not contain it. He could not ignore it, either.

There would be consequences if something went wrong. He wasn't supposed to make dangerous decisions without asking. Really, he wasn't supposed to make big decisions at all. This life wasn't *his* to play around with.

...Right?

Between the smallest trickle of consciousness and oblivion, Ramona had been asleep until the smell of opportunity roused her. Something was going on that she could have a say in, and for once Elliot wasn't here to protest. She sluggishly clawed her way over to Arthur, digging through context as she went. He was lost in thought, which made the journey easy.

"Arty, hey," she said, voice like an afterimage. He startled, but calmed when he realized it was only his sister. She continued. "You should do it. I don't know what's gonna happen, but you should. Elliot can learn the hard way that he isn't the only one in charge. Plus he already drank the tea anyway. What's a little more?"

"But I'd feel guilty, I shouldn't," Arthur said solemnly. Then, after a pause, he said, "and Cillian is telling me to drink pond water."

"Maybe it'll strengthen our immune system."

That only reminded him why drinking the water was a bad idea. Though, considering the potential results...

"Think about it," she said, "imagine how we could express ourselves. Have actual, tangible proof

of our existences. And if the mixed reactions to Cill's speech were anything to go by, I don't wanna get jumped."

He considered it further. Fostering a connection to this place could make their task easier, prevent future harm...

Cillian had definitely noticed the pause.

"What's wrong, don't wanna?"

"N-no, ah, I'm just thinking," he said. *It would be an advantage*, he told himself. *It would be safer in the long run to be able to change...unrelated benefits aside. Being sick is better than being dead. Being **strange** is better than being dead.*

When he thought about throwing the opportunity away, it made him flinch harder than actually following through, so the choice was clear.

"Okay, I'll do it."

Satisfied, Ramona slinked away.

"Great, I'll try my best to teach you." Cillian gave him some space, and held his hair back so it wouldn't dip into the water.

Arthur leaned down, hands cupped, and tentatively brought a puddle to his mouth. He *wanted* to avoid the clumps floating around the

surface, but he decided if he was going to be drinking out of a pond for weird fairy powers, he might as well commit.

Gulp.

“Ugh!” he choked. He nearly spat into his palms. The taste was horribly bitter, warm, and had the texture of raw egg sliding down his throat. Little granules clung to his tongue and teeth. *This better work,* he thought, disgusted.

Cillian laughed. “Never said it’d be pleasant. Here.” He pulled Arthur back from the edge and let his hair go.

“What do I do now?” Arthur rasped, wiping his mouth.

“Focus on what you just swallowed, and the pond, and the grass you’re kneeling on,” he said. “Reach out to it with your very self, like it’s all part of you.”

He did as he was told. He closed his eyes as if deep in meditation, and concentrated on both his surroundings and body. There was a tingling then, like the anticipation between plug and socket. A feeling that sent goosebumps all along him. It wavered as he shifted his attention to the sensation

itself. As murky as a dream, he could see green bloom in the darkness behind his eyelids. "I think it might be working," he said under his breath.

"Good," said Cillian, "keep going. Picture what you wanna change, what you should look like. You souls do look different on the inside don't you?"

Arthur nodded. Internally, he had a softer face than the body, with shoulder-length hair the color of sand. He easily knew what he looked like, as the only thing he felt he truly had any ownership over was himself. It was like holding a mirror up to his mind, seeing the mental image of his face grow clearer and clearer. He was pulling it close, pressing it up against himself until it gave way and breached the surface. At last he opened his eyes. Cillian was looking at him with frankly the most sparkly expression he'd ever seen.

"Did I do it?"

Cillian couldn't contain his smile. He could finally get a proper look at the other Name inside that body. "Yeah! Take a look!" He turned Arthur back towards the pond and made him peer into a clear pocket of water.

Upon seeing a real and tangible reflection of himself, Arthur gasped in shock. "That's me?" He said, watching his mouth move along with awe.

The fairy slung an arm around him. "If you think so, it is. *Hell*, I can't believe that worked. Maybe the Hill likes you! Hah."

"God..." he touched his cheek with one hand, and ran fingers through his hair with the other. It clicked in a way he didn't have the wherewithal to come to terms with. There wasn't a single word moving through his mind. Instead the gentle rustle of wind around him filled the scape within, both hollow and deeply full at once. He stared at his reflection for a long time as he sat nestled into the crook of Cillian's shoulder.

Then his thoughts caught up with him. He couldn't keep looking, so he buried his face into Cillian's side and quietly began to cry. It was all too much to handle, knowing he truly had a face others could see. He was real, more than a self-soothing figment of Elliot's imagination, more than a voice or a daydream. No more mask. His overwhelm spilled out in tears as he questioned what he'd done. Even the wet of his cheeks was a new landscape.

Cillian was as warm as a stray cat in the sun, and smelled just the same. His arms were wrapped around him securely. Arthur pulled at a handful of a sleeve and stroked his thumb along the fabric, which made the fairy shiver. Nothing he touched felt the same in his new skin.

Cillian ruffled. This was it. This was what he was searching for. He stroked the back of Arthur's head and held him against his chest.

"Hey, you ain't that ugly now, I've seen worse," he joked. He didn't know what else to say; he was out of practice with getting personal. Arthur didn't reply. There were only more sniffles and muffled gasps for air. More tugs. He found the salt hit his eyes too, so he bit the inside of his cheek to stave it off. It was too soon to tear up. He wiggled the man instead. "We haven't even got to your little guise, you know."

"R-right," Arthur peeled himself away. "What is that, um, supposed to look like?"

"Anything. Give yourself an obvious 'tell', and you'll be easier on the eyes. Folks won't find you as scary if you look more like 'em."

It took a moment for him to work up the courage. Then, gradually, a crown of small leaves sprung from his hair. He had pushed them out slowly, putting some effort into sprouting the imagined buds into reality. They quivered as he tried to hold them steady. This was an entirely new facet of his appearance that had suddenly been grafted onto him; it only made sense that it struggled to stick. A weak smile spread across his face as he reassured himself this was for their safety, and searched the fairy's eyes for approval.

Cillian nodded at him. "Good start, but you could use an extra touch."

Arthur had all the possibilities in the world at his inept fingertips. He wanted to try whatever he felt like while he had the chance. He fidgeted with the woven bracelet on his wrist as he considered his options. First he put on some whiskers, but they were too stiff. When he gave up on them, they shed from his face as quickly as they had appeared. Cillian got a chuckle out of it at least.

"Itchy..." Arthur said, driving a thumb across his upper lip. A leaf or two fell out and drifted downwards as he lost focus.

“Maybe you need more pondwater in you,” said Cillian, a hand on his chin.

Every leaf on Arthur’s head shuddered off of him at once. “No!”

“Hahaha!” the fairy clutched his middle in amusement. “That bad huh?”

“Please, something else, *anything* else.” He looked queasy at the mention. He was trying hard not to think of the numerous ways in which he might already be risking sickness with some nasty bacteria. Instead, put his focus into replacing the circle of leaves in his hair.

“I’ll pick you some blackberries on the way back, how about that?” Cillian offered. He knew a spot where the bushes grew thick and sweet. The memories of Cairn crouched beside him when he was young, patiently showing him how to pluck those same berries, flew around in his head. He swatted them away. The King had him on a leash right now, pleasant memories could be pleasant later.

Arthur nodded enthusiastically, his leaves bobbing along. The freedom to change was growing more and more exhilarating, now that it was reality.

An upswell of pride hit Cillian's chest. He let himself hope he'd roped in someone for good, this time. "Great, keep going."

Chapter Nine

Over blackberries, dandelion greens, and clean water from *Lake*, Cillian and Arthur spent the rest of the night playing around with fairy features. Arthur was a quick learner, and had his choice of traits to don. He had gone through a number of animal traits, from a padded nose to furry ears, to feathers upon his neck, but what he settled on with the most excitement was a plain, wiry tail. It was the color of his hair, the length of his arm, and he couldn't keep his hands off of it. It wasn't nearly as impressive as Cillian's, but it was his. Sure, trying to maintain the thing consistently gave him a headache, but it was worth it. All he had to do was picture himself that way for as long as possible and it would stay.

Cillian humored him with some shifting around of his own, showcasing just what a Hill-born fellow like him could do. He was a mirage of fur and foliage, an impressive spectacle to behold. He managed to pull some of those genuine, gentle smiles out of Arthur, and had some of his own.

When they had finally tired themselves out, they went to sleep contented, and began to dream.

Returning to his days as a boy, Cillian dreamed of the hill-folk that raised him in his parent's stead. Summers spent running after grasshoppers and frogs, learning to weave and sing dancing songs, and winters spent holed away in burrows, dens, and tree homes, listening to stories from anyone who would indulge his hunger. He was a child of the wild, safe and sound. In his sleep he found himself in Cairn's lap again, having his rebellious hair braided back as he was told a warning tale. He wanted to stay there forever.

Arthur dreamed of a dark pond. He knew in his core that it was as deep as an ocean, from the frothy algae to the mud below, and that he needed to dive. There was something that belonged to him, cradled in the muck at the very bottom. He wasn't afraid at all. He could smell the whorl of welcoming waters, see the blinking motes in the pitch. Why would he have anything to fear?

Elliot begged from behind, telling him to leave it. That whatever lay at the pond's heart wasn't important enough to drown for.

He had turned to him then, tasting the fronds of ferns crawl up his throat. "I can swim just fine,"

Arthur said. As he spoke, he had gills. The in-between of his fingers had become webbing, the smoothness of his skin a slick. Then he leapt into the water as the brother of his psyche screamed with worry.

The Court was as empty as they had left it last. They stood with Cairn, who had left his throne and leaned against the stone podium Cillian stood at before. Without the eyes of his jury and cohorts on him, he preferred to stand eye to eye.

Arthur woke that morning with his self-constructed appearance intact. Elliot, who had experienced a nightmare only to discover this appearance upon waking, wasn't pleased. He aired his grievances loudly. According to him, drinking standing water was completely irresponsible. Arthur got an earful of scolding about that. Then, Elliot was sure to tell him just how uncomfortable twisting their looks around was. What if it became stuck like that? What if he never got his own face back? Though he didn't have the heart to pull control from Arthur

completely, he did ask that, while they were both present, he put that damned tail away.

Arthur folded. He always had when faced with Elliot's disapproval and it was a reflex by now. Even so, he didn't particularly *like* it. A taste of choice had been thrown his way and he wanted more.

So there they were; the Ronans, Cillian, and the King, freshly convened and discussing what was to be done. Cairn was caught up to speed after the surprise of seeing Arthur's face. Arthur was a new shade of shy from truly introducing himself. Elliot was equal parts irritable and intrigued about the task ahead. Cillian was determined to be a pain.

"...so yes, if someone is in trouble, hurt, or greatly inconvenienced, you will lend them your assistance. No exceptions, unless they deign to harm you," said Cairn, continuing the conversation. His palm was busy caressing his brow because Cillian would not stop fishing for loopholes.

Cillian said "even if they don't *want* my help? Awfully dickish to assume, you know."

"Follow their wishes, in that case."

He pointed a vindictive finger at Cairn. "Aha! An exception."

The man huffed, and rapped his knuckles on the moss of the podium. "Be a good spirit about this, boy. There is a point to these duties."

"Boring me to death? 'Cause I'm already feeling it, old man," he sneered.

Elliot hissed through his teeth. How could someone so recently punished turn around and be this cocky? Ramona was just like that in her teens. He would've admired the bravery, if not for the fact it could threaten their chances at escape. Just as it did back then...

Cairn had clearly had enough, and that familiar temper rose, before he pinched the crease of his muzzle and let it dissolve. "Give it a chance. Take it as an opportunity to *socialize*, even. You may, if you put in the work, find that you won't be so *lacking* in companionship if you lend your hand to those around you."

That touched a deep-rooted nerve coiled tightly around Cillian's heart. "Says the man who earned all of Mound's respect as easily as a *birthright*."

"You know full well what led me there, Cillian. What I had to lose."

They stared each other in the face, stone cold. An entire silent battle was waged within their fixed glare. Cillian lashed his tail, Cairn stood straight, crossed his arms, and loomed over him. He couldn't keep up his scowl for long, though, and his eyes softened with disappointment.

It was only at this gesture that Cillian seethed and broke away. He too shoved his arms into a fold across his chest. "Who's up first, then? I'm sure you know."

Cairn nodded, and inclined his head towards his endlessly-circling gossamer insects. "There is one of my count by the name of Silas, he's requested assistance with putting his home in order. He attended yesterday's proceedings, you see. He knows you."

Cillian tapped his chin. "Silas, Silas... don't ring a bell. Refresh me?"

"A historian of ours."

"Hm. Don't know him," said Cillian.

Elliot perked up so severely that the body's face shuffled back into his very own, freckles and all. "You have a historian?"

The King turned to him. "We have history we'd rather not repeat, and far more beyond that. It only makes sense." He shrugged the bitterness off his shoulders and addressed Elliot with a calm tone. "I see that you've returned."

"I- ah..." Elliot stiffened, embarrassed that his interest in the topic had so obviously gripped him.

Arthur still had the reins, but patiently let him have his piece. It was clear he wasn't one to make demands, today.

"Yes," Elliot continued, "History intrigues me." An understatement.

"I see. Your enthusiasm isn't lost on me, it's a good sign. Silas might have some worthwhile stories to share with you. *Learn well.*"

Perceiving that he and his headfellows were on a trial period of sorts, he was relieved to hear Cairn say something positive. Additionally, the idea of speaking to a fellow man of study was steadily improving his mood from *terrible* to *promising*.

"Right, thank you."

Internally, he said "Arthur, it's *imperative* you hand the body over to me, fully. I want to make a good impression."

Arthur hesitated. This was not a request but a demand. Of course, seeing Elliot *excited* was a rare thing. He was supposed to prioritize that, but he was quite enjoying his own happiness! Things weren't so scary now, and he had some room to breathe. To ground himself in the moment. Still...he was choiceless in the matter if he wanted to avoid another lecture. The decision to let go of the wheel tasted bitter for what was probably the first time.

"Take it, but I will be staying," he said, unusually firm.

Elliot had no qualms. "Sure, thank you."

With things settled, the only question was where to go. Cillian wanted to leave Cairn's sorry presence as soon as he could. The tip of his boot tapped aggressively in the grass. "Where to, then?"

"Mound's Head. You should see a hillock with a cart's wheel above the door. Do you need a guide?" An ethereal moth perched on Cairn's knuckle, and he offered it forth.

Cillian wanted to slap it off his hand. It would have been brutally cathartic, but he wasn't in the mood to see Cairn flinch. He just scowled instead. Without the weight of an unresolvable promise

across his collarbone, he'd grown bold enough again to wear his resentment on his sleeve. Cairn couldn't lay a finger on him. A tangle of complicated feelings wriggled around in his heart whenever he was around the man. "I know my way around. I'm grown, unless you forgot."

The King's hand curled into a loose fist, which sent the moth fluttering back up. "Very well," he said, so delicately it threatened to blow away in the breeze.

A sight that sickened like venom.

"Come along," Cillian grumbled. He gripped the Ronans by the wrist as he did, and stormed off.

They were already over halfway there, according to the given directions, and Cillian was still fuming. He'd mostly stayed quiet aside from answering a few questions from Arthur and Elliot. He stomped over path stones, kicked pine cones out of the way, and ground his teeth. Cairn had done it again: he'd shown a hair too much emotion around him. What right, *what right did he have* to look so

sorry? Anger was preferable if anything. Seeing that sad look on his mug was just too much.

It meant Cairn still had a place for him in that big, stupid heart.

It meant there was still a chance to make it up to him, and *that* wouldn't be happening by a mile. Cillian wasn't gonna cut out what he was and what he needed, roll over, and be a good boy. He was a changeling thing by nature, and that wasn't budging anywhere soon.

Stay disappointed, he told the spectre in his head, *I'm far gone*.

A lot of the Hill they'd seen so far was indistinguishable from itself. All wild green and thickets and trees that stretched up like grateful hands. They passed a few collections of homes along the way, none of them bearing the notable wheel of Silas' abode. Elliot noticed how the houses melded with the landscape. They nearly looked like natural fixtures, if not for all the odd baubles they were decorated with. He was charmed by the way wooden, whittled flowers sprouted from the side of one mound like they'd been growing there for centuries.

“Cillian,” he said, remembering to ask, “why is your house covered in silverware?”

“Huh?” Cillian was pulled out of a fantasy where he was locking Cairn up inside of a hollow tree. His choice of decor was not something he’d put thought into for a while. “Oh, right. I used to collect them. Every fork and spoon and knife I saw. I’d make some sap glue and stick ‘em on.”

“Any reason?” Elliot thought about his own collections. He used to collect old bottle caps, until Ramona started drinking and the sight of a loose cap heralded an amorphous afternoon; so he threw them all away. His next and current collection was vintage bookplates. He still had them wedged somewhere inside a suitcase, neglected, yet eternal.

Cillian shrugged. “I just felt like it. They were human creations left behind somehow. They burned in my hands, but they were proof of an outside I wasn’t allowed to see yet. Means I can’t really touch the outside of my house, but I think it adds some charm to it you know? My neighbors think it’s ugly, *hah.*”

Elliot found that endearing; to be so fascinated with the dregs of another world washing up on the

shores of your own that you'd endure pain to keep them with you. To decorate with them, even. He tucked away that concept for later. It had potential.

"I think that's interesting," he said, and couldn't help but feel his mouth pull into an understated smile. Maybe it was because he knew he'd be stuck with Cillian for a while. Maybe it was his love of trinkets that had a story. Whatever the case, Elliot was letting himself relax, for now.

The fairy turned his head. Most of his anger had washed out of his face. "Really?"

"Sure. You seem to like it anyway, that's what matters," he said.

Arthur wished he had got the same treatment earlier. Of course, he was witness to a vulnerable shade of Elliot who had woken up to the startling miracle of losing his own face. It was hard to blame him for being upset, but all the same, his reaction felt unfair. Elliot had gone on a tirade about taking things too fast, going too far... Arthur just kept quiet, which was for the best. He didn't want it to happen again.

Cillian went similarly silent. Then he squinted from behind his sunglasses. "...You're in a good mood. What gives?"

"I suppose I'm looking forward to meeting Silas."

"Oh. Yeah. Good for you," Cillian said. He had been too focused on loathing Cairn to think about what was ahead of them. Even worse, they were almost there. He recognized the area as Mound's Head. Now, his mind was filled with anxieties over how to act and what to expect. Apparently the guy knew him, but how well? He figured it had to be one of those '*I met you when you were small*' situations. That, or Silas knew Cairn personally, and they spoke about him. Questions swirled around in his mind like a vortex. Had he not been raised in the Hill all his life, he would have tripped and tumbled head over tail by now.

Elliot was too deep in his own world of questions to pick up on Cillian's nervousness. He had another inquiry loaded on his tongue like a crossbow bolt, and when things got all too quiet, it found its mark.

"So even *cutlery* can burn your kind?"

Cillian reeled out of his thoughts again. Humanfolk never ceased to ask him weird little things did they? The Ronans, Walter—*no, no, don't think about that*—the McCowan fella he nicked forever ago... It was one of the things he loved most about their kind. The Hill was one big curiosity to them, unlike it had ever been for *him* past his youth. How refreshing it was to make it all anew, again and again, vicariously. To lavish in wonder and discovery! His mood was a jumble, but he was at least reminded that he had a foot in the door. As long as that curiosity stayed, so would they.

“Course it burns,” he said, assuming a more spirited tone. “It’s iron all the same.”

“So universally iron is...an irritant for your kind,” said Elliot.

Cillian made a strangled sound. “That, my friend, is cutting it *small*.”

“How so?”

“Well, here,” he said, as plainly as checking a watch. He turned his hand upwards, palm to the sky, and watched Ell flinch when it burst into flames.

“AH!” Elliot gasped. “Your-!”

“Just a trick, get used to it,” he said, passing his other hand through the fire. “There’s no heat, see? It isn't real. Now listen, I’ve got a point. If this were a real flame, and I pressed it to you, it’d be a lot more than irritating wouldn't it?”

“Y-yes. It would.”

While Elliot was flighty about the illusion, Arthur was captivated by it. His interest bled through as a sudden streak of burlywood amidst the sea of darker hair on their head. He wanted to ask if he could learn such a thing, sometime.

It didn't go unnoticed. *Two birds with one stone*, Cillian thought.

“Right, so even the littlest sliver of iron is like a hotcoal. The forks and whatnot, I picked ‘em up with either leaves or mud packed all over my hands.”

Arthur asked in turn “why does it burn in the first place?”

The flame disappeared. “...I dunno actually. It’s just how it is.” He pressed his hand to his chin in thought, a habit so consistent that it was a wonder it didn't leave a permanent imprint there.

Where path stones didn't rest, the ground was a mixture of dark earth and tree litter, with a generous blanket of moss. Twigs, pinecones, and needles were peppered over it all. As words faded away, muffled crunches broke the quiet. It was peaceful enough to get dull again.

Cillian's mind wandered. He thought about the impact of iron. Growing up, he'd traced burns that had swollen into lumps and wrinkles, poked at scars that bloomed outwards like flowers, milky and red and dark. For hill-folk who had seen the war, carrying these marks with them meant they made it out of the other side alive. His hands didn't carry any scars like *that*. He'd never seen the horror of a conflict.

There was still iron in the Hill before any of it, though. Lost travelers with their tools and horses with tack. Stragglers who managed to slip through without getting turned around, and likely eaten by Nameless soon after. It was only a material, not a shred of ill intent in its contents, and yet it still burned whoever it touched. Had it always been this way? He wondered if the metal were to speak, would it be sorry for its existence?

It was a historian they were about to visit. The collective walking beside him didn't know what they were in for, did they? Silas knew they were human already, if he'd really been at the Court. This was a man of the Hill with his hands deep in the muck of the bloody past. When Cillian still intended to cut the Ronans loose and consider them a lost cause, he'd prodded Elliot a little for not knowing any better. Now the thought of someone being prickly towards them for their humanity made him itch.

At least the past wasn't all bad. He hoped Silas was more the sentimental type.

After some minutes more of walking, the arc of a spoked wheel caught their eyes. Just as Cairn had described, the wheel was perched above the modest wooden door. Mossy grass carpeted the roof behind it and sloped up into a higher ground blanketed with foliage and conifers. The windows were glass, a rare sight, rimmed with white trim and shadowed by curtains. It wasn't adorned in knickknacks like its peers. Comparatively it was a rather plain dwelling, excusing the fact it was dug halfway into the earth.

Cillian stepped up to knock, as much as he didn't want to. Their first task had arrived.

Chapter Ten

Silas' house was warm and comfortable. It was lined with wood where the earthen walls did not dominate, sporting a roof made of interwoven roots from the trees above, sturdy posts standing in the middle to support the ceiling, and a smooth floor of log-hewn boards. It was also *stuffed to the gills* with objects, such that there was very little space to walk around without bumping into one thing or another. Boxes and baskets and bags of all kinds were piled high with relics from the past. An ancient musket was sidled up to a worn, leather saddle like two old friends. Were it organized better, it would have qualified as a museum, but it was nothing more than an impressive personal collection gathering dust.

Elliot was ecstatic. This was a treasure trove of antiques and history, and he had the perfect excuse to get deep into it. He wanted to run his hands along the aged surfaces and feel the gravity of time they held within. Read the old letters and books tucked beside shoddy coats and shawls. They would make for excellent research towards his writing, after all.

Arthur was more fixated on Silas himself, who didn't cut as intimidating of a figure as Cairn, but exuded an impressive presence. He clutched a polished walking cane for his bad leg, which he had a habit of idly tapping, and sharp attire in earthy colors. With what they had seen so far, it was more a curiosity than a shock that he had the head of an owl. His feathers were a tawny brown along his back, and his front was the color of cream. He wore an old wool overcoat with crisp lapels and a pair of black slacks. Interestingly enough, his feathers didn't terminate where his clothing covered him, and across his shoulders the coat bore a generous ruffle of them. They were perfectly melded with the fabric, and showed no real distinction between fiber and plume.

He had greeted them courteously and sat them at a cushioned bench with drinks to warm their laps. With cider swirling around in simple earthenware cups, the atmosphere felt oddly welcoming. It was far from the reception everyone was expecting.

Now, he briefed them on the task ahead of them.

“There are some rules I hope you will abide by,” he said. His voice was smooth and patient. He had an elegant cadence that matched well with his rather coordinated movement and pursuing gaze.

Cillian’s sunglasses were fogged from the steam, but he didn't dare remove them. He only stopped blowing on his drink for a second to give a thumbs up.

Elliot nodded attentively as if he were a pleasure to have in class. In the shadow of his enthusiasm, Arthur was awfully cramped.

“Perfect. One: you are expected to move my things around to my specifications only and nothing more.” Silas tapped his cane against the floor to punctuate. He had suddenly donned an air of authority as he spoke. “Two: you will handle each and every item with the utmost care and delicacy. The trouble I have gone through to collect these articles is immense. If you break something, I will visit *twice* the trouble upon you.”

Cillian felt a shiver go down his back and sheepishly said “got it.” The look in Silas’ eyes meant he would easily follow through on a threat like that, he could tell.

Understandable, thought Elliot, *such things are usually fragile*. He decided he would be extraordinarily careful if he could help it.

“Three, one last rule: you may only lay your hands on what I direct you to touch.” With that, he tapped his cane again, and straightened himself with a dignified waggle. “Is that clear?”

“Clear as a creek, boss,” said Cillian. He didn't want to get on the worse side of their host, especially after dealing with Cairn. Stealing a glance at Elliot, he realized they couldn't be feeling more than different. The guy was even wearing a smile when he said his agreements—but was he really listening? Elliot's eyes didn't stay in one place for long, feasting on the promising collection and rarely straying back to its keeper.

“Excellent,” said Silas, “We can begin.”

The brief and drinks were done with, so Silas got to doling out instructions on what to do. The main issue was that a corner of his home was covered in the most ‘recent’ arrivals that needed to go elsewhere, and since Silas had injured his leg acquiring his goods a handful of years ago, it was getting harder and harder to do the work himself.

The items were to be taken from the pile and to their designated homes. However, there was something strange about the way it was organized. It was almost as if they were slotted in with other items without rhyme or reason.

Elliot had carried a pack of cigars over to a blanket and a pair of shoes tucked inside a wicker basket. He felt a prickle of disquiet at the sight; shouldn't shoes be with other articles of clothing? Why did he insist the cigars be placed *here*? After taking a book about agriculture over to a chipped mixing bowl rather than the other books, and a set of playing cards to a faded blue coat, he began to question what Silas was even making them do.

At least he could savor the brief time he had handling each object. Some were more modern articles, while others were genuine artifacts. Mundane, but spectacular in their age. Some of the collection had to have been from the nineteenth century at the earliest. He lingered over book pages and the curve of a rock-hard canteen, a tin full of photographs...whatever he was assigned, it would stay in his hands a little longer than it was supposed to.

Arthur, who spectated separately, had different thoughts about the way things were kept. While the manner of sorting was odd, it was Silas' business where he wanted his things to go. It was more like a puzzle to him than a frustration as he wondered what threads linked the objects together for the owlish fairy. He also took interest when Silas sat down in a comfortable looking chair, and plucked a viola from the small table beside it.

Cillian had not been paying much attention to Silas over his demands. He had picked up whatever new target was asked of him and dropped it off, not particularly caring about what it was unless it was iron enough to burn him or he truly hadn't seen such a thing before. Instead, while the objects came and went, ideas of how they'd appeared in the collection filled his head. Who owned them before this? How many long gone, human hands had touched each and every thing?

The ringing of a choked bell resurfaced in his memory. He pushed it away to take in yet another piece of direction from Silas, and kept at his work.

Now isn't the time...

When the stroke of a viola reached his ears, he nearly dropped the glassware he was holding and fumbled wildly to catch it. His pulse quickened. He had never once been in the proximity of such a loud instrument, especially not indoors. The sound pained him until he settled.

The melody was well practiced. It started slow and uncertain, then accelerated into something jovial. It was almost capricious the way it danced and retreated, a fickle and tempting piece of music. Silas' hands followed the same motion as the song, traveling to and fro and up and down wherever the fingers and bow were meant to travel. It quickly became apparent to an astute listener that while it was impressive on its own, it was meant to be a duet.

He would pause every so often to point his bow at some object and describe its destination with a graceful swipe and a handful of words. For even lengthier periods he would set the viola down and explain the proper way to hold something or other to ensure it didn't tumble and damage itself against the hard floor.

Strikingly, Arthur found he recognized the tune. It was different when it wasn't distorted by distance, but he still knew it as the faraway song that haunted the village every week. The shock of recognition made another lock of the body's hair fade to lighter brown. He waited until Silas had paused again and raised his hand to speak.

Silas stared. "Are you in need of a break?"

Borrowing the mouth momentarily, Arthur said "no, um—is it you? Are you the one who always plays that song?"

The feather tufts on Silas' head perked up with interest. "You have heard it before?"

Art clung to the front a little longer. "Yes! Weekly, like clockwork...and I'm not the only one who stops to listen in. I always assumed it was someone living somewhere on the mountain. It's beautiful." He'd always loved that melody, and the few other songs that it would trade places with.

"All this time..." said Silas, wistfully. His feathers puffed as he sunk into flattered consideration.

Despite his decent mood, Elliot wanted to maintain full control for appearances sake. Arthur

was polite and all, the kind soul, but this was *his* opportunity to speak with someone like himself. So he tapped his headfellow on the illusive shoulder, and said “*Arthur*, I would *really* appreciate it if you let me do the talking.”

It was easier to mistakenly let thoughts slip into objections within the headspace. “I don't see what's wrong,” Arthur blurted, before realizing he should have just said *okay*.

“I could have asked *for you*,” Elliot continued.

“Well I can...ask my own questions,” said Arthur, uncertain of himself.

“Anyhow,” Silas interrupted, unaware of their conversation, “that jar belongs with the journal over there, Cillian.” He pointed towards a table with a ratty looking leather bound journal.

Cillian was startled yet again, as he was busy dwelling on the realization that the faint, weekly wailing of unseen ghosts he'd been hearing for most of his years was just an instrument all along. All this time, and Mound's Head wasn't actually *fucking haunted*.

“Aye,” he said, and quickly put the thing in its place.

Elliot wasn't used to chafing with Arthur. Usually he'd do whatever he was told. It wasn't that Elliot saw him as an underling or a lackey; he had just grown accustomed to having someone he could always have his way with. Someone patient, understanding, someone who would make space for him and pick him up when he was exhausted. A counselor. A caretaker. He knew Arthur's role in their collective was to have his best interests at heart.

Additionally, he couldn't fathom why glassware and a journal would be paired, among all the other strange groupings Silas had them perform. He was a bundle of conflicted excitement, confusion, and itch.

"Silas, I have a suggestion," he said, forcibly placing himself in control again. He tried his best to sound reasonable.

Arthur was left to stand there watching, speechless. A new emotion began to warm, then simmer, then boil inside him. He *wanted* to stick around, to seek answers with his own voice. If Elliot could, why couldn't he? Was he really *that* embarrassing?

"What would that be?" the owl man asked.

Elliot gestured to the room. "Surely you could group things by material, or similarity? Why are all the books scattered around for instance?" While he tried not to let it out, a hint of distaste was present.

Silas stood from his seat, feathers ruffled, and gripped the handle of his cane. "You are here to move my things, not categorize them yourself."

"But your organizational system...you could sort out your collection a lot more efficiently if you tried a different way." He picked up a random tome and set it with a nearby notebook to illustrate. "Like this, books with books. Easier to find."

The fairy was very still, and very silent. Then he blinked, tapped his cane, and said "it is not meant for *your* ease."

Elliot, who had a running streak of failing to stop when he damn well should, replied, "I just don't understand your logic. The layout here borders on unintelligible."

Tap. Tap. Tap. Silas walked towards him slowly. He pressed himself well into Elliot's personal space, snatched the tome he had placed down, and returned it to its rightful place. Silas then gripped him by the wrist. "I did *not* tell you to touch that.

Have some respect for my things. If you will not, *get out.*"

Elliot shrunk back, the touch sending needles of fear through him. Only two people had ever grabbed him like that, and he'd moved *far* away to escape their clutches. He could hardly stutter through an apology.

Cillian watched the event with disdain. *Is it too late to tell him to shut it before he gets us thrown out?*

Arthur couldn't stand to sit on the sidelines. Anger was a stranger to him, locked away, but Elliot had finally turned the key. In the visual haze of the mindscape, he stepped in front of his beloved, *cornered* Elliot and stared him right in the mind's eye. Never before had such an expression touched Arthur's face.

"Look what you've done with your chance."

Elliot was a mess. "I, I was only making a suggestion! He doesn't understand, if I could just *explain-*"

"No." Arthur was over it.

A touch of anger waded through the fear.

"What do you mean *no?*"

“For your sake...” he stopped himself. It wasn't for *his* sake, and he wasn't one to lie. “For my sake, I want to fix this. So I'll be driving.”

“We—we had an *agreement!*” Elliot stuttered, his feelings pulled in several directions.

“So did you and Silas, and you made an exception of yourself just fine.”

The tension tugged on a few mental strings that snaked back into the gloom behind them. Ramona had been napping through the day, but now there was a *show*. She rose from the bed and the muddy blankets containing her, and slunk towards the front of their mind with anticipation. She really wanted to see *this*.

Chapter Eleven

Silas, who had been staring at the Ronans with contempt, saw their face blur and twitch as if it couldn't decide what it looked like. The only consistency was their eyes, which were limply glued to the floor. He dropped his imposing position in a fit of bemusement, and let go of their arm.

"Is he...quite alright...?" Silas said to Cillian, who had approached to assess. "He's human, no?"

He hummed thoughtfully. "Hm. There's three of 'em in there you know. Maybe they've had a mix-up. You startled them well enough."

Colors of annoyance flowed back into Silas' tone. "*Tch*. Perhaps they should fix *their* organizational system before judging mine."

Cillian wrinkled his nose. "Hey, be easy. Elliot's a weirdo but he means well. They all do."

"Elliot, is that who challenged me?"

He nodded. "That'd be him. Though another was around too, I noticed when he asked you about-"

Silas cut him off. "You should keep a tighter leash on that boy. I won't excuse such contentions again."

Great. Another relatively important person was upset. He rolled his eyes and let it pass. "*Moving on.* They'll sort themselves out I think. I haven't seen this before."

Meanwhile, the Ronans were far from sorted. Ramona had emerged from the dark to watch her brothers go at each other's throats. She was betting on Arthur: he was shaping up to have a backbone, for once. Elliot could get bent if he was gonna be a control freak for the millionth day in a row.

Arthur stood steadfast. "You always take my advice when you don't know who else to turn to, and...my advice for you now is to *stop.*"

Elliot scowled. "I'm not *compromised* Arthur, I could improve things for Silas if I just de-escalate and try a new approach. He's a historian, he should catalogue things in a way that can aid his studies."

"*He doesn't need your improvements,*" Arthur hissed. If he had a body of his own, he would have mistaken his frustration for rising bile.

Ramona ate it *up*. This was exactly what she wanted to see thrown in Elliot's face. She stayed tucked away in the shadows to avoid drawing attention to herself, and watched on.

"It would be useful," came Elliot's cold reply.

Something inside of Arthur twinged. "You...you don't have any respect for him."

That caught him off guard, and he became defensive. "Of course I do, he's knowledgeable. He could be an asset towards--"

"That's it, Elliot, the man is nothing but an *asset* to you. You would have listened if you actually *cared* instead of stroking your own ego." He looked upon Elliot with stricken disappointment. "You fail again and again to write even *one* word of your barely formed concept, reject any help thrown your way, and you expect to give good advice? This isn't your project! This isn't your house!" He tasted the edge in his tone and felt like he had a blade for a tongue. He covered his mouth.

That was enough. Mortification consumed Elliot. He took a step back, eyes alight with shock. Arthur had never spoken to him like that. He had hardly ever raised his voice before.

The green haze of the mindscape drifted on as Ramona watched the two with bated breath. Arthur had run out of things to say, so he turned his face away from him.

“.....W-what should I do?” Elliot asked after a long silence. Long enough that all of them realized there was an entire conversation happening outside, and they were dissociating through it.

Arthur lost his heat. “Silas has his reasons, so we should let him choose what he does. These are his belongings after all, it’s not a public museum.”

At this point, the third of the Ronans made her entrance. “Exactly. Good to see you take him down a peg, Art.”

Elliot only groaned, and looked down at the implication of a floor.

“O-oh! Mona, I thought I felt you wake,” Arthur said. “I’m sorry you had to see that, ah...” Caught berating his brother, his shyness returned to him.

She patted his shoulder. “No, no, it was great! Keep it up! He should be more aware of his actions, don't you agree?”

“Well, um-”

“There’s no shock in me doing it. He’s tuned me out.” She stared openly at Elliot, hoping it would burn the lesson into him. He just kept his head down. The satisfaction was fading by the minute.

Arthur winced. “I’m going to take the wheel, make sure he’s okay for me please.”

“No promises,” said Ramona casually, until she caught a taste of the remorseful current that trickled through both brothers, and added: “...but I’ll try.”

Sway over the body returned to Arthur. With the rage bled out of him, he was left to face the consequences of Elliot’s actions. He came to, and the body re-settled on his appearance. The fairy men before him were speaking quietly with each other. Silas looked upset, and Cillian just looked tired.

“Hello,” he tried, finding his voice.

“Art! There you are,” Cillian said, grasping him by the shoulders. “Did you talk some sense into him? Running his mouth like that... Silas was just about to give him hell. I was sorry for him.”

“Oh um. Yes. I think so.”

Internally, Ramona had an arm hooked around Elliot, and was keeping his attention on what was

going on outside of the headspace. He seemed uncomfortable, but he was watching attentively.

Silas turned his head with an uncanny rotation befitting only an owl. "Another?"

"Hi, I'm Arthur," he said, remembering he hadn't introduced himself. Then it struck him that he should apologize.

"I'm deeply sorry! Elliot was...interested in your collection and didn't realize he was offending you. I've spoken with him." He figured that was accurate enough.

The fairy clacked his beak. "I see. I suppose I should thank you for keeping a handle on him." Though annoyed, Silas lingered on the sight of Arthur's changed face as if it were an interesting bauble. Those voidlike eyes regarded him as timelessly as a pool of water.

Icy shame coursed through Elliot, but he kept his mouth shut. He watched and waited to see how the situation would continue. Ramona encouraged it; she wasn't going to let him take his eyes off of it.

Arthur floundered for something to say, and landed on "may I speculate about your sorting system?"

He narrowed his eyelids. "You best not make any further *suggestions* to me, if you want to remain in this house."

Trying to remain calm, Arthur waved his hands. "No no, I mean to say I um, might have an understanding of you! I want to learn." He had been piecing together possible links between the sorted items as Elliot worked, and figured he was onto something at last.

Silas tilted his head in consideration. "An understanding? You seem keen, very well, give me your guesses. In turn, I'd like to learn about your..." he extended an index finger in his general direction and circled it around. "...glamor."

"My what?"

Cillian grinned, realizing he could impress the man and help turn things around. "That's the trick I taught you. Aye Silas, Art here is a *natural*." He clapped Arthur's back proudly. "Turns out humans can get a hang of what we do, too. You just gotta seed them with enough Hill."

The owl's eyes glimmered, betraying his detached veneer. "Impressive... That would be in line with some of my thoughts."

Now Cillian was interested. "Thoughts?"

At this, Silas warmed somewhat. It was with the same tones of someone who had prepared a speech they had never had the chance to use, that he said "I believe we have much in common with humans. That we aren't such fundamentally different beings. I know it's not a popular concept, but the evidence is undeniable to me."

To Cillian's ears, that was a radical theory for a fellow Hill creature to voice *after* the attack, especially coming from someone so entrenched in its history. Cillian felt just the same, in honesty. The line between human and hillish was a blurry thing for a changeling sort like him.

"Really?" Arthur asked eagerly.

Silas yet again tapped his cane for effect. "From what I've studied and picked apart: it could be so. Your use of glamor proves to me there's a thread between us. Either the Hill is generous, or we are intertwined creatures." He caught himself on the edge of smiling, and cleared his throat. "Right. Well. That's only a theory. You were saying?"

“Ah, yes. I was thinking, maybe you’re keeping things together that were...used together? That were around at the same time?”

“Do give me an example.”

Arthur pointed to a small hatchet, sheathed in leather. Beside it was a tinderbox, a whittling knife, and a lantern. “They’re related, aren’t they? These all have to do with gathering kindling.”

Silas was pleased. “Why yes, you *almost* have it. That other soul of yours could do well to take after you.”

That wrung more heavy feelings out of Elliot, so Ramona gave him a brotherly squeeze. “It’s fine,” she said, “you don’t like it when strangers touch your stuff either, do you?”

“No...” he admitted. “You don’t think he considers me stupid for that...do you?”

“Ell, the only one around here who thinks you’re an idiot is me. Pay attention, Art’s really buttering him up. By the time this is over he’ll probably believe whatever the guy says, including how he’s spun your case.”

“Mm...okay. I just get the feeling I’ve really shot myself in the foot. What if it spreads that I’m inconsiderate, somehow?”

She used every ounce of her being to hide her feelings on the matter because he *really was* an inconsiderate asshole in her eyes. Right now though, she just had to make sure he saw Arthur set a good example.

“It’ll be okay,” she said, and nothing more.

Arthur laughed nervously. He could tell that Silas’ remark stung. “How close was I?”

“Oh quite close. There’s an element you’re missing, and it’s rather personal to me. Artistic, if I may be so inclined.”

He dared to ask “is that why you were so upset just now?”

Silas clicked his beak again. “Hmph. Mostly, yes. There’s value in my process, and I can barely even exercise it myself these days, what with my leg. Would you not be upset watching someone else muddy your vision?”

“I understand. What part was I missing?”

Arthur noticed his tail then, as it began to sway back and forth with interest. Had it unfolded from him

alongside his face? He didn't bother to hide it again with Elliot out of the way.

"I've heard that you are storytellers, so here is my secret. I am too!" He picked up the brass lantern with his free hand. "This lantern uses dry fuel, not oil. The owner would have had to feed it, and do so often. So I imagine..." he paused to set it down and lift the hatchet, "...that they would have spent a lot of their time collecting tinder. Looking along the ground, at bushes or trees, and picking up twigs. *Chop chop.*"

Cillian leaned in and poked the brass while Silas wasn't looking. No burning sensation, not even a tingle. He didn't know the difference between metals, and decided it was either tamed like *Lake*, or tampered with.

It dawned on Elliot that Silas was doing something far more exciting than he'd given him credit for. To his sister, he said, "Is he creating personal exhibits...? That's incredible."

"This is why you hear people out, dude."

"...I suppose. I just didn't expect a fairy to perform this kind of expression. I'm impressed."

“Shows what you know.” She jostled him.

He sighed. *“Thanks for rubbing it in.”*

Arthur decided to externalize. “You know Silas, Elliot changed his mind. He likes what you’re doing here.”

That charmed the fairy. “Well, if he sees the merit in my work...then I forgive him for his foolishness. ”

“I do!” Elliot said, his voice falling short of their mouth. Ramona gave him a pat.

Cillian carefully picked up the knife by its wooden handle. “So is this for carving firewood?”

“Yes, according to the tale I’ve crafted for it, it was used for shaving sticks and bark into smaller pieces, and then setting them in the box for later. Toiling away in the daylight to gather for the lantern, burning through it all after dark. But there is something you wouldn’t expect within. Observe.” Silas tenderly lifted the lid of the tinderbox, revealing a detailed carving on the inside of it. It depicted a song thrush, watching over the flint, steel, and tinder contained within. Spots and all. *“This is the particular reason I included the knife.”*

“Wow,” mouthed Arthur, in love.

“...One could say this is how the individual received the box; that a relative, friend, or craftsman etched it this way. In my interpretation however, as an indulgence, I like to think that this woods-goer had a soft spot for birds. Perhaps they carved it themselves.”

Cillian peered inside the box. It was a strange and admirable thing. “Quite the imagination you have there.”

“Thank you,” said Silas, his breath hanging off of the last syllable. It seemed like he had never caught the opportunity to share the extent of his hobby with another living being. He had the flutters of a lonely artist.

He turned on his heel and strutted in staccato taps to his chair. He picked up the viola and its ever-faithful bow, and pointed it straight at Cillian and the Ronans. “You know what, you’ve won me over. Let’s build a tale together.”

The two bodies glanced at one another.

He changed his tune quick! Thought Cillian. From resentment to joy in a heartbeat... Other hill-folk really were just as unpredictable as humans. He

wondered if Silas was a supporter of his idea to open the Hill's borders to outsiders again.

Elliot was relieved that his reputation with the fairy had been salvaged. If not for Arthur... He didn't want to imagine the impression he would have walked away with after insulting Silas' craft. He'd been so ignorant in his suggestions. And for what? To seem more intelligent? Guilt pulsed inside him like a vein.

He itched to grab the controls and communicate an apology directly, but he couldn't bring himself to. There was no point in smothering Arthur just for his reputation's sake, *again*.

So when Arthur smiled at Silas, and said "I'd be happy to make a story with you," Elliot stayed behind. He resigned himself to spectate.

Ramona ruminated on a hope that things were on the right track for once. "Hey," she said, and nudged Ell. "Good job."

He hadn't heard that sincerely in a long, long time. Not from her. It didn't sound right from her mouth when it wasn't sarcastic, so he gave no response. He was more focused on Arthur anyway.

She gave up and scooted away from his presence. It wasn't worth talking to a wall, but she didn't let it get to her.

Silas directed Arthur and Cillian to find a snare, a fur coat, and an empty cheesecloth bundle. Cillian left the snare to Arthur, who could safely hold the iron, and held the coat and cloth under his arm. Silas strummed, meanwhile, a tune that hummed with potential. At the touch of his bow, the strings spilled out an illusion of a snow flurry.

Arthur was mesmerized by the sight. The room remained warm, but the unreal snowflakes whorled around like they'd been blustered by a cold front. Cillian's flame trick came to mind.

"Now tell me," Silas said to the two, lowering the tempo, "what brings these lonely articles together?"

Cillian ran his hand along the fur of the coat in his hands. The softness was genuine, like the collar of his own jacket. "A pile of fur and a springtrap, I reckon that'd belong to a trapper?" he offered.

A sharp set of chords spelled Silas' approval. "Yes, my thoughts exactly. Now, what of the cloth?"

“To hold bait? Trail rations?” suggested Arthur. Another run of the viola meant that it was so. It tickled the inside of his chest. He liked this activity so far.

“Perfect, we have a huntress out in the cold, with an iron trap and naught but a small bundle to fill her stomach. Cillian, there is a boot with no partner over there, can you retrieve it?”

“Aye, one sad shoe coming along shortly,” he said. He returned with a worn, black boot.

“Arthur, why do you think this pair is incomplete?”

He thought for a minute, having set the busted, rusty old snare onto the floor to grab ahold of the boot. The floor was pretending to be caked in a layer of snow, but the trap clattered against it anyway. The details came to him slowly.

“She...she made a mistake,” he started. “She set up the trap incorrectly, it didn't trigger for the prey.”

“Go on,” said Silas, who looked to be having fun. It was like a game. His melody *crawled* in anticipation.

“...she threw her boot at it, trying to get it to work.”

A shrill note from the viola indicated a *snap*.

“*Woe*, a ruined shoe.”

Cillian’s nape stood on end. “Did she abandon it?” he asked, because now there was a face to these miscellaneous objects and *people* were a lot more entertaining to him. He began to forget the trapper was imaginary.

“It wasn’t in the worst condition, so she could have tried to retrieve it,” said Silas.

Arthur shivered at the idea of having to reach into a spring-loaded trap. “Maybe it was the prying and pulling that really damaged it,” he said.

“Certainly. If our huntress can’t set a trap correctly, she would have been a novice lacking in experience. Thus... her boot met an ill fate, and she either went home hungry, and cold, or did not go home at all.” Silas played a suitably glum finale for the end of the tale, and set down his instrument. The illusion of snow dissipated. He was content.

“That was fun,” Arthur said, “have you been doing all that on your own this whole time?”

A stone's toss worth of seconds ambled by, before the owl said "Yes, it keeps me busy. It's what you could conservatively call my passion."

Elliot thought it was a shame an activity like this couldn't be shared with more of an audience. It could make for an excellent educational tool... Perhaps if he really did succeed at crafting a good fairy story, and humans started to visit the Hill as his companion hoped, a historical presentation could further bridge the gap between the two populations.

That is, if Elliot would bother to tell his assigned story to the village at all. If he did, he would have to organize it somehow. Hand out flyers, find a space in which to orate... There was no doubt at least half of Alderhill's populace would attend. Entertainment was entertainment, and with a tapestry of traditional beliefs and superstition hanging over almost everyone's heads, whether they really did put any stake in it or not, they would listen.

Cillian wasn't finished with the game. He was a fiend for any kind of narrative entertainment, and a *real* ending hadn't been put into play yet. He was left to hunger. "That's it? But what happened after? Do

you think something got her while she stumbled through the snow?" he asked.

Out reached Silas to give Cillian's nose a tap. "Insatiable boy, *that* is for you to decide. What seems the most likely, in your eyes? Consider that, and you have your answer."

A gleam crossed his eye. He'd never been given the reins over a character's fate before. He hooked a finger through a dense lock of hair while he thought. "There's no way a starving girl freezing her foot off would make it far. Poor thing."

Arthur gave his shoulder a pat. "It's alright Cillian, maybe something else got the chance to eat that day."

Everyone turned their heads at the morbid idea. The two fairies, Elliot, and even Ramona goggled at him. Cillian looked like he'd been kicked.

The attention startled him, and an attempt was made to explain himself. "Ah—it's sad of course, but that's nature." After a beat, he added in sotto, "*yeah, poor girl.*"

Cillian only grumbled and cast his gaze to the floorboards.

Quickly, Silas cleared his throat. “How about we continue with another tale?”

Chapter Twelve

Many faces arose from the old, gathered objects as the group worked. They spun lives and snapshots to the tune of Silas' viola; always only ever a guess at the real moments each item contained within themselves. Formed from the collection, the dramatis personae were never named and never fully explained, only adding to their mystery.

It was all too easy to get absorbed into the little narratives, especially with Silas' fancy illusions. Cillian found himself asking more and more questions, craving all the details of the made-up people they were playing biography with. Some part of him was always threatening to get attached, until the music would cease and it was on to the next. He loved it just as much as it gave him a terrible itch.

Partway through the tale of a forager, performed by a small curved knife, a pair of deep-pocketed pants, and a tarnished locket, he gave in. Arthur had suggested the locket contained the face of a loved one lost to the woods, who the forager secretly searched for while scrounging around. Cillian

couldn't take it, it was just such a compelling tale that he had to ask "what was he *called*?"

Silas shook his head. "It's not right to put a Name to it. He will be *Forager*, and nothing more."

He had shuffled his feet then. "It's unfinished..."

In the tones of a consoling parent, Silas said "Oh cuckoo bird, you know none of it is real. Don't have it haunt you."

Cillian frowned, and crossed his arms. "Hey, lay off with that. I know what is and what isn't. The story's too good, that's all."

"Cuckoo?" asked Arthur, who was left confused more often than not.

The cuckoo in question huffed. "So, what's left to sort? This place is looking better already." He shot a look at Silas that said *leave it*.

It was true, though. Silas' home had become far less haphazard; a great many objects, small and large, helter and skelter, were now in their proper places among the items they found the most convincing companionship with. The transformation had made his house look less like a dragon's messy lair, and more like a props closet for a stage play.

“Nothing, you’re all done.” Silas rose from his chair, and clasped his hands over his cane. Much like his home, his mood had been dramatically altered. He had an air of pleasant satisfaction about him, and it was infectious.

“Already?” asked Cillian.

“It’s been a few hours,” Arthur replied. “I’m glad we could help you, Silas.”

He bowed. “I’m grateful. A moment please, and I’ll send you on your way.”

“Hours...”

As Cillian contemplated the passage of time, Silas strolled off to his kitchen. He took something from a shelf, and returned with a small, but weighty cotton bag. “My thanks, have this” he said, and handed it to the Ronans.

“Thank you,” said Arthur. Peeking inside of the opening, he saw what looked like candied nuts. The aroma was earthy, with a distinct edge of honey and mint.

Cillian huddled close. He recognized the gift; it was a common snack in Mound. He hadn’t had any in a long while, but he found the taste irresistible.

“That’s plenty generous of you!” he said, plucking the bag out of their palm and tossing a few of the candies into his mouth. It was as sweet and crunchy as he remembered it.

Elliot wasn’t pleased with having something snatched from their hands, but Ramona covered his mouth before he could object, while Arthur gently took a nut from the bag. They all enjoyed the flavor.

The bitterness that consumed Silas prior had faded. Perhaps the company, tidier space, and genuine interest in his work had undone some of the tangle one gets from living with only a disorderly hoard for household company. He seemed more tickled by his guests’ behaviour than anything.

“I believe I was right to request you after all.”

“An honor to work with you,” said Arthur, echoing Elliot’s regards.

Elliot certainly wasn’t used to communicating by proxy, and while being held back in this way mortified him, he had to contend with being humbled for now.

Cillian shrugged, swallowing more candies. “It was a good bit of fun. I figure I’ll be stuck working

my tail off for a good measure now, so you call for me if you want me.”

“I might just, you’re not as much of a terror as I imagined. You’ve done a good job.”

He stiffened. “You don’t say?”

“Mhm. Cairn and I chat now and then. From what he said of you I thought I’d have to keep you in check, but you focused on what I asked of you and handled my pieces gently. Really, I thought you to be a troublemaking child, not the well mannered man before me.”

“I, uh...” Cillian floundered. He stuck more candy in his mouth.

Silas chuckled and patted his shoulder. “If you’re that hungry, I can send you and your friends off with a meal.”

“Ah no need really,” said Arthur, “I don’t want to impose much. Especially after...”

“Nonsense! Look around you, my house is in excellent order. Let bygones be bygones. I’ll be back in a moment...”

As the owl left to prepare them a lunch, Cillian swallowed his mouthful. He found himself somewhere to sit, splayed out his legs, and stared at

the space of floor between them. Arthur quietly sat down at his side. The only evidence his presence was noticed was a twitch in the fairy's ear. After that, the various shufflings in the kitchen became the only sound in the house. Silas seemed to have a habit of whistling when he was in a good mood.

Arthur leaned further to get a look at Cillian, but he was noticed. Cillian didn't turn his head, instead flicking his eye at the curious Ronan.

"What," said Cillian, "got somethin' on my face?"

"A crumb there, but I wasn't looking at that."

He wiped his mouth. "What then? You're always lookin' at me."

"There's something on your mind."

"Mm." He gripped his tail. Arthur only mirrored the action, which he found confusing. When he raised his brow, the human smiled at him.

"You don't have to tell me what it is, I'm just wondering if I can help."

Cillian sighed. "Well, Silas... I dunno. Was just something he said. I'll be fine."

Arthur leaned closer. "Yeah?"

"...Nobody tells me 'good job,' It's weird."

"I know the feeling," said Ramona. The words tumbled out in a heavier tone than Arthur's soft affect.

He stared back at the floorboards for some time.

"It's not like I do much good anyway," he mumbled eventually.

Before they could reply, Silas had returned with a neatly wrapped bundle in each hand. He strode up to the two bodies and tilted his head. "I have better seats than the floor, you know."

"Ehh," said Cillian, "I like the floor."

"Me too," said Arthur. Cillian gave him another quizzical look.

"Well if you're done imitating the furniture, I have some humble provisions. Here." He handed them the bundles, which were warm to the touch.

"Thank you again."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Silas nodded. "Of course. Now, time for farewell."

They both got up and dusted themselves off. Arthur made sure their bag was secure and placed his bundled lunch within, while Cillian pocketed the

nut candy. The house had only grown cosier than when they'd first arrived, what a shame they had other places to be.

"See you, Silas, I hope this makes your work easier," said Arthur.

"Certainly," said Silas, "now go. Best wishes towards your other tasks."

It was already afternoon by the time they were headed back to the Court. Arthur was sore in his heels and knees. The weight of standing, walking, and carrying things in the space of only a home had taken its toll. It was with huffy breaths and winces that he kept in pace with Cillian.

Despite that, spirits were high. They shared their lunches and saturated the air with talk of other treats Cillian was happy to explain. He flicked his fingers as he described a seedpod that would burst open when it fully ripened, and how the seeds inside were good for a quick snack after roasting. There was also a small, wild grain that a brittle sort of

bread was made from, and it totally sucked in his opinion.

Arthur loved hearing it all. There was always something new to learn with Cillian. He was glad to watch the sun slowly graze its talons along the forest floor as he listened along to his facts and anecdotes. The shuffles in the canopy didn't feel as haunting anymore.

The others rode in passenger, demanding little. Ramona was half asleep again, still slumped against Elliot, idle thoughts of making herself a glamor passing through her mind. She didn't have the presence to try on any of it yet; only the want to dream.

Elliot was still on edge, ruminating about Silas. The situation had turned out okay—*more* than okay without his involvement. He still had tugs of embarrassment at the memory, but that was lesser than the relief Arthur earned. His trust in his brother had grown. He figured it was time for an apology.

“Arthur,” he said, like it was the title of a melancholy poem.

"Oh, yes?" He braced himself, and gave Cillian a *one moment* gesture. The fairy nodded and diverted his attention.

"I didn't put much faith in you. I thought I knew better, I thought you were getting in my way. I'm sorry."

This was unexpected. Arthur took a deep breath. "I was getting in your way."

He shook his unreal head. "No, I was just—"

"Elliot." It was a hard note that softened as he continued "I meant to. Sometimes you need someone to stop you. And you have to let them."

"Oh," he said.

Arthur didn't like to be stern, so he made it brief. "*Allow me* to help you when you go too far, instead of doubling down, please."

"Okay."

"Thank you for the apology."

No air passed through the idea of Elliot, but he sighed. "I'd feel terrible if I didn't apologize for how I acted today."

"If that was true you'd feel like shit a lot more often," Ramona muttered in his ear. "But what do I know? Maybe you're getting better."

Elliot furrowed. Where were *her* apologies for being rude as hell? “Anyway,” he said, pointedly ignoring her, “thank you for smoothing things over Arthur. I think I need to rest again...”

“Of course. It’s unfortunate you didn’t get to spend more time with Silas, but maybe we could visit him again some day?” he suggested.

“I don’t want to set foot in this place ever again, if I’m being honest. Bye Art.”

“Ah, I see...goodbye.” Arthur was at odds. He was beginning to like this place. The people were interesting, and there were wonders all around him. Cillian’s presence was warming to something of a friendship. When it would be time to go, he realized he’d miss it.

Ramona felt Elliot peel off of her and tiredly amble away until he was swallowed by the murk. She waited for the weight of his presence to lift, then said “congrats, you got a genuine *sorry* from him. I didn’t think it was possible.”

“It’s a start.” Arthur turned his focus back outwards. Cillian was humming something to himself. After a few notes, he realized it was Silas’

first song. He couldn't help but sway his fledgeling tail in tandem. *This is...nice*, he thought.

Cillian found relief in chewing on the tune. Every handful of days, he'd been convinced someone was out there screaming—the ghosts of the war stuck in a reoccurring caterwaul—but now he could put the thought to rest.

It was far from a lonely walk back to the Court. Cillian had seen some fellow hill-folk milling about along the way. Some of them he waved to, others he kept to himself around. Arthur followed in his footsteps, tentatively greeting unfamiliar faces and avoiding others. There was often a look of shock on their faces at the sight of Arthur until they noticed his borrowed traits. One thing becoming increasingly clear was that almost every fairy they'd met took after a plant or animal in some way. Beings with hooves, paws, fronds and flowers, upright or otherwise, light of tongue and gruff in the throat, passed them by. Some bumped into them intentionally, ridicule hanging from their muzzles,

but Cillian had them shove off. As far as the Ronans could tell, he was the only other human-faced curiosity in Mound, and they both stood out sorely.

Arthur was fascinated watching the hill-folk come and go. His gaze followed a scurrying creature in a doll's dress shirt as it dashed from one home to another, a bell tied to its tail. *A messenger? A child?* Out of the fairies that did wear clothing, he wondered how much of it was lost and found, stolen, gifted, or handmade. Typically Elliot was more interested in objects than he, but the occasional tide of overlap rose to meet him when he was in the right mood.

One hairy fellow spotted Cillian and gave him a grinning thumbs up, while a pair of fawnlike beings upturned their noses and pretended he wasn't there. While his speech had been provocative, a lot of his fellow Moundgoers still saw him as *'that problem child from End.'* He was a delinquent youth in their eyes, and they weren't exactly wrong.

Cairn awaited them in the Court like usual, but now he was playing some manner of token game with one of his personal cohorts. They had stones, beads, and nutshells arranged on a flat stone. Both

of them were focused deeply on the game, for there wasn't much else to do. Cairn moved a token into an empty space, traveling over a number of others in the process. He collected the ones he passed with a smug laugh. "Aha! Can you top that?"

The cohort's impressive tail feathers fanned competitively. She plucked another token in her talons and moved it in a different pattern. It seemed that her count was higher, for there was a satisfied expression on her doggish muzzle as she gathered them. "Easily."

Cairn groaned in defeat. That's when he spotted the returning bodies, and sat upright.

The playful pitch of his voice settled back into his more powerful timbre. "Ah, my friends. Back so soon?"

Cillian was in a pleasant mood this time around, so he greeted Cairn with "good to see you haven't got any better at pebbles."

The King smiled knowingly. "I don't have to tell you that you would fare worse."

Behind his sunglasses, he rolled his eyes. "You know I don't play anymore. Anyway, yeah, we fixed up Silas' mess."

“How was it? Not too cumbersome a task for a restless soul like you?”

“Nah it was fine, these ones were eager.”

Cillian patted Arthur on the back.

“We made a game out of it,” he said. “It was nice.”

“I’m glad to hear it. You seem to be settling in well.”

The cohort cocked her head and squinted. “Is that the same human he dragged in?” she asked Cairn.

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

“What, do you think I picked up a new one on the way back?” said Cillian.

“Funny. What’d you do to it?” She pointed at Arthur with one of her talons.

“He did it himself.”

Arthur felt like an exotic. He was a peculiar sight to both King and cohort, coupled with the fact he wasn't *really* meant to be in the Hill in the first place, and that humans had done so much damage already, he became uncomfortably conscious of himself. He tugged at his sleeve.

“Well well! I didn't know they could change themselves up. Hey human! Show me what'cha got.”

Cairn raised his hand to settle her. “Easy, Sienna.”

“Aw c'mon, I just wanna see it in action.”

“I—I could try a little something!” Arthur said to her. “In exchange for getting a closer look? I've never seen a creature like you before.” He so badly wanted to know what the cockerel-hound's feathers felt like.

“Deal.”

Cillian chuckled. “You know, you're getting the hang of our ways bargaining like that. Just be careful.”

“I think it feels right,” Arthur said. Then he readied himself. “Here...”

Despite discouraging Sienna, the King was paying just as much attention as her. That powerful curiosity fluttered around his head.

Arthur wasn't sure what to choose, so the first thing that came to mind was uncomplicated. He focused on giving himself a temporary cat's nose. The sensation of fur growing in was ticklish, but he was determined. It got close for only a long few

seconds. Visualizing the structure on top of his already demanding crown of leaves and wiry tail was a lot to handle, and in trying to hold it all together, everything destabilized. The snout folded back into a human nose before he could even consider whiskers; his face back to being plainly his own.

Oh well, he thought. *Worth a try*. He restored his more familiar accessories and readjusted himself. At this point, he was getting used to picturing them as part of his person. He'd close his eyes, and there it was: a smattering of leaves and that thin, soft tail.

"How was that?"

"Impressive," said Cairn, tinged with some amount of shock.

"Yeah, good enough! You're learning glamor ain't you?" Sienna stood from her seat in the grass and hopped over to eye him, and at this he realized the creature stood to the height of his chest.

He nodded nervously with her so close.

"...Definitely a beginner. I still don't know how it, um, functions." He hesitated until she gave a *go ahead*, then stroked along her neck. It was soft as a feather duster, but grew more coarse as his palm traveled down to her back. Her front was a warm,

peachy color compared to the cooler hues behind, and her face was just like a dog's, wrapped in the fleshy scarlet of a rooster's comb.

"You'll get used to it! Oh so funny lookin' you are now. Can't say any human beings I've seen got furry appendages." She leaned in closer. It seemed the examination was mutual. She snuffled at his skin and poked at his legs. When she decided to pinch his tail, that's when her talons became too much to bear. It felt like the nip of a snake. He reflexively slapped her hand away with it.

Arthur stepped back in shock. "Ah! Sorry! I didn't mean to."

"Don't bother, I ain't hurt." Sienna flashed her teeth like she was attempting to smile. "Interesting, you got feeling in it already."

"Please don't pinch me again..." he curled his tail away defensively. He didn't realize it could experience pain until now. *Is it **really** flesh and blood? I thought it was only a trick on the senses...*

"Sienna..." Cairn warned.

Instead of listening to Arthur's plea, she reached up and tugged on one of his leaves. Before, they'd flaked off of him without much force, but he

was reeling from the sting of her pinch and the confusion it brought, so the leaves grew stubborn. She managed to pluck it at last when he tried to shove her away. He yelped. In place of sap, the stem oozed a deep red.

“Ow! I *just* said...” he stumbled back, one hand on his head and the other protecting his tail.

Sienna snorted. “What, I’m just assessing your work! It’s well done for a greenling.” She appraised the leaf with a sniff and a lick, staring at its delicate surfaces, then threw it back into her maw. “Sure tastes human.”

Cairn glared. “That’s no way to treat him, do you forget your station?”

“It’ll be fine, I’ve played rougher. I didn’t know it would hurt anyway.”

Arthur clutched his head as they spoke, and the spot where Sienna plucked him was wet. It trickled down his forehead and past his eye. There was his answer after all. In conjunction with the discovery, the thought that she knew what a human *tasted* like made him queasy.

Alerted to the sensation of pain, Ramona stirred from her half-sleep. She was still the

protector of their collective in some right, and heeded the call to action before she could even coordinate her thoughts. She was by Arthur's side in an instant.

"You okay?" she asked quickly.

"It stings."

She wanted to pull him from the driver's seat and chew Sienna out, but Arthur needed her right now. If she ignored him and played the hero, he'd be worse for it.

"I've gotcha," she said, "I'm here."

"I'm sorry-" he started. He was shaken from his train of thought by a firm hand catching his sleeve.

Cillian had stepped in front of the Ronans, one of his arms thrust behind him, and glowered at Sienna. "*Hey. Lay off.*"

"It needs thicker skin than that if it's sticking around here," Sienna replied. "A lil' nick ain't much."

She wasn't fully wrong; the Ronans had been lucky enough to miss the even ruder crop of Mound folks until now, but they were certainly *around*. It was just a matter of time. That, and there was still the threat of monsters in the deeper woods,

Nameless, which he wanted to keep them away from entirely.

He didn't like Sienna though. She was definitely one of the mean ones. It was a wonder she was an official advisor at all, though Cairn always said she *brought a different perspective* or something like that. Besides, all of his cohorts were siblings. She would've been the only one left out of the position they were raised for.

Cillian's voice was a growl. "Leave him alone, he's *mine*. He won't be having any trouble."

"Come on, I got nothing to do around here! You won't play with me anymore, and now you're just bein' selfish--"

"Oh and you're pleasant company are you? I said back off, *mutt*."

Her face hardened. "*Cuckoo!*" she spat.

"*Mongrel!*" he returned. "Go pester your brothers for a change. How come they don't play with you either, huh? Something happen?"

She barked and hopped closer. "Gimme one good reason not to put some teeth in you."

His tail lashed. "I thought you said something about thick skin."

At that she lunged. She could hardly clamp her maw around his leg when Cairn snatched her by the flank and jerked her back.

*"That's enough! Have you no shame? The both of you are acting like children! Cillian and his companions are to be left *unbothered*. Don't forget your position, Sienna, or I will remind you."*

She huffed and wriggled, so he dropped her. There was a flurry of blue-green feathers as the cockerel-hound flapped up into the trees. She perched in a clumsy swerve and pitched forward, then leant back and raised her head. Her comb stood taut and crimson as she snarled. *"Fine! Fuck's sake, have your plaything. See you later, Cairn."*

Cillian seethed, the hair on his nape rippling. *"Stay up there forever, rotten bird!"*

Arthur had to sidestep to dodge the thrash of Cillian's much stronger tail. His jacket had hackled alongside his mood; the illusion of its fabric bristled like fur. The grip he had on Arthur's arm was held strong until Sienna slipped away between the leaves.

*"That mean, feathered *fuck*..."*

"Don't mind her," said Cairn, exasperated.

“I’ll mind what I damn please. She was pickin’ at my friend.”

“And you continued to rile her. I know she should have been more gentle, but really, Cillian, if you keep quarreling like this she won’t get any better.”

“You hardly punished her! Isn’t she part of *your* counsel?”

“I will be speaking to her privately.”

“*Over another game of pebbles,*” Cillian scoffed.

Arthur spoke up, unable to bear the tension. “Thank you for stopping her...” he said. He wasn't sure what to make of the situation. Everything had happened so fast, there was a lot of shouting and sudden movements... He remained near Cillian and his sister. Ramona tended to him internally, stroking his head and holding the idea of him against the secure idea of her.

Both fairies eased their edge around him.

“I apologize for Sienna, she was acting out of hand,” Cairn assured. “And before you worry, no, my counsel do not, and *have not* eaten any human person.”

“Good to know...”

Cillian had turned to fuss over the Ronan. “She didn't nick you too hard did she? There's blood on your face. Show me your scalp.”

“I, I'm alright, really.”

“Not until I make sure of it. Oh hell, it ain't even scabbed yet.” He touched the wound with his thumb, which made Arthur shudder. The finger came away dripping fresh crimson. “How deep does this go?”

Arthur winced. “It was like she was ripping out my hair. I didn't think it would...you know...it wasn't like that before.”

“You're getting good at the trick, I'm sorry it bit you back this way.” Cillian stared at his head for a while. “Right, not so deep, but that one must've been rooted well. You're a fast learner, Art.”

“Oh...” Tentatively, Arthur tried giving one of his other leaves a tug. As expected, it kept its hold and gave him the impression he was tugging on hair instead. Glamor was a more convincing trick than he thought.

“That's *weird*,” Ramona said, and she stole his other hand to give it a try.

Cillian huffed. "Stop that, you might hurt yourself." He swatted their hands away with a gentle swipe.

Cairn cleared his throat. "The rest of the day is yours to spend recovering, I don't wish to keep you. At least while you're here I can tell you who has next requested help?"

"Sure," Arthur said, weakly fending off Cillian's inspections, "who is it?"

"It is known as Murmur, and lives in a cave northwest of here outside of Mound. It needs help with finding something lost. This time I am *certain* you'll need a guide..." He looked to Cillian with some amount of expectancy.

Tired, Cillian said "Fine. Give us one of your bugs tomorrow, we're headed home. Come along Art. *Oh*—hey! Stop touching your head, what did I tell you..."

Cairn raised a hand to stop them. "Wait, before you depart I have something more to ask. What is your progress on the tale, Ronans?"

"Oh um..." Arthur blanked. They hadn't done a thing towards it yet. In fairness, not much time had passed, and there was still an abundance of things to

get used to. “We’re...gathering more inspiration before we start,” he said. They had nothing but spare time if they were being kept here for the rest of their lives, it seemed like a reasonable excuse.

Cillian nodded along, growing impatient.

“Inspiration’s a tricky thing. Gotta hunt for it, right?” He wagged the Ronans’ shoulders, prompting them.

“Yeah, um, we’re still getting our footing here.”

“...Right. Run along then, I’ll see you tomorrow,” said the King. He gave them a look that was somewhere near relief.

Cillian pulled Arthur towards home, seething. They left the Court behind, nearly tripping over their tails in haste as they made it down the slope of the hillock. Of all the things Cairn could do, there was nothing Cillian hated more than being made to *depend* on him.

He glanced at his companion along the way. The boy had blood dried into his forehead, a nervous twitch about him... He wouldn’t last on his own. If Sienna could do this much damage, he wasn’t *nearly* ready to be taken out of the safety of Mound. Neither were his supposed siblings. It was too soon.

He swore under his breath. Not even a full week and they'd already caught scratches. Not even a week, harassed by his neighbors and sent towards sketchy grounds to fetch somebody's something-or-other. With only a stupid moth to show them the way.

The ringing of a bell hung in his head.

Chapter Thirteen

When morning arrived, Arthur woke, and Elliot did not.

He was reluctant to accept the feeling of his own skin, his face, the leaves that shivered at the top of his vision and tickled at his forehead. The hair that cradled them. The tail that shifted naturally beneath the blanket when he turned on his side, as if it had always been there. He was naked to the enormity of the world, uncertain if he was to claim anything other than his voice, which now fit so snugly in his new form he startled himself saying 'good morning.'

He bore some amount of concern at Elliot's absence. He wasn't *gone*, but there was an aspect of his fretful mind that wondered: *will he ever wake up?*

And, worse, *do I want him to?*

He had choked the thought back quickly. Elliot would wake up if it meant dragging him to the front by the collar. Just, not yet.

With Cillian he shared a breakfast, still tracing the spot where Sienna had plucked him. It was a

minor wound, the dry crust of healing skin already reclaiming its territory. It was still difficult to believe that his body had integrated with the illusion so seamlessly. While the leaves would go away for the next Ronan, the scab would remain. *I should be more careful*, he thought.

Meanwhile, Cillian was aglow. The Ronans' continued presence was a balm to his annoyances with Cairn. The only problem was that he didn't have much in the way of food laying around. He'd have to stock his pantry soon. At least Arthur seemed content to eat half of the remaining bun from his bag, and give the rest to the fairy.

Through a mouthful of bread, Cillian said "you're still touchin' it."

Arthur's hand twitched, fingers laced under his hair and leaves. "I know."

Cillian swallowed. "It won't do you good to bother it. Are you thinking about Sienna?" His sunglasses were left laying on the table, his golden eyes unfettered. They carried a sympathetic sheen.

"I guess so." He was loath to dwell on her further. It seeped into his tone.

“Don’t let her knock you down. You did good! She’s just an ass, it’s better to forget about her than let her haunt you.” He rifled for the bag of candy Silas had handed them and tossed Arthur a nut. “Here, think about the positives! You’re learning well, I don’t think it’s easy to get used to all this.”

“But what if-” he started.

Cillian pressed a finger to his lips. “Breathe, you’ll be fine. I won’t let Sienna bother you none, it was my mistake to even let her get close.”

He awkwardly turned the candy around in his hands. “Thank you...you’ve been kind to me.”

“It’s what friends do, yeah?” Cillian didn’t show it, but he held his breath.

Arthur’s melancholy turned into a soft smile. “Yeah, it is.”

The fairy’s tail made a loud thud behind him as it smacked the wall. He scrambled to catch it, but it was on another side-swing.

“Are you alright?”

“Y-yeah, uh, just a funny feeling.” He had his hands planted on his tail, unable to restrain the damned thing.

Arthur had an inkling of what he was hiding. He beamed, and reached his free hand over to ruffle Cillian's hair.

Cillian flinched. The warmth of his palm sent a ripple down his back. He hadn't been stroked like that since Cairn had raised him on his knee, oblivious to what would come. The emotions inside him fought dirty. His touch-hungered nature clawed and yowled for more, *more*, while the part of him still swollen with guilt, with contempt for Cairn and all of his affections bit at the throat of the first. He sat stock-still as a result, gripping the sides of his seat like it would disappear right from under him, and let Arthur tenderly pet his head. It took all his effort not to jump away and clamber up into his loft.

In Arthur's view, the fairy bowed his head a little and didn't move much, save for his animated tail. He was pleased to discover the hair on his head was as soft as it appeared, if not softer, for it possessed the same feel and thickness of fur. He could tell this was a creature who didn't want to admit he wanted touch. There was a shyness to the way Cillian sat: hunched over to receive the contact, knees raised slightly to guard his chest, his breathing

about as silent as it could get... It reminded him of Elliot, when he was in the mood to simply wait around Arthur in the hopes he would be consoled, and how he would quietly lean in for more when he got his comfort.

Their parents were never forthcoming with any touch. Was it the same with Cillian's? After taking his time to soak in the moment, Arthur let his hand slip away and gave him some space.

The fairy shifted in his seat and rubbed his arm. "We should get goin', shouldn't we?" He didn't really care whether he kept Cairn waiting or not. He just needed something to say.

Arthur stood slowly, slinging the bag over his shoulder. "We might as well. I don't know when he expects us. Have you had enough to eat?"

"Yeah, could you pass my boots?"

The scenery couldn't bore Arthur. He marvelled at the mundane like it was spectacle; at plants and knick-knacks and passing scraps of conversation with equal interest. As they navigated Mound's End he

was sure to catch an eyeful of the hill-folk going about their business. Some tended to their homes and supposed gardens, others had places to go, things to move. There was something familiar about watching them.

While he kept his distance, there were some he wished he could follow along and talk to. He wondered how well they would tolerate his questions. It could've been helpful for the story they needed to craft, too, poking around about these creature's lives, but now was not the time.

Further along the way, leaving the homes and hollows behind, Arthur spotted a patch of flowers he hadn't noticed before. They were congregated a little ways off from the path. He was certain he would have recognized them if he had seen them—they each had a colorful corolla of four iridescent petals, and the points of each petal were rounded and wide. He stooped to get a better look, but before he could get too close, Cillian scuffed him back by the shirt collar. The flowers snapped their petals shut and scurried away on beetle-legs.

"I'd be careful with those."

“Why?” Arthur’s eyes stayed with the cluster as they scuttled. One of the flowers tripped over another as it tried to keep up.

“Some things ain’t good to touch.”

“I only wanted to see.”

The fairy clenched the fabric of Arthur’s shirt in his fingers. “That can be just as dangerous. I thought I said as much.”

“Doesn’t the King keep dangerous things out?”

The fairy’s eyes hardened. “Don’t be an idiot, Art, no place is a sanctuary. I was talking about *monsters*, this ain’t monsters. It’s a pest.”

“Ah... Sorry.”

“You can’t go touching and gawking at *everything...*”

“I didn't know...”

Their words slowed to a trickle as they watched the colorful creatures settle down again and unfurl. They swayed slightly more now, petals tilted towards the two. All the colors seemed to melt together. The lines between individual flowers were fuzzy and changing, and it became difficult to tell one from another. The effect was magnetic.

Cillian shook his head. *Damn trick.* "Alright, *c'mon,*" he said, and gripped his friend by the sleeve.

"...What?" asked Arthur, half-stirred from his trance. "What are they doing...?"

"Don't look. They want you to follow them so you get lost. We're probably late enough by now."

"But..." he started. He still hadn't turned his head away from the patch. Their dance was so calming, he nearly found himself swaying side to side as well. Any thought he had towards moving or looking away became quieted, and he couldn't fathom the idea of risk. They were flowers. Just flowers...

"Art." Cillian turned him around. He tilted his shades down with his free hand and looked him in the eye. "Pretty things can kill you."

Arthur's eyes twitched as his gaze re-settled on the fairy. "I'm sorry," he said, the words fuzzy on his tongue. After watching the shifting petals, it seemed as if the gold of Cillian's gaze flowed in circles.

"Snap out of it and ignore them, we're going. *Get moving.*"

He was wrenched away from the sight of the flowers before he could say another word. It was disorienting to be pushed to walk at first. It hurt to match Cillian's insistent pace, and he couldn't shake the idea he was forgetting something, but eventually the distance cleared his head. With every ushered step he grew surer that if he'd lingered any longer, Cillian would've picked him up and carried him personally.

Soon enough, the two of them made their way to the empty Court. Cillian had practically shoved Arthur the whole way, and the human had to take a moment to catch his breath. His knees and ankles throbbed uncomfortably. Whenever he looked up at his companion, he found that Cillian was in an impatient, foul mood, with his arms crossed and his tail in a familiar thrash.

Arthur found it in himself to ask something, though he wasn't sure if it was out of compassion, or fear.

"...Are you okay?"

The glint of Cillian's sunglasses hid his eyes completely. "Why are you asking *me*?"

"Y-you seem upset." Arthur noticed his voice falter, and quietly cleared his throat. "Did I—"

"*Forget it, Art. We got shit to do. Just don't leave my sight.*"

He didn't press further.

They waited for a handful of minutes more. The sky wore a coat of overcast, and the breeze whistled through unoccupied boughs. The King was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey!" Cillian hollered into the silence, "I thought we had a meeting!"

Arthur hesitantly joined in. "Hello? Are you there?"

The Court remained silent.

"Oh he *really* slept in. He hasn't done that in a while. Hold on," said Cillian. He strode up to the tree, and knocked on the wood like it was a door. "Open up your fuckin' highness."

This was followed by a snap—the sound of splintering wood. The thick tree that was Cairn's throne shuddered, a deep, crackling fissure forming in its bark. A groan emanated from the cleft. Small gossamer insects emerged, clinging to the outer surface of the tree as it peeled itself, revealing

something bulky and translucent within. It appeared half-formed and blinked its eyes awake. Fur spread across its body in a cascade, chased by something like fabric as it crept across the torso and legs. Suddenly, there he was: Cairn of Oak, clothed, dry, and quite groggy.

“...I...see you’re feeling...restless today, boy,” he groaned, prying himself from the tree’s crevice. It bent to his will, but not without some effort. Once he was out completely it folded shut behind him.

“And I see you’re getting your beauty sleep. I could’ve had a day to myself if I hadn’t woken you. What’s going on?” He elected not to mention the mesmerizing flowers that had almost ruined his day.

Arthur was struck by the urge to compensate for Cillian’s attitude. “Is everything alright?” he asked, politely.

Cairn clucked his tongue. “Aside from giving Sienna a thorough talking-to, one could say there was a significant problem last night that needed solving.”

“What kind of problem?”

He frowned. “It seems Cillian’s speech was...inspirational. A handful of my count took it

upon themselves to topple a Name bearing tree. It is needless to say I don't take lightly to such breaches of law. Especially when enacted by drunkards in the name of 'progress.'"

Cillian's eyebrows arched. "Seriously? What'd you do with them?"

"They are now tending to the tree under the watch of Amaranth. I've had to endure a great many complaints and cries from said tree, you can imagine it was not easy to sleep," Cairn huffed.

Amaranth was the eldest of his counsel. Cillian knew him to be a terribly serious sort, much like Cairn himself.

"I'm sorry to hear that's happened...will it recover?" said Arthur. He couldn't imagine the pain of being ripped out by the roots, but the memory of Sienna plucking him was fresh enough to make him wince.

"The tree? Yes. It will be relatively fine," he assured. "It's that they chose defiance in the form of harming something that cannot defend itself that irks me so."

Cillian grimaced. "What good is tipping a tree?"

“It sends a message. I was told they weren’t happy with the Threshold, which this tree was a willing marker of. Regardless, now that I am *awake*, I can send you along.” Cairn raised a hand towards his head, and had one of his ethereal insects perch upon his knuckle. It was eerily still, and unlike a real moth, did not wiggle its antennae or shift its little feet. When he lowered his hand, Arthur studied it closely.

Cairn’s expression softened. “Go on, offer your palm.”

As if he was feeling for rain, Arthur held out his hand. The insect marched dutifully onto it, only adding to the feeling that this was no ordinary creature. If it *was* a genuine creature at all. The tickle of its crawling was the sole signifier it had a physical presence.

Then, the moth took flight once more, circling around Arthur’s head and shoulders. He found himself charmed by it, despite the uncanniness. “Pretty...” he whispered. At least this beauty was safe.

“So that’s all?” said Cillian, a note of impatience on his tongue.

Cairn nodded. "That's all. Get along, I have more rest to return to. Oh—and do not forget, you *must* avoid looking Murmur in the eyes."

"In the 'it'll rip my eyes out if I do' kinda way, or the 'it's just shy' way?"

The King made a face of considerable pause. "...Try not to insinuate Namelessness in your compatriots Cillian. Murmur simply does not tolerate eye contact well. It is nervous."

"I'm just tuggin' your tail, old man. We'll get to it. Thanks." He turned on his heel and left then, because he'd grown tired of talking to Cairn. That, and he didn't like seeing that flake of him hover around Arthur's head for too long.

"Stay safe," added Cairn in that particular way that jabbed and stung and wriggled like worms with thorny hides and poison pincers. What a kick in the chest. '*Stay safe.*' How polite. How caring. He'd heard that remark after countless arguments, and Cairn had the gall to mean it every time. Cillian returned the favor with a huff that undoubtedly meant *fuck you, again.*

Arthur added his own quick, more sincere thanks before catching up with Cillian, and they were on their way without much ado.

Cairn lingered to watch the boys leave with that small part of him. He saw two young men, tails trailing behind them, more alike with one another than he could ever be with the boy he raised. He had seen humans come and go, but the Ronans were truly something new. Cillian had finally managed to make a real catch.

He invited himself back into the hollow of the tree, his presentable guise falling away. The bark pulled itself around him and meshed with his bare, botanic flesh. Where he ended and the tree began were not so different. He would rest, for the most part, and the moth would amble towards its destination. Unfeeling, unseeing, nothing but a leaf strung along an invisible current. It would guide the young men to their task on nothing more than a wisp of his own energy.

At least, he hoped it would.

The Ronans' mindscape was minimalist to say the least. There were no buildings, paths, or gaudy decorations befitting a place where one's imagination was truly the limit. There was only the dark, the Ronans, and a bed. Elliot lay in that bed now, dreaming of nothing at all. It was comfortable in the same way passing out in the shower was comfortable. He'd left himself to rot in that bed handfuls of times in the past; some periods dreadfully long and others dramatically short.

Ramona was bored. It was great to see Arthur stretch his legs, but she didn't have anything to do. She wasn't much for the errand work Cairn was sending them on, so she didn't really want to watch, and she currently wasn't in the mood for coming up with some kind of fairytale like he'd asked, either. Chores didn't suit her. She imagined a piece of looseleaf paper, with all its blurry lines and hazy edges, just so she could crumple it.

She stole a look at the bed again, as she'd been doing for a while now. She knew Elliot would be up eventually, and she wasn't too eager to deal with him yet, but hell if it didn't remind her of some pretty bad days.

The paper ball bounced neatly off his forehead and dissolved. Lucky for her, things tended to land exactly where you wanted them to when physics didn't matter. The disturbance was enough to make Elliot curl up harder.

"Hey, you alive?" she asked.

"*Maybe, maybe not.*" he mumbled, drunk with sleep.

Hm. Concerning. Ramona moved over to him, and laid a hand on his shoulder. That protective part of her was stirring again, and she didn't like it. "Are you *good?*"

He opened an eye to glare at her. It was the clearest detail about him. "What do you need?" he asked. He looked like a moody teen again, all bunched up in the blankets with his face half-hidden.

"I'm checking on you."

"...Why?"

She folded her arms. "Because. How are you holding up?"

Elliot hadn't bothered soaking in any recent memories, yet. He still felt the same way he had when he first consigned himself to the bed: full of dread and shame. He didn't know about Sienna, or

their new mark. "I've had better days. I want to go home as soon as possible."

"Okay. You know we'll be here for a while right?"

"Not really, we just have to... study these fairies, talk to them, and come up with something flattering. It will be quick, I think. I just need to rest."

She sighed. "Great. See you in a million years Ell. I think I'll just get used to this place, actually."

He shot up into a sitting position. "Hey, we *are* going home, I'll get us there."

Her laugh was thick with spite. "Oh sure. And you've totally made a lot of progress on your novel, too."

"Well it's *your* fault we're here in the first place, if you want to be dirty about it." He squeezed a weightless fistful of blanket instead of her throat.

Ramona shrugged. "I just bumped into a guy. You're the one who said yes to his cute little walk."

"You agreed to it too!"

"*Too*. Besides, it sounded like fun. How were we supposed to know?"

"I...guess we couldn't have."

“Yeah. So lighten up, it’s no-one’s fault”

He huffed. “I’m not going to ‘lighten up’ about being kept against my will.”

“Why not? I’m making the best of it, and Arthur’s like, actually living. At least we’re not locked in somebody’s basement, right?”

“At least then we’d be in a human amount of trouble,” he replied.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, sinking slightly into the duvet. “Eh, I’ll take the woods.”

“Are you just here to bother me?”

“That’s my job, isn’t it?” she said, nudging his mass of blankets.

He grumbled and inched away.

She smiled. “Hey remember when we were like, eleven or twelve, and we couldn’t find mom in the grocery store-”

“Oh god, don’t remind me.”

“-and you wanted to stay put, so she could come find us, but like, we *really* had to use the bathroom-”

“I don’t see how this is worth bringing up.”

"-but you were too scared to ask anybody for directions, and you were worried mom would leave without us if we weren't there when she got back?"

"...Yes."

"You refused to move so I decided we might as well just pee right there, and *that's* what made you do something?"

He sighed. "I know what you're going to say, but fine. Go ahead."

"*That's* why I bother you. 'Cause otherwise you make yourself suffer."

"Great. I really feel motivated now. Thanks Ramona." He shoved himself further into the blankets, so that he didn't have to hear another word.

"You're welcome," she said as she stood and gave him a *pat pat*. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go see what's going on out there."

She strode away into the gloom. Elliot was left entirely alone, in the mood to do nothing but drown in the sheets.

Externally, Arthur was chatting with Cillian. The conversation was slow and shallow, touching on little more than pleasant remarks and idle talk. It

reeked of how Arthur would speak with Elliot after being reprimanded for something. It was hard to watch; he was trying, but the fairy had his mind on other things. What happened?

It seemed like they hadn't quite left Mound yet. Ramona sat herself right next to Arthur's consciousness and took a nice, sharp breath of fresh air. "*Mmm*uch better."

Arthur jolted. He was so focused on navigating his conversation, he failed to notice her arrival. "Oh, hello Mona," he replied mentally.

"Hey. I checked on Ell..."

Oh dear. He braced himself for bad news.

"How is he?"

"He's fine, just his usual. Prickly, depressed...not freaking out at least." She took in their surroundings. The ground was solid, a deep brown of old pine needles and packed dirt interspersed with moss and ferns. It looked so *regular* in the dimly gray light. It might as well have been any other patch of woodland, save for the occasional fairy hollow or pole.

After a beat, Arthur said, "I see, thank you." He could faintly taste the tones of an argument on her presence, but didn't mention it.

"Yeah, 'course. Enjoying the community service?"

"Um...It's not so bad. I like walking, even if my legs don't."

"A shame we aren't in better shape."

"We might be by the end of this," he joked. Ramona's presence helped alleviate the quiet that filled the space between himself and Cillian. The fairy had lost his anger some minutes ago, but he was still distant.

"I guess we'll see. By the way, did I miss something? I thought you guys would've been braiding each other's tails by now, but you're all tense."

Arthur hung his head. "I was being stupid."

She began to remember. "It's alright man, you had no idea. C'mere." Mustering what comfort she could, she pulled him into a squeeze. "I can't see this guy staying mad at you. I mean, come on, you're you."

"I'm not sure what you mean..."

It was then that Cillian noticed Arthur hadn't said anything new in a while. He turned his attention to the Ronan and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, where'd you go?"

"Oh—um, Ramona's awake, I'm just catching up with her."

His face brightened with interest. He stopped mid-stride. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, she was talking to Elliot. I think he's...moping."

"Huh." His gaze flitted to the ground. "Me too, really. Not doin' me any good."

Arthur took a relieved breath. "I thought so. I, um, I didn't want to bother you about it."

"Don't sweat it." Cillian straightened, took off his sunglasses and ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. "How's Ray?"

"Who- oh, right. She's okay."

The fairy cracked a smile. "Good. I like her."

Ramona turned to her brother, pleased. "*Well now I wanna drive.*"

Go ahead, he nodded. He was fine with giving up his seat. He supposed he had more than his fair

share of time piloting, and Ramona was feeling affable.

“Here she comes, then.”

The Ronans closed their eyes. Hair spilled heavy and dark from their head, and though it was slight, their physique bloomed sturdier. Their shirt strained ever so slightly, but held fast. Arthur’s leaves withered and flaked from their head, and his tail crumbled into nothing. A grin spread across their shared face.

It was invigorating for Ramona to don her own likeness. She reveled in the way every adjustment was *right*, how her jaw was set and her hands were firm, and that it brought more of *her* into the world. For kicks, she followed Cillian’s advice and let a few ‘tells’ settle in. She flexed claws onto her fingers, and played her tongue over a sharpening set of fangs.

Ramona’s inner self had made its debut in full.

She inhaled deeply, filling *her* lungs with delectable air. “*Ahh*, good. That’s good. Hey Cill.”

“Well, well, look at you!” said Cillian, regaining his spirits. “Looking like a stranger already.”

“Thanks, you look just the same as before,” she flicked one of his ears, and he tried to pretend it didn't hurt.

“So, what brings you here?” he asked, flicking her hair in retaliation.

“I was checking up on things. Now I can finally take this glamor stuff for a spin.”

“It suits you. Haven't seen you much, though, how come?”

“I've been around! Just in here.” She tapped the side of her head. “Anyway, I know we're in the middle of another errand but we basically have all the time in the world right now... You wanna just...hang out?”

“I sure do. I did have something in mind...” He was still bothered by the whole arrangement they were in. Blowing off responsibilities sounded good at the moment.

Ramona had that same craving. “Hit me.”

Now Arthur was curious. If Cillian was planning something, he hadn't shown it.

“Let's take a break and relax. You wanna learn Hill ways?”

She grinned. “Oh yeah. I'm in.”

“Alright then,” he said, and reached ahead where the moth hovered clumsily as it waited for them to continue.

There was a muffled *crunch* as he crushed it. The slick of it stuck to his palm like dandelion’s milk. He knew the ‘moth’ was just a plant, a little offshoot from the oak. He pictured Cairn gritting his teeth somewhere, from both the twinge of pain and the realization that they had deliberately abandoned their post.

Or, who knows, maybe a bird caught it instead. He’d keep that excuse in his back pocket.

Ramona’s eyes went wide. “Oh you really mean it, huh?” She could respect the commitment.

He shrugged as he wiped his hand on his pant leg. “Better than scrounging around all day for some lost bauble.”

Arthur flinched. He could hardly stomach the sight of an insect being crushed, but worse was the knowledge they’d severed the only means of completing their task. His mind filled with punishment, of consequences outside of his control, what Cairn would do to them if this was discovered.

In a moment of panic, he stumbled back from front and rushed towards Elliot's bed.

Ramona sensed his sudden leave. She knew he didn't like to see things die, and chalked it up to his aversion alone. It'd be fine. "Yeah that blows. Where to?"

"This way!" Cillian said, and ran off of the path. He disappeared between a copse of pine trees, the sound of his voice lingering behind him like a tether. She smiled and ran after him, chasing both his tail and the opportunity to finally let loose.

Chapter Fourteen

It never felt so good to get so dirty. The overcoat Ramona wore was scuffed with soil, and if it wasn't already green, it would've stained many shades of it. Her white shirt wasn't so lucky. Both items were stuffed into the shoulder bag, now, because she'd grown warm. A pair of sunglasses rested at its side.

She pinned Cillian to the ground; her hands planted firmly on his wrists, his chest held down by her own. He squirmed like a polecat, trying to kick her off. "Nice try," she said.

"You're a mean one," he grunted. She wasn't budging, so he lit his forearms ablaze. A cheap trick, only harmless light, but it shocked her enough to let go. He dismissed the illusion, rolled out from underneath her, and pounced at her side to knock her down.

"Shit—*ooph!*" She returned the favor with a knee to his stomach.

"*Gah*, you fight like you mean it," he gasped, clutching his middle. Then, he lunged forth and bit her on the shoulder, using the opportunity to pin her

for a change. He laughed as he held her down. “I love it!”

Cillian had been itching to tussle for as long as he could remember, but he’d stopped spending time with Sienna a long time ago, and nobody else ever bothered to ask.

In kind, Ramona hadn't fought anyone since highschool. She was rusty, but so was he. They made for a clumsy, determined pair.

“I think I’m done,” she panted after more rolling around. There were red marks all over her from his teeth and claws, but nothing deep enough to really break the skin. She poked at a blooming bruise while she sat back and caught her breath.

He laid on his back, eyes bare, staring up at the canopy. They had found an area without many roots to trip them and a nice cushioning of clover to scrap in. He was satisfied. It was still overcast, but in the clouds’ creases, the faintest touch of sunlight shone through. There was a little pinecone digging into his back. He didn't care enough to move.

The decision to roughhouse came after Ramona had playfully tripped him up and sent him head over tail. He was in the middle of describing his

excellent footing, something any hill-folk worth their salt was decent at in these woods, when she tested his claim. Now they rested side by side.

“That was great,” said Ramona, rubbing her arm. “Elliot’s gonna blow a gasket.”

Cillian laughed. “You’re pretty dinged up right now.”

“I almost wanna make it worse, but I’m all fought out. Hey, what do you wanna do?” she asked.

He laid there, tail swishing in thought. There was plenty to do, really. He could teach them more tricks, if they’d take. They could look for honeysuckle and blackberries; he could bring them to one of his many favorite spots... It wasn’t easy to decide. Maybe all of it, if it would waste Cairn’s time.

“How about we find a creek,” he said at last. “You like fishin’, Ramona?”

She hadn’t fished in her entire life, but she liked the idea. Her stomach growled at the thought of freshly roasted fish over a campfire. *I could pick it up quickly*, she thought. *How hard could it be?*

“Let’s find out!”

While the two of them dusted themselves off and began their search for running water, things weren't going so well in the Ronans' headspace. Arthur had caught Elliot up to speed, and struggled to convince him to get out of the bed.

Elliot had left the body unsupervised for a *day* and things had already gone wildly off track. Minor injuries, responsibilities shirked, and Ramona, once again, was doing her very best to rattle him. He was loath to fix that mess. If she wanted him out of her way so badly, then fine, he'd stay and fester.

But here was faithful Arthur, crawling back at the first sign of trouble, tugging on his arm to get up and corral her. *Figures.*

"Please," Arthur begged again, "I don't want Cairn to be upset with us."

It was always authority that drove fear into Arthur, wasn't it? He hadn't coped well with their parents.

"Why haven't you asked her *yourself*? She would take you a lot more seriously than she takes me." There was envy coiled around his throat, he could taste it.

“I don’t know, I just—I panicked, we were supposed to follow the guide...you usually make decisions...” Arthur slumped over the side of the bed, kneeling on the ‘floor’, which had sprouted something like grass. He balled up the blanket in his fists, its formlessness providing no comfort. “I’m not used to this. Stopping her feels wrong, but *not* stopping her feels irresponsible. But they’re both so *happy* out there...”

A pang of sympathy struck Elliot despite his foul mood. He leaned over, and stroked Arthur’s head, swallowing his discomfort at the touch of every leaf he brushed aside. Arthur was only his brother, not a chaperone. “I’m sorry. You understand my frustration, now, don't you?”

Arthur remained silent.

Elliot continued. “I hate interruptions in my schedule, and this whole excursion has been just that. A significant hold-up, a waste of our time. I just want to get this over with and make it home... But it’s difficult to muster the energy in this state. God if it isn't irritating to hear she’s made things more complicated...”

“I don’t think it’s been a waste...but, yeah, sorry.” Arthur held his own desires tight, afraid to let them bleed out where Elliot could discover them. He didn’t want to go. He wanted to see more of the Hill, more of Cillian... More of *himself*. It was so selfish. He couldn't let him know.

Elliot let a long, bedraggled sigh slip out. He readied himself to rise, feeling for all the world like his essence was made of sickly tar. “Right,” he said, tousling Arthur’s hair again. “That wasn’t exactly fair of me. Stay here, I’ll go assess the situation, as much as I would rather not. It’s...necessary. And I *suppose* this escapade gives us more time to conceive ideas. Ugh.”

“Be gentle, please,” he said, clutching Elliot’s sleeve. “I just want you to encourage them to pick up our duties again. I can’t interrupt their joy, it would hurt.”

“I know. I suppose I should thank you for keeping our priorities in order, at least. I’ll try not to be too harsh on her this time.”

“Thank you...”

As Elliot crawled out of the bed and onto his feet, he braced himself for the worst. Ramona was a

headache, and his resident painkiller couldn't make a move. He knew there was no real chance at swaying her if it was himself speaking, so he resigned himself to supervise, or intervene. He could take command by force if it really came down to it.

He walked towards the front, groggy but resolute.

Here goes nothing.

A skewered trout dripped from its perch on a whittled stick. They had a few of these skewers lined up against a rock beside an accessible stretch of creek. Low-hanging plants dipped their fronds in the stream, and the water was green where it didn't reflect the sky, or lap thick froth against stone. Had it swollen just that much more past its edges, it wouldn't be difficult to mistake for a river. It was a good place to unwind from their troubles. They had to stray from their original path significantly to reach it, but it was worth it for the chance to wash up and eat.

Cillian taught Ramona how to make a hook out of a sharpened twig, and they managed to find worms and slugs to use as bait. All she had to do was pinch the hook between her fingers and hold very still, then quickly tug at the right moment, but she was better at feeding the fish than catching them. Cillian had been doing this since he was young, and he snagged a handful.

The two of them were in the middle of constructing a fire when Elliot assumed a spot close to his sister's presence. He stared at the fish, the makings of a fire, and felt the chill of a breeze over their skin. Once again, what he considered his own body felt alien, and furthermore it was strangely full, not the slender exterior he was used to. Ramona had left the topmost button of their shirt unfastened to accommodate her broader frame. It was comfortable in only the physical sense.

"There you are!" Ramona thought towards him as she noticed his sinkhole of a presence. "Feeling better, *buddy*?"

"Fine, thanks." he said, internally gritting his teeth. That nickname...

Still taking stock of things, he noticed their hair had become even denser with Ramona's influence, mussed by the roughhousing. He felt smothered. "I see you've made yourself at home."

"Pretty good huh? I feel *amazing* right now."

In the most deadpan affect available, he said "Congratulations."

Ramona snorted. "So, what's got you out here anyway? Decaying in bed got too boring?"

"I'm here to keep an eye on you," he stated flatly.

She expected worse. "Oh. Okay sure. Why?"

"...You've gone off-track. I should convince you to get back to work, but I don't see that happening."

"What, I can't catch a break?"

He sighed. "The sooner we do what Cairn asks of us, the sooner we can go home."

"Home can wait, Cillian's showing me how to fish. I haven't been this hungry in a while, check it out." She pressed a hand to their stomach, forcing him to feel the empty space. "There's gonna be trout in there soon."

"...I suppose there are worse things to do than eat," he said.

Ramona agreed, and continued walking around gathering tinder and sticks to dump in a pile. She made sure everything was dry, and for Arthur's sake brushed off any bugs she found so they wouldn't end up in the fire. There was a pang of guilt nagging at her about the moth thing.

Cillian told her what to look for, but not how to set everything up, so he did that himself. He leaned the biggest sticks against each other in a triangular heap and scattered the moss, twigs, and bark Ramona collected within. As a finishing touch, he used a sharp stone to shave kindling onto the pile.

"That'll do," he said, kneeling. "Been a long while, but I think I still got it."

"Looks about right," Ramona said as she crouched beside him. All that was missing were the flames. It dawned on her that she didn't have anything to light the fire with. She thought back to a time where she'd stolen an old flip lighter from the junk drawer and took it everywhere with her. It was a permanent pocket resident until it was confiscated.

"*Shit*, I don't have a lighter..." she whispered.

"It's fine, I got a starter." He set down his tool and pulled a small pouch from his pocket. It rattled in a way Elliot had definitely heard before.

"Wait—you carry those on your *person*? Aren't they flammable?" he asked, voice leaking through. He recognized the contents as the salamander stones from before.

Cillian tittered. "Only if they touch water."

"That's hardly safe. Haven't you been in the rain?"

"I leave them at home when it rains. And—Oh! Hey Ell!" He flashed the man a smile of recognition. There was only one Ronan who was that fussy.

"Hello. ...What on Earth do you do when it starts to rain and you're already outside?"

"Find cover until it stops. Anyhow, look here—" He plucked a small, black stone from the pouch and tossed it on the pile, then spat on it. The stone began to smolder, then suddenly it burst into flame.

He nudged their shoulder. "Go ahead, you too."

Ramona dredged up a pool of saliva in her mouth, which Elliot found repulsive, and hucked it at

the stone. Now the flame burned steady, the spittle functioning as a catalyst. She was delighted.

“That’s awesome. I thought we were gonna have to use sticks or something,” she said, pantomiming a fire plow.

Cillian felt very impressive. He shook the pouch, making another satisfying rattle. “Not with these.”

“Where do you get all those anyway?” She poked the pouch, happy to hear the stones click against each other. Elliot was wondering precisely the same thing.

“I traded for them a while ago, but I heard it’s a pain. Fellow said you gotta find a salamander nest and drive ‘em out, then you stick your hand in and grab whatever you can reach. He had burns *all* over him the color of snow.”

Elliot was beginning to get the picture. “Oh no...”

“That sucks dude,” said Ramona.

“Some folks will do anything that don’t kill them.” He shrugged and kept an eye on the fire, blowing on it occasionally so the heat licked high. He handed his companions one of the fish he’d caught

and started roasting another for himself, keeping it close to the forming coals.

“You forgot to gut these,” said Elliot.

Unfortunately, he hadn't the faintest idea how to actually gut a fish.

Cillian looked at him funny. “Why waste the meat?”

That turned Elliot's stomach. He thought about the silt and waste inside of a fishes' intestines. Ramona didn't think that was appetizing either, but internally, she said “...we don't have anything else to eat. I'd eat guts for us.”

“Let's just eat *around* the organs, please,” he insisted.

For once, they agreed on something. They cooked their fish beside Cillian's until the skin had turned brown and crispy, and dripped oil into the fire. The fairy ate his portions fully, bones and all. By contrast, the siblings chewed delicately. With Ramona's new choice of teeth, stripping away the meat wasn't so difficult. She reveled in the sensation of (carefully) clamping down and tearing, while Elliot was less than enthusiastic about having his whole

mouth rearranged. They tossed Cillian any leftovers they couldn't eat, which he happily polished off.

Then, Cillian and Ramona encouraged Elliot to give fishing a try. While he had his reservations, there was something rewarding about picking up a new skill that he couldn't resist. After losing a few hook's worth of bait, which was just fish scraps and dug-up worms, he finally caught a small trout and tugged it out of the water. The fish would have easily escaped if not for the firmness Ramona had instilled into their hands. He could even hold the squirming fish steady, slippery as it was.

He was busy placing it on a skewer when a rustling noise emerged. With the breeze, it wasn't too surprising to hear leaves shuffle, but this was a more persistent noise.

Cillian's ears perked, the fur of his jacket hackled, and he whispered something sharp beneath his breath. Sniffing the air, the fire and greasy scent of fish proved too pungent to tell him anything useful. He couldn't identify what was there. To the others, he signaled silence and handed them the sharp rock while he took up a skewer. The rustling continued. There was more than one thing lurking in

the foliage behind them, and they were cornered.
Just had to happen by the fucking creek, he thought.
He prayed to the world that it was more of his own
kind, or just some mundane animal looking for food.

If not, he was prepared to go down swinging.
He wouldn't lose another friend.

Chapter Fifteen

Out from the bushes slunk a pack of wolves. One after another they poured from that shadowed green, noses in the air, undoubtedly tracking the scent of roasted meat. As soon as they noticed the travellers, they stared and slowed their movement.

Maybe Cillian had misjudged how far he'd walked while looking for the creek. He had certainly never seen any wolves in Mound. Just great. Somehow, he'd stumbled right into the exact kind of situation he was trying to *avoid*. He cursed himself for his carelessness and tightened the hold around his stick as the beasts pooled around them.

The wolves moved like smoke; every step fell silent beneath their graceful paws. Unlike the rowdy procession one could expect from a wolf pack, with a great deal of padding around licking, nipping, and brushing up against one another, these creatures were a coordinated unit. Some dipped into shadows and behind trees, only to emerge much closer. The pack was made up of eight—no, nine wolves, each swathed in a sheet of air that rippled from their pelts

and confused their outlines. With supernatural ease they formed a circle around the trio.

A large wolf slipped from the center of the pack, its eyes as focused on them as the rest of its ilk. Its coat was dark, with a frosty muzzle and vapor that bloomed in oil slick hues. The rumble of a growl crawled up Cillian's throat as he watched it advance.

Elliot could never stand to admit how dogs terrified him. It didn't matter what kind. He couldn't quite put his finger on it; his family had never kept them and he had never been bitten, but even just the sight of a dog could rattle his nerves. Worse, these were wild, unpredictable creatures that could outpace him in a heartbeat. One would have been enough to make him tremble, but a whole *pack*? He could hardly think straight.

The creek would make for an awful getaway, they were already pressed to the bank. There was no running from these hounds, not if they could transpose themselves as smoothly as a breath. He tried to wrack his mind for more options, but it was hard to think past the self inflicted rigor.

A funny turn of fate, that wolves were Ramona's favourite animal.

She saw his state coming. It was always freeze, with Elliot, never fight. To his credit, it was hard *not* to feel intimidated by the situation, but she was thrilled. Wolves! Even better, weird fairy wolves. Part of her wished she could get Arthur to see, considering how much he loved wildlife, but she had to focus. This was real.

“Cill, lower your stick,” she whispered, slowly reaching her hand towards him. From the way the fur collar of his jacket bristled, he was one wrong move away from going berserk. *That* would be an extremely bad idea. “And for fuck’s sake stop growling,” she added.

“They better keep their damned distance then,” he replied, but thankfully he lowered the skewer.

She kept her eyes at the hounds, maintaining a mutual gaze. One thing she and Art had learned while watching nature flicks together was the dual purpose of eye contact: greeting, and dominance. She tried to recall everything she had learned about wolf behaviour over the years of interest. No amount of reading or watching would ever be enough, sure, and these were something new, but a little

knowledge was better than nothing. After all, wolves have formalities.

What appeared to be the lead wolf raised its head and curled back its lip, worn fangs on display. When it growled, the rumble was heavy and thick. Wispy projections of itself echoed out from it, dissipating once it closed its maw. The message was clear to her: *I am so much stronger than you, submit.*

Ramona hesitated. These were clearly not normal animals, how could she be sure playing along would work? There was a very real chance they'd walk away from this mauled, if at all. The sliver of pause made the lead wolf snarl and displace itself forward a few feet to flash its teeth, reasserting its power. The other wolves flanking them closed in, applying pressure to the threat. There was no way out but through, and she'd have to come up with a pretty good 'through.'

Without meaning to, she focused on emulating the canine language so strongly that it bled into her face. Her mental image had smeared wolfish features across her head, from a complete, hairless snout, to the suggestion of pointed ears. After realizing what

had happened to her face, she cast her eyes to the dirt and hung her head, doing her best to communicate: *okay, I get it, look. I'm not a threat. You win.*

Cillian saw the change and bowed his own head without question. He wanted to shout at the animals, shift his skin and chase them off for daring to come close to his friends, but he got the impression Ramona knew what she was doing. Her glamor did most of the work convincing him of that.

Really, she didn't have a clue whether or not the gesture would take. It was just a waiting game of looking away until The Bad Noises stopped.

They heard the lead wolf huff. A twinge of nervous energy got Ramona to lick her nose, a sign that read: *Please don't hurt me.* She elbowed Cillian to do the same, who was just about to get between them. After a moment's pause he dropped the stick slowly and did as he was told.

Elliot was in shock. The scene proved too frightening for him, and all he could think was *I am going to die*, on repeat. His whole presence had become searingly cold and fixed in place. Ramona, his greatest adversary, was now his only hope.

A few of the wolves broke off to inspect the campfire, snuffling at the greasy sticks and fish, testing them with their teeth. They were reluctant to approach the flames at all. The others sniffed intently at the Ronans and Cillian, sounding growls to keep the dynamic between them clear. When a wet nose brushed against his skin, Elliot went unconscious on the spot. It was too close.

Though she did not waver, Ramona whined like a kicked dog. *I'm too scared to try anything*, she said in wolf, at least she thought so.

It got a bad reaction from a wolf to her left, who had the beginnings of a warning call in its throat, but the lead wolf had its teeth sheathed. It had become completely silent as the mist wafting from its pelt flared in decision. The rest of the pack held firm.

Holy shit, is this working? she thought to herself. She was glad to not only survive the encounter, but to also see these beautiful animals up close. The amount of restraint it took not to reach out and ruffle a handful of fur was huge.

Cillian's alarm bells were going off. The hounds were sniffing at any part of him they could reach,

from his tail to his crotch to his boots, and he felt he couldn't move without one of the things raising its voice in disapproval. He found himself bothered at the risk of it all, and having to rely on someone else when his body was writhing with the energy to fight. Every snout that got too close to the humans put a twinge in him. Even so, he stayed stock still.

The investigative wolves had seized the fish, and rejoined the pack, only confirming Cillian's suspicions. "...Bah, you can have it, there's plenty of fish in the creek. Just leave us alone," he said. They probably wouldn't understand, but he couldn't stand the quiet tension. He was rewarded with an aggressive bark.

Ramona had one final message to get across, to make sure the pack didn't feel threatened. She endured confused growls and nips as she lowered herself to her knees, then her side, then her back. She laid with her belly facing the sky, the animal kingdom's universal sign of *I'm exposing my most vulnerable side to you, be cool.*

"*What are you doing??*" Cillian whispered sharply.

"*Just trust me,*" she replied.

“You better know what you’re in for...”

He didn’t mimic her actions this time, opting to stand still and keep his tail low. He watched the lead wolf press its paws into the dirt beside her head and loom completely over her, helpless to stop it without putting everything in jeopardy. *Do something*, his body screamed, *don’t just stand here!* Though, painfully, he kept his resolve.

Ramona whined again, appearing as pathetic as possible. The heat of the wolf hung over her like a blanket, its breath humid against her face. All she could see was fur, scars, and a pair of piercing eyes bearing down. *This is cool as fuck*, she thought, trying not to squirm, *but my heartrate is through the roof.*

It spiked when the beast opened its jaws and pressed its fangs against her neck, slowly, carefully, leaving pinprick indents of pain. She did squirm, then, and clawed at the dirt with her fingernails. Everything she could do to prevent following her instinctual need to shove or kick the beast off of her had to be done, but it was getting harder to concentrate. Its breath rolled across the skin of her neck, and stuck there. When its tongue flattened

against the hump of her throat with its suffocating heat, and the pressure only grew, she began to see stars streak behind her eyelids. All thought vacated her head, and she did the only thing that came to her.

She licked its face.

Immediate release. It chuffed at her, pawed the ground, and promptly moved to the side. The other wolves loosened their circle. For some time, nothing happened at all. Ramona could only lay there, breathing in and out, too stunned to talk and more than alive.

Cillian didn't move an inch, watching her closely.

The elder wolf finally raised its head and looked to the others. In one swimmy motion, it appeared back near the bushes. The other wolves got the message, and drifted towards their leader, rubbing up against one another and shaking their wispy tails. They slipped through and between each other in a stream as the leader herded the blurry procession back into the foliage. It cast one last, long look at Ramona and Cillian before it was gone.

The two friends darted their gazes towards one another.

Cillain's sunglasses had slid down his nose. Behind them, his eyes were wide with disbelief. "That was fuckin' close, Ray."

"*I know!* What even—how did that work?" She was sitting up now, hands pressed against her forehead. She cast a sidelong glance at the fire, and out tumbled a nervous laugh. "They took our fish! They just wanted our food, *god...*"

He approached to help her to her feet. "How'd you know to do that? Are you hurt?" he asked, inspecting her neck. He ran his thumb along the red marks. Thankfully no blood this time, but just as sticky.

"I'm alright, kind of woozy but alright. There's a, like, thing wolves do to show respect, they lick each other. I saw it in a documentary once," she said. "Spent the whole day watching them with Art."

He smiled. "I dunno if I get it, but...good thinking."

"Thanks. Right now I'm just, uh—" She clenched her hands and shook them vigorously to illustrate the feeling. "-You know? Just, *wow!*"

He put a hand to his forehead. "Yeah. Wow."

For a moment, they silently chewed on the aftershocks of what happened to them. What went right, what could have gone wrong, and if it was truly strategy or the whims of lady luck that had kept them intact.

"This would have been a pretty interesting way to die, at least," Ramona piped up.

Cillian cuffed her arm. "Cut that out."

The strike landed hard enough to ache. "Hey? What did I do?"

"Don't kid around about death, I don't like it. *Nothin'* interesting about it." He pushed aside the spectre in his memory. Now wasn't the time to think about that stupid, reckless boy.

Ramona looked to the dirt. "Sorry."

He sighed. "... 'S fine. You're alive." He hooked his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for an embrace. He wanted to say he was glad she was okay, but it fell flat on his tongue.

She took the hug without complaint. The tremors of excitement melted from her as they held each other. Her wolfish muzzle receded as her

thoughts drifted from the encounter, to what had become of Elliot.

“Shit,” she said. “Elliot’s gone. I gotta check on him.” Last she knew, he was frozen stiff with fear.

Cillian was used to his companions’ habits, now. “I’ll hold you while you do.”

“Thanks.”

Elliot wasn’t easy to find. The murk of the headspace offered no easy outline. She called out to him as she walked through a fledgeling sea of grass, pulled on particularly provocative memories, even uttered nicknames she knew he couldn’t stand, but there was no trace of him anywhere. The only one asleep in bed was Arthur. It was like he’d disappeared altogether.

“Ell! Where the fuck are you? The big scary dogs are gone, you can quit hiding.” There was no response but the hum of the brain processing her thought-speak. She tried again. “Can you hear me? I get it, I went and put us in danger again. Whopty-do. If you come out I promise I’ll listen to you talk about maritime tools or whatever gets your rocks off, okay?”

In the silence that followed, she felt something. There was a sound made of a sensation that vibrated gently from the direction of the bed, but it wasn't Arthur. Something was crouched there behind it. Small, wavering, failing to make itself disappear. Ramona hadn't noticed it before, but it had been there the whole time. She peered around the headboard. "Ell?"

She saw a child pressed up against the surface, clinging to an imaginary pillow. He had long, brown hair, summer-soaked freckles, and a face that hadn't yet endured the gravity of nearly three decades. It was him.

He had to have been pushed far past his limit for this to happen. The last thing bad enough to make him a kid again was grandma's passing, and that had been a nightmare to detangle.

It pained Ramona to coddle Elliot after all he'd said and done, but she couldn't stand to leave him alone, right now. He was broken. She'd be a jerk again when he could actually take the heat.

She crouched down in the grass, and shook his shoulder. "Hey, I'm here."

Ramona's voice was low and soft. He opened his eyes, and turned his head towards her, with her large, comforting figure. He said nothing, still shaking, half-hidden behind his pillow.

"I'm here Ell, you're safe. Promise." She opened her arms.

He buried himself in his sister's embrace, so jumbled in his vulnerable state that he didn't care about his grudges. They meshed against one another, warm.

"That's it, that's it. You're okay buddy," she soothed. As bizarre as it was seeing Elliot like this, she knew he was still himself in there. Just hurting. Deep down she really did care about him, annoying and snotty as he was.

She knocked on the headboard, dredging up a particularly loud scrap of sound from their memories. "Arthur, wake up, we've got another kiddo situation."

Arthur jolted awake. He didn't remember when he'd fallen asleep, but someone needed him. He hardly had time to consider why before he threw aside the blankets and placed himself at Ramona's side.

“Show me what happened,” he demanded. He completed her protective embrace around Elliot, trying to quiet his tremors.

She plunged memories of the wolf encounter into his head, careful to keep them away from the shivering boy.

“Oh, gosh, I see,” he said, stroking Elliot’s hair.

“I’m fine, body is fine, he just couldn’t handle what was going on.”

There was more trembling under their arms, and they could hear Elliot mumble “*I’m sorry, I’m sorry...*”

Ramona squeezed him. “Hey shhh, it’s okay. I took care of it. No more wolves.”

“Scary,” he said, “very very scary.”

“I know, but they’re gone now. They were just a bunch of hungry puppies. I’m okay.”

“You almost died, everyone almost died... What if it bit down harder? What if it killed you? We’d never make it back home, never seen again, gone forever-”

“Hey, slow down,” Ramona said, giving him a squeeze. “We. Are. *Alive*. Don’t what-if yourself into a panic attack.”

“I should have made us go back...”

“It’s not your fault, Ell.”

He sputtered out a hopeless cry. “I need to get us home, *I should have done it already!*”

Arthur rubbed his back. “We don’t expect you to, the responsibility isn’t yours alone.”

“I *have* to,” he said, balling up Ramona’s shirt in his tender grip. “It’s on *me* if something happens, I have to get us out, it’s, it’s... I have to do *something...*” he fell into crying again, frustrated at both his current state, and his cowardice.

“We’re here for a reason you know,” said Ramona. “If you can’t handle something, we do.”

“I let you handle so much before,” he said, “and you just—just *messed us up.*”

That was true. She’d picked up a pretty toxic relationship with alcohol that left her dazed out of her mind, sick, and sleeping through the days she couldn’t bear to live through. Elliot never forgave her for that. Even after they recovered.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and meant it.

Elliot cried for a while. Ramona tolerated his need to punch, pull, and scream, and Arthur poured soothing words and touches all over him. He finally wore himself out, and slumped against them both. "I'm scared," he admitted at last. "I can't just enjoy this like you."

"I know," she said.

He curled up again. "I want to go home."

"We'll get there. We just gotta take our time."

Arthur said nothing, comforting his brother in silence. Once again his desires tugged at him. A new vine crept up the headboard.

They moved Elliot over to the bed once he was settled enough for it. He was already beginning to doze from his mental exhaustion as they tucked him into the formless sheets. Arthur decided to stay with him and keep him company, so Ramona could return to the front.

"Everything will be alright," Arthur reassured him.

"Thank you," Elliot murmured to them both.

"Of course," Ramona said, "and hey, I gotcha something."

"What?"

Behind her back she'd been mentally stitching together an object, and now she presented it with a smile. It was a plush wolf, with rounded edges and harmless paws. The toy was dense with imaginary fluff. "Here. You can pretend it's me and tell it all the things you hate about me and what I've done. And it's not gonna hurt you. It's gonna stay soft."

"Why?" he asked.

"You need an outlet. I'm your personal monster. Have at me, maybe you can finally let go of all that crud I did when we were seventeen."

He went quiet, and took the plush. It wasn't real. It was a visual put to the idea of what a soft lump of fabric should be. But it was goofy and stupid and something to hold while he slept. He replayed her words in his mind. *When we were seventeen.* They had basically grown up together... She was there for every rotten turn of it, and faced the weight of the world when he couldn't. He hated her with the ferocity of a sibling and loved her just as much.

"Alright," he said, and just accepted the thing. He was too exhausted to pretend he was ungrateful. What was the point when she'd gone so far out of her way to comfort him?

“Take care, buddy,” she said, ruffling his hair as she made her departure. He seemed more stable, so she was keen on leaving before his mood took any sour turns.

Elliot found himself back to his adult self by the time she had returned to the front. He was clutching the imaginary plush under the covers while Arthur laid with him, who hadn’t much to say besides small reassurances as he privately replayed the wolf encounter in his mind.

He had a lot to think about. Ramona could handle things when it mattered, and for so long he’d been too busy shutting her out. Regret bubbled up in him. He missed what they had before. He missed spending real time together, talking without ugly feelings churning away behind them. And Arthur... This place was bringing colors out of him that Elliot had never seen. Cillian was rubbing off on him, too. It made him tighten inside watching someone he thought he knew change so quickly—but when he looked over at Arthur beside him, and saw a man who was growing more and more himself, he couldn’t find it in him to oppose.

He'd been chasing a sense of control since he was young, always losing his catch eventually. This wasn't just *his* life anymore.

Looking at the wolf plush again, he wondered why she was even talking to him, these days. Why she hadn't just left him for good. Turning it around in his hands, he realized there were words attached to its underbelly in glittering red.

'LOVE YOU, DORK.'

It tingled in his head. He could *hear* it. He squeezed the wolf, angry that he could hardly stand the words. It squeaked like a dog's toy.

Arthur giggled at the sound, leaning over. "Did she really?"

"She did..." he said, squeezing it again. Completely harmless.

His brother stroked its ears. "It kind of looks like her, doesn't it?"

Its big toothy grin and fluffy ruff captured her likeness well enough. They stared into its dumb little button-eyes together. Its clumsy paws. Its...sweet, determined face.

"It really does."

Coming-to, Ramona discovered she was seated on the ground, leant against Cillian. His fingers ran through her hair, gently separating strands and allowing them to fall back into place. He occasionally worked out a knot or picked away some woody debris with his claws, and breathed out the suggestion of a whistled tune all the while. His other arm was around her back, forming a crook that she'd been settled into. Beyond him the campfire laid with its coals cooling. The rush of the creek brought the world back into focus.

"Cill...?" she said, through a film of throat gunk. "How long was I..."

He jumped. "Oh! You're awake." He withdrew his hand from her head and set it on his knee.

"How'd it go?"

She adjusted herself, sitting upright, and took a deep breath to ground herself. "He wasn't doing so hot."

"Ran off scared?"

"Yup. Had to go looking for him. He doesn't handle dogs well."

Cillian snorted. "I don't think he handles *anything* well."

"Not really."

"Good thing he's got you," he said, clapping her shoulder.

She sighed. "You have no idea."

Then it hit her. Elliot *needed* her, here. He'd forgotten what it was like to depend on her courage. He'd taken her for granted, turned a blind eye to her wants, and only now, brought to his knees in the belly of the Hill, did he listen. If all it took to crack his cold veneer was danger, this was the best place to be. When Cillian stumbled into their life, he'd granted her exactly what she needed.

"We should put out that fire," she said, watching the flames flicker weakly. "Can't have your Hill go up in smoke when a stray wind hits."

"It's too wet to burn much beside the creek, it wouldn't get far and all it takes is one tree screaming bloody murder in Cairn's ear for somebody to come snuff it out." With a grunt, he propped himself up and stood. "Just look at that poor thing. Hardly a fire."

"You're right, let's just put it out of its misery."

He pulled her up, and the two of them worked on extinguishing the flame. Ramona was just about ready to splash creekwater on it. Cillian had to shove her, before she caused an explosion of hot steam from the remains of the salamander stone nestled in the pit. They kicked dirt over it instead.

By the time the fire was successfully out, they were filthy. The two of them stripped down to wash. Cillian pulled off his boots, his shades, and simply willed away the rest in a blurry shuffle. Ramona left her garments next to his. She figured the fairy had seen far stranger things than a body in the nude, and didn't mind a little exposure between pals.

After wading into the creek, they washed the grit off of themselves in the water, and Ramona told Cillian everything she knew about wolves. As he listened, he occasionally splashed her with a flick of his tail. He interrupted her several times this way until the two of them broke into a splash fight. Water was flung this way and that, obscenities hurled just the same between their laughter. Once they exhausted the fun of bothering each other, they slaked their thirst upon a clear-looking stretch of fast

running current, and decided it was time to get going.

Where to? Cillian certainly didn't know. He didn't want to go back to Cairn, and now that he'd seen what Ramona could handle, he wasn't itching to get the Ronans back to Mound. There was no use in trying to find that Murmur fellow either. He decided, at last, that they could just walk for walking's sake.

There were plenty of things he could fill their time with along the way.

Chapter Sixteen

They wandered as far as curiosity would take them. Cillian attended his friend closely, ensuring her daring feet didn't stray from his view. As they poked around the woods for things of interest, he showed her stashed knick-knacks in nests and tree hollows, at wards tied in boughs, waymarkers hidden where only knowing eyes could see. Things left behind by those who made a habit of passing through the area. Ramona made to touch one of these makeshift ornaments, but she felt the gaze of an unseen presence lie heavy on her neck, and figured it was better to leave it be.

So much of the Hill, even outside of Mound, was touched by its people. Between the teeming ferns and aspiring saplings, the smothersome green did not sprawl long without a mark of influence. There was a pattern to it. Silent trades, stored goods, messages left in dapperling circles and woven weeds—they always occurred just a little ways off from the path, if you could even call the winding breaths of space between the trees a 'path.' Thorny patches guarded secrets. Brambles had stories

tucked away. They made a game of spotting what they could, and, remembering Silas' practice, guessed at the lives behind the scattered odds and ends.

Despite the cage it had become in the past few years, Cillian was fond of his home. He was eager to introduce the Ronans to details they would otherwise miss. Show them the colors of his here-and-there culture. He hoped it would bring them closer to it, to foster a deeper appreciation that could ease their stay, and it seemed to be working. It brought him a little kick of joy to see them taking part in the kinds of things he grew up with.

He watched Ramona settle into the rhythm. Quick to jump headfirst into whatever caught her eye, she was a reckless, wild thing like himself. He found he had to stop her from getting too ahead of the chase.

"Come on, get back here," he said. He'd shown her ways to step with care, practicing how to stay on one's feet in the forest with certainty. She'd soon taken to sprinting around a cluster of trees to test their knotted roots. Several laps had come and gone, and she was still going.

"I'm almost-" she disappeared behind the trunks again, then came around, "-done!" She trotted up and patted his shoulder. "*Whooh*, I'm gonna feel that later. I feel great, though. Do you know how much running this body usually does? *Zero*. I think all this exercise might be helping."

"You folk haven't done a lot of...moving about, have you?"

She wiped her brow. "Elliot's always stuck to his desk, dude. Like yeah, we go *outside*, but some days we just stay in the house. All day. I'm so sick of it."

"That's no way to live," said Cillian. No wonder they were so pale.

"*Hell* no. It's been killing me. If I could spend that time *doing* something it would be more bearable."

"Don't seem fair. Has he grown some sense yet or what?"

"Yeah, maybe. I think he's getting better... Just, don't worry about it. I'm out here right now, I'm me, we're having fun and that's all I care about. At least he's letting me have this." Ramona caught her breath a little more and rolled her shoulders. She

did that a few more times, less for stretching than enjoying her new form.

Cillian scratched at his jaw. The idea of being held back within one's own body didn't sit well with him. If he had to share his with another soul, they'd better allow him his habits or—well, he wasn't sure how he'd strangle a soul, but he'd figure it out.

"Good, then," he said. "We can keep up our little romp. I wanna see more of you. Been having more fun than I've had in a long, long while."

She laughed, and wagged one of his floppy ears. "You too, man. Feels like a dream."

Feels better, he thought. *I don't have to wake up.*

"Say, how'd you like some water?" he asked. No doubt Ramona had worked up a thirst, running like that. Besides, he was pleased to see his new friends eat and drink from the Hill's bounty. He might as well keep up the encouragement. They were coming along so nicely.

While they debated whether to double back towards the creek or look for another stream, a voice struck them like an arrow.

"Abandon your post quick, huh Cilly?" *Sienna.*

Both he and Ramona wheeled around to face the cohort. She had a recognizable sort of voice. It was a distinctly Moundish accent; words clipped short to save on breath, with a heavy-handed lean on the harder sounds that made *'quick'* sound like the cocking of a gun. Cillian had generous licks of it himself.

She was perched in a tree, sneering down at the two. Either she'd been following them, and was damn good at staying quiet, or she only managed to stumble upon them just now. Cillian didn't have any faith in the former.

He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of alarming him. "The moth didn't make it," he said coolly, which was as close to avoiding the truth as he could get. "So we got lost." *Also* not exactly a lie.

"Bullshit. I know you pulled somethin', you *reek* of it." She made an obscene face and stuck out her tongue.

"You're smelling your own stink, bird," he bit back. "What business is it to you how we go about our day? I don't recall there being a deadline."

Sienna fluttered down from the branch like a chicken and landed with a thump. "*Cairn* sent me.

You're lucky Amaranth has his hands full, with how you're always mouthin' off."

Well that was a problem. At least he knew Sienna's boredom would drive her away sooner or later. Had Amaranth showed up, the lecture would have been brutal.

"...Alright. What's Carmine up to?" he asked.

"He's busy helping Murmur 'cause your sorry selves are out here dickin' around instead!" she huffed.

Carmine was the final sibling of Cairn's hounds. Like Amaranth, he was well focused towards his duties, but had a more warm, approachable personality. Cillian liked him out of all of the three, but sometimes he was a bit much. *Wish he were here instead*, he thought. *Would have been easier to deal with.*

He shrugged. "Well? Murmur's getting help, I don't see what the big deal is. I'm lookin' at a clean schedule. Right, Ramona?"

"Oh—yeah. Sounds like Murmur doesn't need us anymore, so..."

Sienna's tail fan flared, showing off her fiery plumage. "Hey! You can't just shove off, you agreed to help."

Cillian puffed. "Or what?" His tail swished in time with his tapping boot.

"Or you'll be hearing it from Amaranth. You know full well he don't take *no* for an answer."

After the run in with the wolf pack, Sienna's flash of teeth was just a sloppy attempt at looking tough. Ramona was hardly intimidated and far from impressed.

She wanted to get this over with. "Alright, where do we go then? What's the plan?" She placed her hands on her hips, which made it clear she didn't particularly care about the fairy's display.

"There's a tree 'round here that's coming out its skin and you're gonna help it shed," she said. "Come along now, this way." Sienna strutted past them, headed towards their supposed new mark.

Cillian's brows shot up, and he caught up with the cockerel-hound in a few quick strides. "Hold on! A tree's cutting its bark? *Right now?*" It was difficult to withhold his interest. Even in a place so thick with trees, it wasn't everyday you actually *saw* one hatch

itself anew. With how it usually went, someone fresh would show up out of the green one day, a naked thing with unsteady feet and tender flesh. Someone who was not quite *someone*, yet, but no longer no-one. A quiet, curious being until they grew themselves a respectable skin and a personality to go with it. Knowing how Cairn came to be, a part of Cillian had always wondered what the process *looked* like.

“Sure is, you got quite a stupid fuss going Cilly. I ain’t surprised if it wants to see what the noise is all about.”

“Fine, I wanna take a look at it,” he said. He adjusted his shades, then turned to Ramona. “What about you?”

Of course she did, but she wanted to have some fun with Sienna first. She figured turning the tables on her was fair payback for what happened to Arthur.

“I do, but if it’s too boring, I think we could have some fun plucking feathers instead. See how many we can pick each before the bird just can’t fly home.” She leered at Sienna, and said “I have to wonder how they taste.”

Cillian's face read surprise, then drifted towards a deep satisfaction. Half lidded, smug pleasure. "I'd like a game of that. You'd lose."

Sienna growled in offense, feathers once again splayed in flaming colors. "Oh you think you're fuckin' funny?"

"I think I could manage a good handful," Ramona continued, ignoring the cohort's words but eyeing her up and down, teeth still gladly bared. Every movement was an intentional attack. She learned her lesson from the wolves.

Cillian's pride swelled at how his Ronans were coming along. First Arthur took the leap into using glamor, now Ramona was playfully turning things around on the ever-terrible Sienna in true hillish fashion. While his own toothy grin *did* serve to intimidate the cohort, it was entirely genuine.

"We could use 'em afterwards too. Stick 'em in a nice basket, maybe? String 'em on a necklace?" he suggested, gesturing loosely around his shoulders like he was holding a long string.

"I'm right here you pricks!" Sienna protested, an unpleasant scratch caught in her voice. She looked about ready to snap.

Ramona felt a chuckle hit her, but she choked it down. "Why not use them as kindling? She's not nearly as pretty as her brothers, I'm sure no one would miss them." She recalled Amaranth and Carmine's appearances from back in the Court. She still didn't know who was who, but one of the brothers had a more impressive, deeply red comb that complimented his rich blues, while the other had lovely curly feathers, like a frillback pigeon. Sienna just looked scrappy.

The cohort lunged, gravely insulted. As if she had forgotten her position of authority, her responsibilities, her restraint, she barked and snarled and left behind any illusion that she served under the King at all. "*You Nameless bastards!*" she bellowed, "you take that back!"

Expecting an attack after all the prodding, Ramona endured a few scrapes to seize Sienna by the neck, flip her relatively light body belly-up, and toss her to the ground. She kept her fangs out, growling her own melody of dominance at the cohort. After already having to submit and grovel so fucking hard, this moment was hers to revel in. Now *she* was the wolf.

Ramona kneeled over Sienna and pressed in, pinning her legs to her body as she squirmed. “I earned the right to pick on you the moment you laid a hand on Art,” she said. “*Fuck you.*”

She pulled a feather from the cohort’s neck, prompting a yelp, and placed it on her tongue. It tickled her palate, leaving a greasy sort of residue on the inside of her mouth. She spat it out and watched it drift down onto Sienna’s nose.

“*Gah!* You’re an animal, you hear me?” Sienna growled, puffing the feather away. “Can’t take a joke-!”

Cillian clamped her muzzle and held it shut. “Listen here. You show us where to go, we get there, you leave us alone to it. No lingering and comments, nothin’. No queer business. Get lost and we’ll do our job like was asked of us. Aye?”

The cohort tried to break his hold and bite him, and failing that, clawed at him with one of her wing-hands. She landed a few good gashes before Ramona pinned her wings down.

“He asked you a question, *answer it,*” she snarled.

"*Aye or not?*" Cillian pressed. Even though Ramona could handle it, the sight of her getting attacked lit a protective surge in his heart again. He had no intention to kill, nor seriously harm Sienna. Doing so would mark him seven different kinds of incredibly damned and he'd be Nameless in Cairn's eyes. Still, he was mad enough to imagine squeezing her neck until it snapped. His claws dug dully into the scarlet flesh of her muzzle at the thought.

Sienna shuddered and shifted in her skin. She began to grow. Her limbs lengthened and thickened up as her wings folded into arms. Before they knew it, they were grappling with what looked like a feathered human being. Cillian's grasp raked against her changing face.

"I bet you'd like me more like *this*," she seethed between his fingers.

"You know that don't change a damn thing." His tail thumped against Ramona's side as it swung in anger. "Put your own face on if you wanna talk."

"Rich coming from you, cuckoo. We was friends. What happened?"

Sienna made for a wiry human, with a shock of ginger hair and a pointed nose. Though her body was

sturdier than before, it was just as easy to keep her down.

Ramona was more surprised by the idea a grouch like her could have friends, than the transformation itself, but she was transfixed by the sight all the same.

"I got needs you can't fulfill," Cillian said. "I told you so already."

"You and I had fun *just* fine," she hissed through the gap in her front teeth.

"I've changed," he said.

She growled again. "Changed, huh?"

There was a long silence between the two. He firmly gripped her jaw as she stared up at him, eyes narrowed. Ramona said nothing while she pinned what were now wrists. The history between these fairies wasn't for her to know, but she wondered what exactly drove them apart.

A faint river's burble nestled into the space between words.

"...You gonna take us to the damn tree or not?" asked Cillian at last.

"I will if you let me go."

Ramona hesitated, eyeing the spot where a muzzle once was. "You won't bite, right?"

"Naw, I'm tired now. Don't pick at me anymore and I won't bother. You got your piece." She rolled her head to the side and snorted. "Cairn nagged my ear off yesterday, so I guess I owe you a sorry. I got a job to do and it ain't this."

"Fine," said Cillian. "Get off her, Ray."

They both released her and stepped back. She sat up awkwardly, rubbing away the soreness in her wrists. As she did so, she assessed her altered form. "Been a while since."

Cillian crossed his arms. "So it has."

"...So you can just do that?" asked Ramona, unable to resist.

Sienna caught her staring. "What's it to you?"

"Oh she can do it alright. Practiced *real* hard," said Cillian. He was in a particularly sardonic kind of mood, having another face from the past thrown his way.

"*Just kick me,*" the hound muttered.

"I'd love to."

"So, why-" Ramona started.

The cohort grumbled loudly. “*Why* don’t matter. It wasn’t good enough. Fuckin’...stupid. It’s stupid. I dunno why I tried.”

“You couldn’t accept I was done with you,” Cillian replied. “Still can’t, just look at yourself. Dredging up this old shit. Gettin’ in my way. I know you’re here to sort out more than a little laziness, I ain’t an idiot.”

She hunched her shoulders. “Maybe I’m the idiot. We ain’t kids anymore, I should’a known you’re not gonna budge. You couldn’t care less about me now that you got your toys.”

His hackles rippled. “You think I don’t miss it too?”

She froze.

“I hate you,” he continued. “What you’ve become. You got mean when I started drifting away, not like it was my *fault*. You know I didn’t go and choose it, for fuck’s sake.”

“Why’d you give up on me?”

“Your company was like nettle-sting. You couldn’t stand a thing I wanted or dreamed of and it wasn’t fun to play anymore. I’m not the only one who’s different now.”

“Your dreams could’ve got you *killed*.”

“Better than being stuck with you.”

Ramona tapped her fingers against her thigh. She didn’t want to get between them, but she was restless. Her throat tickled with want for water, and the musty taste in her mouth begged to be rid of.

“Hey, guys,” she spoke up.

The two fairies turned, regarding her silently.

“We should probably have this conversation on the way to the tree...thing...?”

Sienna’s knees and breath shook alike as she rose to her feet. She was shorter than Cillian and Ramona both. “Guess so. Shouldn’t sit here barking at each other.”

“Mm.” Cillian stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Can you walk like that?”

“I could, maybe. Prob’ly. I’ll be fine.” She held her arms out to steady herself, but she was clearly having trouble. She took a few wobbly steps.

His tone lost its edge. “...Any reason you ain’t changed back?”

“I won’t judge,” said Ramona, “we *did* threaten to pluck her.”

She snorted. “How kind of you.”

“Well?” he asked.

“I’m too worn out to fly, and the weeds up ahead look thick. Might as well make the most out of this body.”

Ramona peered at the path ahead. It was choked with bushes. She could hardly picture the cohort making it through without taking to the air, and there was no way she’d let them carry her.

Though, momentarily, Ramona considered sweeping Sienna off of her weak legs and hefting her through the tangle anyway. Unfortunately the thought of carrying a girl in her arms proved a little too distracting. “Fair,” she said, dismissing the idea, “lead the way.”

Nose in the air, Sienna caught the direction they were meant to head in once again, and nodded to it. “Follow me.”

Her gait was undignified and clumsy. She was easily outstrode by her more practiced companions, and had to make frequent stops in order to calibrate. At least the natural terrain was more forgiving than it seemed. She led them into thickets and through verdant patches of blueberry and ferns, agreeable plants without snagging thorns. Every so often she

would lift her chin and trace the scent she was looking for.

Miraculously, the two fairies didn't bicker further. Cillian busied himself with collecting blueberries and tossing them back into his maw. Sienna was preoccupied with guiding them along.

"So how did you find us?" Ramona asked, watching Sienna nearly trip over herself. She hadn't expected the two to get all quiet.

"I saw smoke while searching for you and went from there."

Ramona gave herself a sniff. *Wow, I smell like a barbecue,* she thought. *I could have used the soap while washing up earlier. I was looking forward to that.*

"I guess it wasn't that subtle," she replied. Her thoughts were still caught on the bar of soap in their bag. *...Am I ever going to get that hangout with Relle?*

"Why do you think Cilly keeps gettin' caught?"

"Hey now," Cillian said through a mouthful of blueberry. He was picking at another bush from a ways away. "Not my fault trees like spreading rumors."

“They’ll have plenny to say about you stuffing your face then,” the cohort snickered.

“Shut it.”

In that instant, Ramona realized her taste in company was truly terrible.

As they emerged into a clearing, they found the tree hunched by the opposite edge of it. It was a hemlock, with its thick trunk bent back in an extreme curve so that the top of the tree rested on the ground. Its fronds splayed out every which way. They reached toward the sky, lay weak against the earth, and fanned out all over its circumference from the lowest boughs to its fallen tip. Scattered all around it was a carpet of needles and cones that had shaken loose. They were dusted all over the roots, too, some of which had recoiled from the soil in uncomfortable angles. At the point where the trunk was pushed furthest outward, there was a break in the splintered bark. A smooth, translucent form bulged from within.

Arthur stirred from his rest. At some point consciousness got away from him; with Elliot fast asleep, the loosely retained figment of a wolf toy in

his arms, there had been no one to keep Arthur from slipping.

The sight of the tree was compelling enough to shake him from the murk. A blip of outside reality that had slipped through and wriggled his way. He knew what it was as soon as he laid his eyes on it; the bulging form and nascent flesh of the tree rang similar to Cairn's bare body. He rose from bed with a start, waded through the incorporeal, waist-high grass, and approached the front of their little world.

Nearing the front, it dawned quite suddenly on Arthur that Sienna was present. He could recognize her past her human veneer, with her blue feathers and gruff tone. The recent memory of a scuffle hit him. He was taken with a fearful tremor, one that soon subsided into quiet anger as recent events flooded his awareness.

He had been so afraid of potential consequences from Cairn that he'd run away with his tail between his legs, and for what, *her*? Sienna was far from a genuine threat, Ramona made that more than clear. He watched, through his sister's perspective, how easily she'd pinned the hound, how

she enacted retribution for him. An eye for an eye, feather for frond.

While it wasn't a great sign that Sienna was sent in the first place, he could see no punishment in place. Their task had simply changed hands. If this was the extent of the consequences, what was there to fear?

Arthur's consciousness brushed against Ramona's, and she was quick to tug him closer. "Hey! You're here," she whispered aloud, happy enough to see him that the words fell through her mouth.

"Ah, hi," he spoke in thought, "I wanted to see the--"

"The tree! Yeah. I was thinking about getting you. We gotta help it hatch or something, isn't that cool?" she said, still hushed.

He noted that she was unusually electric. Ramona often fired on all cylinders, but the adrenaline rush of pushing Sienna around must have had a strong effect on her. At least she was having fun now.

"I look forward to it."

Cillian's ear perked, picking up on their whispering. "Having another chat without me?" he said.

"Art's around again," said Ramona.

"Oh lovely. You folk come and go so quick." He really did enjoy having all that company packed into one vessel. They changed places enough to keep his interest nicely satisfied, and he only had to look after one body.

"We do, don't we? Hello again," said Arthur. A shock of sandy hair wended through Ramona's wild mane, along with a few scarce leaves.

Cillian noticed. He was growing to love the sight of his companions emerging from themselves like that; their faces bleeding through each other in gradual layers. There was the smallest lick of an urge to reflect it back, to use his glamor as a mirror, but he held back. "Hey Art," he said instead. His voice was pleasantly low. "Ain't that a sight, that hemlock?"

It was as if they were all huddled in secret, watching the tree from afar. They still hadn't stepped into the clearing yet.

“What’cha whispering about back there?”

Sienna asked, “it better not be about me.”

“Nothin’ about you. Just never seen a thing like this asides from Cairn,” Cillian said, gesturing toward the tree with his thumb.

“Me neither,” said Ramona, “how should we start? Do we gotta peel it open or...?”

Sienna rolled her eyes. “Dumb as it sounds, yeah. Peel it. C’mon.” She inclined her head with a sharp flick, indicating them to follow as she marched towards it. “It’s like an egg, but it's both the shell and the hatchling right now.”

“You done this before, yeah?” Cillian asked, keeping an eye on the hemlock, and how its needled boughs swayed on the breeze like they were breathing labored breaths.

“Aye,” Sienna said. “Long time ago, it was a maple. I was just a youngling...me and my brothers were being taught exactly what we were made for.” She was by the roots of the tree now. She crouched and traced one of them with a talon. The tree shuddered, slightly. “Gotta be delicate, see? They don't look it, but they're sensitive.”

Cillian felt his nape prickle as he approached and rested a hand on the bark. It emanated warmth beneath his palm, despite how rough and thick it was. A bough twitched above. This was going to hurt, if it really could feel pain. "You're not a delicate sort, Sienna," he said.

"That's why you're handling it, cuckoo," she said. "You ain't as quick to scratch. That maple's still got a scar from me."

There it was again. Arthur had yet to ask what *cuckoo* meant, but let it go once more. There were more important things to consider and Cillian clearly didn't like the subject.

"S'pose so. Ain't you due to go then? We made it."

Sienna chuckled. "Here I thought we was getting along again." She drew herself up, and let her gaze hang on the hemlock a moment longer.

He bit his inner cheek. Some part of him had slipped back into the old familiarity of her company. Despite everything, the grooves they'd worn into one another still fit.

"I don't get your hopes up."

"That's fine," she said, "I been taking my hopes too far anyhow."

At this, she shook, and shifted back into her old appearance. Her wings returned, tail bloomed, and her face became canine yet again. She stood far more comfortably this way.

Cillian sighed. "So you gonna get outta my sight, or what?"

"Aye. And I won't tell Cairn about us scrapping, he don't gotta know. Speaking of which..." She turned to Arthur and Ramona. "You. You're tougher than I thought. Keep it up."

"Thanks," said Ramona. She flicked a finger gun at her. "Round two, sometime?"

The hound bristled. "Huh?"

"Just go, Enna," said Cillian. He waved his hand to shoo her.

She snorted. "You sure picked an odd one. See you."

With that she was off, tail feathers fluttering behind her as she flapped up and into the canopy. In her absence, the clearing was cold with silence.

Cillian eased. Finally, they were alone again. He didn't like having his old problems out for his

friends to see, they didn't need that. His jacket and ruff smoothed out again.

"I guess we'll get to it," he said.

Ramona looked to the tree, then her hands. Her glamor-given claws stared back at her. "I don't know if I'm the one to do this, all things considered," she said.

"Let's give it a try, at least," replied Arthur. He wanted to witness every inch of the creature as it slipped out of its casing, so he was set on participating. Internally, he placed a hand on Ramona's shoulder. "I know for a fact you're more careful than you think, when you mean to be."

Cillian reached over and ruffled their shared body's hair. "You're both fine. Come along, we got a tree to help and I'm sure it's sick of hearing us run on."

Chapter Seventeen

Fingers wove between grooves in the hemlock's bark, sinking in where claws allowed them, tearing strips away. It was agonizingly slow. Each tug sent a cascade of trembles from its trunk to its roots and branches. Like soothing an animal, they stroked the parts of the tree they hadn't torn away whenever the shuddering got too intense. Piece by piece, more of that pale, glassy flesh was uncovered.

It was a ritualistic quiet in which they worked. Their small grunts and exhalations were only accompanied by the tree's faint creaking, and any regular chorus of animal chatter drifted in from afar. All focus was put towards the task at hand. Keeping their pace in check.

The bark wasn't easy to rip from the tree; it was still firm and awkwardly shaped, coarse enough to make a hassle of holding on with too much force and tough enough to necessitate it. There was no longer wood beneath the outer layer, only a swollen cavity. Any movement from the creature within made the bark distend this way and that. All it took

was an unfortunate shudder to earn them pinched fingers and scuffed palms.

At one point, Cillian tore out a piece just a sliver too quick and got nipped for it. He gasped and jerked his hand back, a couple of his knuckles hot with pain. The tree wept a clear substance from the site while he sucked on his own injury. He tried to calm it, resting his other hand on a thin strip of bark and whispering assurances. Its nascent body twitched.

So sensitive, he thought to himself as he remembered Sienna's words. He wondered if this was how Cairn felt when he first emerged from his skin. *Vulnerable, tender, fragile*. This hemlock's fate was well within the hands of others, so who gave Cairn a chance? Who had the patience, the time, while the world around them churned with danger?

Had he been all alone?

Arthur studied the hemlock well. He'd taken a notebook from their bag, and paused to sketch simple renditions of it between bouts of pulling and peeling on Ramona's part. She took lengths to be gentle. Her touch lingered on the soft flesh when she slid her hand between it and its wooden cradle. It

was smooth and fibrous beneath, and had a pungent piny odor. It sent an electric pulse through her skin whenever they made contact.

The hemlock itself began to look less like a cage and more like a moult. They peeled away enough of the outer layer that the new body had room to stir. It was a sort of humanoid shape, tightly curled in on itself, clung to by tendrils and veins that hung from the inner walls. That same slick, transparent residue coated the creature and everything it was attached to. It was fully exposed to the air, now. Its skin tensed in waves of unfamiliarity, and the friends had to stomach an indecent feeling as they stared.

“*Well,*” said Cillian, the spell of focus broken on his tongue, “it's free now. Think we should pull it out or leave it?”

“I wouldn't want to hurt it...I'm not even sure it's awake,” said Arthur.

Ramona agreed. “Looks fragile. I don't think we should just leave either. Something might get it.”

“Let's wake it and let it decide, then,” he said. Cillian approached the curled up figure with caution, for its sake rather than his. He laid a hand on what

he believed to be its shoulder. "Hey, of-hemlock, do you hear me?"

It shuddered, then loosened its fetal curl. Tendrils unwound and clenched into fingers. An indistinct face craned up to stare back at Cillian. Its eyes were cloudy and pearlescent, but it was undeniable that the creature was touched with sight. It had a mane of hemlock boughs that flowed from the back of its head like hair. It sat upright and said nothing. The husk it sat within twitched again, like a pair of jaws that threatened to snap closed around a tender heart. The jagged bark was rough against the new form it had given way to.

Cillian gave it some space. "We're here to help," he said.

The words slid off of the figure. It held a fixated gaze on everyone, and quaked as it produced two long, feathery tendrils that hung from the back of its head. They tensed, as if it were considering something.

Then they shot out and struck both bodies, attaching to the sides of their heads. Filaments found purchase on their skin and travelled deep. There was

no time to react or brace before the connection was made.

You.

Its voice was like a gulp of water, with more presence than anyone's minds had comfortable room for. It was like a thought from oneself, with more volume, an odd edge of clarity, and the full meaning of a concept, *the entity I am addressing that is not me*, compacted into one signal.

Of course, the Ronans were no stranger to communications of the mental sort; the way their thought-speech reverberated through the mindscape and sidled up in low, even volume was all they had ever known. This was different, *this* was an intrusion.

Cillian was dumbstruck. He had never in his life heard another inside his own head. That was private, off-limits, and yet this hemlock had managed to squirm its way in. He would've torn the tendril out right away, but he didn't know how deep it was rooted. He clutched his hair instead. What a terrible way to greet someone, this was!

Mound Oak sent you? It asked.

Arthur needed a moment to digest the question. Before he could even get the *yes* between his lips, a pulse in his temple made it clear he was already understood. The sentiment moved along the connection in an instant. *Do you need our help?* he added, once he realized he didn't need to speak aloud. It was almost like talking to the others. Close enough, anyway.

The tree nodded. *New self grows. What Once Was decays. Name me.*

Name you?

I ask you. Give a name to me.

It was a strange sensation for all as the hemlock's voice gradually sharpened from abstract impressions into language. It no longer had the strength of miles of fungal connections entangled in its roots, nor the consistent exchange of hormones and electricity that saturated its existence beforehand. The assurance of a world where there was only the barest meaning, only signals and reactions and pheromones, the ebb and flow of a colossal network centuries in the making, had been left behind.

Finding the means to get his mouth moving, Cillian asked "I never seen a tree talk like this, how come you're able?" He winced, pushing through the confusion in his mind and throat. If he was gonna speak with the tree, he'd do it out loud or not at all.

It paused, and gestured to its face. *No mouth. No vibrations. It has to grow. Soon.*

Ramona was the first to notice something shift beneath its skin as it explained. She could imagine the teeth forming and settling into place. *How does it feel?* she asked.

New roots. Pressure. Heat without heat. Cold without cold... The hemlock put a hand to its jaw, then withdrew. *I think it hurts.*

Amidst the oddity of speaking with a tree, consciousness drifted towards Elliot. The shock of an uninvited voice inside their head had stimulated him. He awoke with the feeling that he was incredibly distant from anything and anyone, and the sudden idea that he couldn't continue wasting his time away in the headspace had him at the throat. He couldn't

allow himself to be left behind. To step back completely and lose what little grasp he had. To accomplish *nothing* at all. *Again*.

Coniferous boughs brushed the back of his neck. He didn't notice them sprout from the headboard. He didn't notice the scattering of cones on the blanket, nor the piny smell in the atmosphere. The clarity of his surroundings, the thickness he breathed, the fact that, slowly, impossibly, his personal ocean had become a forest.

He only knew that something was happening now, and he was going to investigate it for himself.

He crept from the isolation of his bed, struggled through ferns, grasses and brush towards the front, and took in any recent memory he could get his hands on. There was a lot to cover.

"So, of-hemlock, what are you looking for in a name?" Cillian asked.

The former tree stretched, acclimating to the sensation of arms. *Freedom. New start. I spent eternity, life passing by me... I feel footfall, I feel*

shouting, little claws climbing, digging, teeth gnawing, I feel growing, spreading, loss... Cold, warm, cold and warm and cold and warm again, wet and dry, sun and sunless, never ceasing, seasons and seasons of this. I want to pass by others. I want to walk. Run. Scream. Eat. See.

It pointed towards Cillian. You say the ones with fire make no more fire. You say one can catch freedom beyond this place. Mound Oak said it was a danger many many seasons ago, still after the smoke left. Spread the danger-scent to me through the roots. To all Mound Oak could reach. Now...the roots are full with whispers. I want to see your freedom.

He ruffled. "You shed your skin 'cause of me?" Already wanted to. You gave reason to.

"...Well I'll be! Never thought I'd make an impact." He resisted the urge to itch the tendril vine still attached to his head. It tingled whenever the hemlock spoke. The others were clearly affected by it too, shivering a little after each exchange.

Even so, Ramona felt fine. She bumped his shoulder with her fist. "Look at'cha go man! You're an inspiration."

“Of both good and bad it seems,” he said, thinking back to Cairn’s news on the other toppled tree.

“That’s not *your* fault, though.”

“...Guess so. It’s not like-”

The hemlock twinged, gripping its tender jaw again. *It hurts.*

An empathetic pang hit Arthur. He bled through further, and stepped toward the creature. He offered his hand. “May I take a look?”

It stared, then nodded slowly. It allowed him to place his palm under its chin. Beneath the layers of translucent flesh, in just the right angle of light, he could make out the beginnings of something pale and sharp. Reminiscent of seeds buried within the meat of a fruit. A cavity was forming around them.

Teeth.

“Fascinating... I hope it doesn’t hurt too long.” He studied the way the light passed through the skin, how firm it felt despite a lack of bone.

It will stop. The hemlock assured him. *Do not pity me. Pain is interesting.*

“I imagine it’s a new feeling for you?”

No. Color, light, new. Speech, new. Many senses to understand. Not pain. Pain is old. Very old.

"I'd believe that," said Cillian.

Arthur released the hemlock's chin and gave it some space again. Something tugged in the back of his mind, but he figured it was either the tendril attached to him, or the unsettlement of holding the half-formed creature.

Instead, he caught a more familiar face when he closed his eyes.

Elliot crept towards his headfellows once he had his fill of context. He'd reviewed anything they hadn't bothered to keep to themselves, from the patchy recollections to sharp snapshots, important or not. Now that he knew what was attached to their head, he wanted to watch them handle the hemlock. The others weren't bothered by the arrangement, that much didn't surprise him; the confusing part was how little *he* cared.

He was noticed, of course, but he didn't greet them, and received no greetings in return. That was fine. He didn't feel like talking much.

"So, freedom..." Ramona mused. How could you condense it into a name? Names weren't easy to

conjure out of thin air. She wracked her brain, wishing she had a list of ideas on hand, and something clicked.

The pocket thesaurus! It was in their bag. They'd always brushed against its spine while rummaging for other things. She pulled it out, cracked it open, and flipped to *F*. "This might help," she said.

Cillian leaned in. He liked skimming human books, but all he caught was an eyeful of words standing in orderly lists. He couldn't taste any hint of a story. "What's that?"

"A book full of similar words—maybe you can pick one out?" she said, redirecting her explanation to the waiting hemlock.

I can try. It replied.

"Cool, I'll read you some, just tell me what you like. There's...oh, not many options... *Liberty? Rein?*" Quickly her idea was starting to fall flat. She skipped words that didn't sound enough like names and looked further up the page to *free*. Unfortunately *unbound* and *loose* didn't seem very good either. "Uh, hollon."

Ramona turned inwards. "You guys have any ideas?"

Keen to keep his mouth shut for once, Elliot turned his head away.

Arthur was more eager. "I want to see what options *identity* and *change* give us, try those," he suggested.

Far too barren. They searched further, and the hemlock shook its head at *Renewal* and *Journey* as well. With every failed attempt at finding a name, Elliot grew more restless. It was harder and harder to bite his tongue. He gripped them both by the shoulders, preventing them from suggesting more.

"Oh come *on*," he fumed, "I *know* you two are more capable than this."

He looked them in the eyes, then said "you both love animals, a fact that I couldn't ignore if I tried. Arthur, your attachment to creatures borderlines on obsession, I was *waiting* for you to suggest something based on doves or butterflies or some other trite, symbolic organism. And Ramona, you've *plagued* me with your love of the supernatural. Surely you could have chosen better from the damned bestiary of monsters you've built in

our head. At least if either of you had done as such, I could claim I've been paying enough attention to you."

It came as a shock that Elliot was counting on their interests. He'd always groaned when it came to Ramona's tangents about werewolves and cryptids, dragons, and otherwise. She'd tried to enlighten him to the merits of the supernatural, until eventually she stopped bringing it up as much. Arthur had roped him into reading a few nature articles and snippets of xenofiction, but Elliot always longed to return to his work.

Why, suddenly, was he so aware?

He knew. Those passions were secondary to the things he was always falling short of. They were distractions from writing, reading, whatever demon of the month he convinced himself to climb into the mouth of. He chose to isolate from their interests, but he could never truly cut the cord. They had a place in his heart too.

"Put down the book. You've proven fairies prefer something more genuine, anyway. This isn't *your* way, rifling through synonyms, it's *mine*. I'm not as creative as either of you."

“Elliot...” Ramona said, at a loss for words.

Thoughts of his selfishness throughout the years snaked up through him and struck. There was an urge to turn around and let the green of their mind swallow him completely. Why not slip into dormancy? Feel the embrace of oblivion take him again, forget the stress of being someone at all, for good? His brother and sister were more interesting people, they could do well enough on their own. The resident tyrant could sleep forever.

It would be so easy. He could lie, say he was resting. Disintegrate while they focus on the Hill, and he'd be gone before Ramona could come pull him back from the brink. Dissolve away. It wouldn't even hurt. Would it?

His heart pounded. His real heart. Their heart. It pounded hard.

I don't want to die, he thought. It was a quieter thought than the rest of the churn. It made his blood run cold. *I don't want to die. I want to see them live.*

Something enveloped his presence and squeezed. It burned. The heat of the sun was upon him, sizzling every thought from his mind, holding

him in place with what felt like the weight of the world. He couldn't breathe.

He was being hugged.

Externally, the Ronans appeared to be stuck deep in their thoughts again. The hemlock was patient, as trees are, and did not disturb what it considered the ritual of its naming, but it was curious. Their steady heartbeat had spiked. Veins thudded against its sensitive filaments. Not a thought of theirs spilled across the connection, only the pressure.

Cillian tried to keep to his own; he figured out what he was looking at and it wasn't his business, but when they dropped their book as a tear welled up and rolled down their face, he shook them. "Hey," he pressed, "what's going on? Are you well?"

There was an "ah," from them, collectively too choked to talk, and that was all for a while.

He whipped his head around to face the hemlock. "You're not doing anything to them, are you?"

No, it replied. It shivered, then detached the tendril from the side of their head. Nothing changed. *See. Not me.*

He watched the distant glaze in their eyes with a knot of concern growing in his stomach. Finally, they stopped holding their breath, and he realized how still they'd been. Their features shifted around slowly, like waves bobbing against the shore.

"Awake yet? Hey?" He asked, tapping the side of their face. He propped them up against his shoulder, a habit he'd quickly picked up for any moment he noticed they weren't all there.

Their vision focused, and their form settled on Elliot. Freckles winked into being upon his pale skin. He mouthed something as he came to, blinked, and said "...we've, ah, decided on a name."

Cillian sighed in relief. "Good."

In the realization he was braced against the fairy's body, Elliot pulled away and straightened up. "Y-yes, right. The first idea wasn't working well." He then faced the hemlock. "My apologies."

He expected its voice to probe into their mind yet again. Instead, it spoke from a newly formed throat and mouth. Its face now echoed a remarkably human appearance, as that was all it had around for reference. "All...is...well. What is...my name?"

It was hoarse, but its voice strengthened with each syllable. It pressed a palm to its neck.

“I name you *Phoenix*,” said Elliot, “after the legendary firebird that rises from its remains. Again and again, it will go up in a blaze, a beautiful death wreathed in flame, and emerge once more.

Wherever its ashes lay, it will be reborn. It’s untouchable, it’s free. Much like you, casting away your old self in favor of the new. Do you accept?”

He carried a sense of bravado in his delivery. A name like that deserved some oomph.

“Fire...” the hemlock mused, becoming oriented with its throat. It detached the other tendril from Cillian, who was more than happy to be rid of it. “...I like this choice.”

Phoenix closed its eyes and allowed itself to descend from its perch within the trunk. As it stood upon its new legs, it braced itself with an arm and snapped all the veins that had tethered it. Severed from its husk, it held itself with steadying confidence. A deep breath filled its developing lungs. “Thank you.”

Cillian offered a hand, helping it stay upright. He said to the Ronans, “that’s brilliant.”

Elliot nodded politely to both parties, his hand aimlessly caught on his bracelet. He didn't know how to respond. Praise itched at him like a mistakenly given gift. He'd sooner offload it onto the people he'd left waiting in the wings for so long. "I can't take the credit, it was Ramona and Arthur's doing..."

"You delivered it," said Cillian, "messengers are important too y'know."

"I've been too important. Give me a break," he spat, with the air of someone who'd decided they no longer mattered.

Ramona would have gloated now that things were going her way, but it didn't feel right. Finally, he was admitting that he'd been unfair to them—while *bludgeoning himself* over the head for it. She could watch him grumble and drag his feet all day with pleasure. Not this.

Internally, she gave him a good smack. "Hey, cut that out."

He sighed and rubbed the back of his head. "Fine," he muttered. "I suppose I matter a *little*."

"That's the spirit!" said Cillian. He gestured to Phoenix. "Look at the help you did. You ain't as bad a fit for this place as you think."

“Maybe.”

Lending assistance while we're here has been tolerable so far. Not so terribly different from what we usually do, between...sessions of rotting at home, Elliot considered. *Maybe Cillian isn't completely wrong.* He contemplated Phoenix' new frame, with its pale veneer and natal sheen. *How many more days would this creature have been trapped inside its own skin, had it not been pulled? And if rougher hands had stripped the bark...* He could only imagine the agony.

Another thing caught his attention. Beyond the new feathers that bloomed across Phoenix' skin, and the words of gratitude that drifted from its lips, something had approached the clearing. Stood behind the newling fairy was the unmistakable shape of another Hill denizen. It was about as tall as a small child, and stood on two legs. Its body was contoured in shaggy, soot-black fur, and in its paws it held the end of its bushy tail. It stared back at him with interest.

He startled, and stepped back a pace. There was some quality to it, some gravity that pulled his

attention away from everything else. Like staring into a trench, that swimmy vertigo caught him again.

“What is that...?” he whispered.

“...Do you hear me?” asked the former hemlock, falling on deaf ears.

Cillian turned to see the creature, following Elliot’s gaze. From tip to tail he ruffled when he caught a look. “Oh hell, something’s here.” He smoothed down the hackled front of his jacket with one hand, a reminder that it was never really a piece of clothing in the first place.

The creature took a hop forwards, and bowed its head. They found themselves bob their heads to the motion as well. It was the polite thing to do. The *right* thing to do. Of course it was.

Then it looked up and stared deep into their eyes. In enraptured silence they held a conversation that was not a conversation. Not a word was uttered by the beast, mentally or otherwise, but it left the impression it was talking to them all the same. Each flick of catlike ear breathed cadence, each slant of its eye turned a rhythm of ideas that were not there. It strung the feeling of words and sentences together—

an afterimage that only the companions were convinced they could hear.

When Phoenix received no answer at all, it too grew curious. It faced the interrupting creature, and a dread as sharp as ozone pricked every fibre of its newly crafted body.

The thing wore a cloud of odorless smell. *You do not see me, you do not hear me, you do not know me*, it read, clinging to the inside of Phoenix' mouth. Sure enough, the hemlock could not fully fathom the creature before it. Mere glimpses of a form that loomed high flickered in its view. It was cloaked in an illusion, save for the small creature it pretended to be.

You do not fear me, you have no need to run, the scent insisted.

"Oh thank you, we are a bit hungry..." Elliot said, in response to nothing.

"Yeah, sounds great. I don't mind a lil' work for that," Cillian added. His tail hung relaxed behind him.

Follow, came the next scent. *Follow, follow, follow me*.

Phoenix grabbed the human's shoulder. "No! Get away...run from that thing-" it begged. It could hear the weakness in its voice.

"Hold on, he's explaining his issue," Elliot said, trying to brush the hemlock's hand away. Phoenix held fast.

"Run, use your legs, *move*, it is not-"

"Give me a minute, please, I'm trying to listen."

"Do *not!*" it rasped, tearing something in its throat. It turned to Cillian too, and clawed at his shoulder without much effect. "Get away! There is danger here, not safe-!"

Cillian turned his head, unbothered. He couldn't focus, nothing about the hemlock was clear. "What? What are you saying?"

You do not see the tree.

The hemlock's grip fell away. When he spun around, its wooden shell was still there, gnarled and split, but their charge was gone. An empty clearing stared back.

"Phoenix?"

Chapter Eighteen

It was late July. Amelia Ronan sat in her favourite chair before her grandson, one hand resting on the lacquered tip of the arm rest and the other waving about with each new sentence of her fairy tale. All of it was true, not that the boy knew. She hoped he'd never really know.

The things she dealt with in her tenure as a bluecoat still kept her up at night. She'd been a member of Alderhill's *Greyhound* circle, before it all went to shit, and that meant having the grit to face the fairies and beasts of the woods armed with nothing but a pistol and an iron rod. The taste of hard tack and terribly tinny water they brought along for their big 'fairy purge' clung to her tongue for years well past. Sounds of talking in the dark, rustling and scratching beyond the lantern light, and the smell of gunpowder wafting through the air all stuck around her insides and refused to let go. That forest was no place for man.

She'd grown old, a privilege many of her fellow greyhounds were robbed of the moment they decided to plunge further into that rotten Hill. She

did her damndest to instill Elliot with all the lessons her daughter couldn't bear to hear. He was a promising child, despite his difficulties. He always listened with rapt attention, those green eyes closely following along with each and every gesture.

"What happened next?" he asked, eager for the rest of the story she was spinning.

"When he looked down," she said, "the beast gripped him by the leg with its big ol' teeth and dragged him off into the bushes fast as you could say *look out!* Bennie screamed and hollered, chased after the damn thing with his gun at the ready, but it slipped away! Nick was never, *ever* seen again."

"Not *ever*?" Elliot's little hands pressed into the rug beneath him, nails scratching at the fabric rhythmically.

Her expression hardened, and in an appropriately dour tone, she said "as long as the earth turns, he'll be gone."

"Woah..." he gasped, "what happened to Bennie then?" The boy's curiosity hungered.

She leant down and patted his head. "He made it out just fine, despite finding other nasty things. He used to run the tobacco store, you know. Though

he's passed since." She missed Bennett. He was a good soul who'd been through what she'd been through, somebody she could talk to. A fellow survivor.

"Ta-ba-koh?" He hadn't yet learned the word. He was still so young.

"You'll learn about it someday. All you gotta know at *your* age is that it's a load of crap, and you shouldn't touch the stuff. Not unless you want your teeth to fall out of your skull."

He grimaced at the thought of it. Why would anyone want *that*, whatever it was? "Gross..."

Amelia laughed warmly, and patted him again. "Don't worry too much about it kiddo."

His mother, Mary, emerged from the hall, finally done with unpacking her suitcase. She took one look at her son's face, and frowned. "What have you been telling him this time?"

"Telling him not to get into *chew*."

Elliot piped up. "She told me about a monster, it had huge teeth and claws and a—"

She cut him off. "Well, your grandma's right, nicotine isn't good for you. But come *on*, mom! Should you really be telling him scary stories every

time we visit? It's hard enough getting him to sleep."

"It's okay! I can sleep!" said the boy.

"No, I've seen the light on in your room *way* past bedtime."

Amelia grumbled. Her daughter never approved of her stories. "It builds his character," she said, "Besides, little boys shouldn't be running around in the woods. *You'd* know that, wouldn't you?"

Mary knew full well how many times she'd been stopped on her way into the forest. How many times she'd lingered at the edge, with a part of her she didn't understand trying to return to where it had come from.

The mother's face tightened. "He's not going *anywhere* near it, I can assure you. He doesn't need to be *frightened* out of it, especially when you tell these things with so much...so much *violence*," she argued. "He's a sensitive child."

"You're too limp with him. Kid's not made of sugar."

Elliot could sense the tension. "I promise I won't go in there!" he blurted.

It hurt to hear the already apologetic tones in his young voice.

Mary ignored her mother. "Good. Now get your shoes on, we're going out," she said, "and you're staying *right* beside me, you understand?"

"Yes mom..."

"Hmph. Enjoy your walk. Oh, and, Elliot, see if you can bring back a flower or two for me." She wanted to be sure he had some kind of distraction to keep his chin up. Knowing him, he'd pick one of each kind he came across and return with a bouquet of meticulously arranged shapes and colors. Maybe it'd save him from his mother for a while.

"I'll try!"

Creeeak. Click. Latch. Alone again.

Amelia stood from her chair. Her poor excuse of a daughter, always trying to get her to stop with the stories, saying they were too much for Elliot... Well, she lived through it, didn't she? That was real life. Kids ought to know about real life.

It'd be far scarier if the boy ended up in a similar situation without a clue what was what. Who's to say that city Mary carted him off to didn't have its own damned fairies in the harbor? In the

drains? The Hill wasn't the only nesting ground, she was sure. He could handle it, anyway. Mary was far too coddling for someone who didn't love her child. She had grown so deeply sour over the years. Moved out, cycled through soul-sucking jobs, got hitched with an idiot fisherman and found herself saddled with a happy little accident. It was hardly a surprise when they broke it off.

At times like this, Amelia wondered if she should have handed her *daughter* off to that underhanded fairy instead of her son. Escaping the Hill's maw meant making a choice, and Mary's saving grace had been human looks. You couldn't raise a child with fur.

Rousing what had happened all those years ago weighed on her with such disgust and guilt that she marched through the hall, into her bedroom, and flung herself onto the bed. She turned her back to the old coat still hung in the closet and squeezed her eyes shut. The memories came for her anyway.

She'd been running for an eternity. She tore through thin branches that stung at her arms as she crashed through the all encompassing dark. Before, it was a fairy chasing after her, some shaggy, toothsome thing that roared and lumbered on cloven feet. It eventually took more interest in her comrades than her, and by that mercy she was able to shake it off her trail. She was a strong young woman. Nevermind the fire in her lungs. The numb behind her knees. She had to keep going. Keep going. *Keep going.*

It wasn't until she collapsed from exhaustion on a patch of clearer ground that something else finally caught her.

She lost hold of her breath at the sight of it. A tall, bulky animal, adorned with plantlike wisps, outlined by only the faintest blue from above. Another fairy.

"Greetings," he said as he slunk into view. He moved with the same smooth ease as his voice. His bright eyes cut through the gloom of his own shadow as he towered over Amelia. This was the devil himself, as far as she was concerned.

“You’re quite unlucky, human girl,” he continued. “It’s a good thing I found you.”

That confused her. What trick was he pulling? In her bleary state, she briefly considered he could be one of those rare, helpful fairies, and took the chance. “Who are you? Are you here to help me?” she asked, too tired to even reach for her gun.

“I’m *Nobody*, and no, I’m not here to save you. I could care less if one of them caught you for the little mess you’ve caused. Simply put, I want to *eat* you. It smells like you’ve got some good memories in you after all, but we can make a deal.”

Typical. Nonetheless, the word *deal* struck her, and she was desperate enough to explore it. *There’s a way out. Take it.*

“Go on?” she asked, haggard.

A flash of teeth made her wince, but she soon realized it was meant to be a smile. He leaned in, breath potent with a hot stench. “I could use a successor. Give one to me, and I’ll deliver you from this place.”

It dawned on her exactly what he was asking. “You’re—you’re an *animal!*” She stuttered, somewhere between fear and disgust.

He grasped her by the chin, and she realized that his hand had changed from a heavy set of claws to the fingers of a human being. His form shifted into that of a man, as if he'd simply shed a thick fur coat. "Is this better? Or would you prefer a woman?"

Those eyes remained beastly, staring her down like stars. She couldn't stand, and she couldn't reach for her pistol, let alone her knife. She couldn't even throw a punch like this. She was at his mercy.

"You ugly beast," she spat. "I can do something else, there's gotta be *something else!*"

He licked his lips. "I could still eat you."

"Go ahead, it's better than living with myself after being *soiled* by one of you—"

"Oh, you wouldn't die."

"What?"

"Some things taste better than flesh."

"Like *what?*" she asked. If only she had her gun. Her fingers clenched around a clump of soil.

"Not what, *who*. The difference between *you* and *me*. I crave it badly." He paused to breathe in, savoring her scent. "It's been some time since my last meal."

Everything. Everything she was.

Or one child.

“...If I bear for you...”

“I will let you go. All I want is a child. Enough so that I haven’t eaten you yet.” he said, his gaze pinning her.

Anger consumed Amelia. She was white hot, awash with such despair it blazed high and burned her out. She thrashed like a fish, trapped beneath the fairy’s imposing figure. Then, she slumped against the dirt. After all, she only had so much energy, and plenty of it was spent keeping her eyes from falling shut. It pained her to relent.

“You swear I’ll be free? On your word?” she asked.

“On my word, and more. I will keep you unharmed.” He stroked her arm in a way that made her skin crawl. Too gentle for a beast, too possessive for a stranger. She was a rabbit in a snare.

For days, Amelia did as the creature asked. The thing that called himself *Nobody* kept to the guise of a man, as if that could possibly ease her nerves. Though she swore a great many curses upon him, he kept true to his word and led her out of the Hill once he’d done all the sowing he felt satisfied

with. She remained relatively safe, left the already shattered Greyhound circle, and kept to herself.

In almost a year's time, she returned to the treeline with a baby boy who had his father's eyes. She didn't dare utter a word about his twin, the girl she'd left at home.

The way Nobody took the child always stuck out in her memory; he cradled the boy like a precious flower, thanked her, and walked back into the forest's embrace so serenely it made her insides turn with nausea. As if it wasn't the same beast who had forced her hand, the same who had permeated every night's rest with ill memories forevermore. Every time she closed her eyes she was back in those woods.

And there she was, back then, left standing between trees and safety with a grief she couldn't parse.

Amelia knew that fairy was the only reason she had survived and she never forgave him for it. To her, anything he'd done, any little hospitality or kind

word, was a lie in service to his ends. She never let her guard down under his watch. Never let her guard down again.

Then, after all she had been through and *more*, the only child she'd walked away with intact still had the gall to hate her. To encourage ignorance in *her* son.

She lay in her bed, entrenched in her past. It was all so long ago, but it churned well within her. Every fairy she burned bloody under her iron, every huff of the beast who'd stolen her, every step deeper into a place that felt more and more like a mouth and throat than the woods. If Amelia could help it, her nameless son would be the last Ronan to ever set foot in the Hill.

Chapter Nineteen

Elliot and Cillian's steps fell soft on layers of grass and damp earth as they followed the black-furred fairy. There were chores to be done. Chores it surely couldn't complete on its own with its slight body and stature. They would be rewarded handsomely with a meal, of course, if only they would come along. Just come along! *Follow me*. They were too wrapped up in its charms to question a single detail, so along they marched.

How odd that Phoenix decided to slip away so soon, but at least they'd done their part to help it emerge. A shame it was too shy for farewells.

The creature's home came into view after a brief walk. It was much like Silas' hollow, dug into the side of a small hill, though it was bolstered by a cluster of trees and their intricately woven roots. Aspens with eyes that bulged between barren stretches of bone-white bark. The stranger reached over, touched one trunk, and the trees' wooden eyes all winked closed. Away went any unease.

The consistent burble of a river could be heard rushing somewhere nearby. Elliot pondered the

possibility it might have branched off into the same creek as before. The two waterways were near enough to meet at some point, and both could have trickled all the way down from the mountain. He looked upwards, seeing if he could spot the peak of it above the trees, but he was met with what was virtually a ceiling of green. The heavy canopy dampened what little sunlight could breach the cloud layer above, and the understory stretched high. The usual serenades birds cajoled each other with were absent. Arthur wondered why, but the wondering dulled whenever his eyes came to rest on the dark stranger.

When their host stopped to regard them again, it explained laundry would come first. There were plenty of clothes that needed to be scrubbed and soaked clean in the river, then sorted. It insisted they start right away, and told them that everything they needed for the task was already there.

Soon they found themselves knelt on the bank toiling away. At last this was a place where the canopy broke, pouring a cool light down on them where the trees couldn't smother the sky.

The creature had retreated into its abode and left them to their own devices for the time being. Just Cillian and the Ronans, side by side, picking pieces of clothing out of a large pile and scouring them with smooth bricks of soap.

“Damn these rocks, they're hell on my knees,” Cillian griped. He despised menial chores, but the food they were promised would be worth the slog. Meat and gravy, robin’s eggs, honey and raspberry wine... He couldn’t wait to stuff himself full. For now, though, he was bored out of his skull.

Taking care of the household chores was one of Elliot’s many occupations back when he’d lived with his mother, and while he too disliked them, he had more tolerance in him. If only the same could be said about the stones. “They’re quite uncomfortable,” he agreed.

“Too bad we don't got a washbasin, that’d be nice. I’m worried I’ll lose hold in this current.” Cillian struggled to pull a shirt out of the water. “...And the stench of it, yuck.”

It was noxious. Elliot figured the clothes had been left to pile and fester for quite a while. Instead

of the musty scent of rotting fabric, however, they smelled of another kind of spoil.

Ramona spoke her mind. "Y'know, here's my question, why does a little guy like that have laundry like *this*, anyway? It's all the wrong size, and I didn't see him wearing clothes either... You think he's someone's kid?"

Cillian paused. "Could be a shapechanger, he don't seem like a kid to me. Plenty of our sort are just small. That's how it is."

"Somehow, it doesn't surprise me to learn shapeshifters are real," Elliot sighed. "After everything we've seen, and, well..." He stared at the back of his hand, unsure if the freckles were still in their original places.

"Glamor's not the only way of changing face." The fairy scrubbed at a pair of pants fruitlessly, and said "if only it could cover smells..."

Even with everything so wildly sidetracked, curiosity began to creep up on Elliot again. If he was already going against the grain of his preconceived notions today, he might as well lean into whatever pulled at him. "So...glamor. How naturally does it

come to you? I've noticed your, ah—I mean, at least I *believe* your clothes aren't...real. Might I ask why?"

"Oh it's real natural—I think I'm made of Hill, sorta, it ain't much to shift the surface around. Even so! Some things are stubborn—" He paused to turn the pants over and scrub the other side. "-but all and all it's simple and useful. You folk ain't hillish but you take to glamor nearly as well."

He squinted at the pair of pants in his hands, which still smelled poorly, but they looked fine enough. He tossed them aside. "As for the clothes... 'Saves me the effort of washing. The boots and glasses I nicked though. They're 'real', whatever that means."

Reminded that he could change at a whim, he let his jacket blur into a pelt of fur, which quickly receded into a bare torso. The lighter patches on his skin continued from his face to his shoulders and back, his arms and hands; they were present on every length of him. They resembled the white blotches of lichen that dappled tree bark.

Now he didn't have to roll up his sleeves anymore. "There we go."

Elliot dipped his hand into the river, watching it pull at Joanne's gifted bracelet. "You like the freedom of it too, right?"

The fairy set down his soap and picked up another article. "Of course I do, I don't tolerate being confined. Art likes it too, and it's clear Ray does. So that begs another question: why haven't *you* given glamor a shot, Ell?"

"It's not within my interest," he said, "I don't need to change my appearance."

Cillian poked him. "Sounds about right, mister no-fun."

Despite being 'no fun', Elliot chuckled. It was plain to see that the fairy liked him just as much as the others. "I'll leave that to the other two, they can enjoy learning your '*Hill-folk ways*' in my stead."

"Fair enough. It ain't because I tried on your face, though, is it?" Cillian asked.

The memory of the pondside glamor explorations with Arthur resurfaced quickly. Elliot found the sight of his own features mimicked on Cillian's face to be deeply uncanny. He swallowed the discomfort, and shook his head. "No, of course not. Just don't...don't do that again, please."

“Alright, hah. You feel too stiff anyway. All angles.” He tapped Elliot’s nose.

“He’s right,” Ramona chimed in, “wearing you is like wearing a shirt that’s way too tight.”

Her choice of words irked him. “*Wearing me??*”

“That’s kinda what it's been like switching in until now,” she replied.

“I’m not a *shirt*...”

“You’re about as thin as one.”

Cillian laughed. “Sure is!”

The two of them had the same terrible grin. “Maybe Silas was onto something with those similarities...” said Elliot.

He then plunged a coat into the water and scrubbed away at it with the soap, so he could dodge his own sentimental thoughts. He was tripping over himself now that every secret impulse to be a hopeful, trustful idiot threatened to tumble out.

Arthur was pleased to see everyone in a decent mood. No tension to untangle or riled tempers to diffuse, just the boredom of doing laundry together. Not a far cry from the chores spent keeping each other company back home. It eased him the way it always had; hands busy, mind clear.

He appreciated the refreshing taste of the river on his shared skin. Wind ruffled the plants on the opposite bank without hurry. It was a pleasure to take it in quietly, but there was something he had to ask.

“What do you think Phoenix will do with herself?”

“Beats me, whatever it wants,” said Cillian. “It’s uprooted now.”

Idly he thought of the things they might see for the first time. Especially if they were brave enough to leave the Hill... He just hoped they would be alright. All of them did.

As the Ronans held another shirt in their hands, and were about to dunk it into the flow, something flickered on the river’s surface. In the dim reflection that danced on the water, there was something about the shirt that was bulky and off-color. They lifted it up to get a better angle. As far as the river was concerned, it was *covered* in fur. Not only that, but the sleeves they were holding had never been sleeves at all. They found dry, flattened paws beneath their grip, and the illusion that it had

ever been a piece of fabric quickly sloughed from his mind.

They dropped the animal pelt in shock, seeing it for what it truly was as the river carried it away.

“Shit, there it goes. You alright?” asked Cillian.

“I, the—these are *not* clothes!” Elliot stuttered. He knew deep down that they’d all been fooled.

“What, my pants?”

The Ronans looked to the soap, which was now quite plainly a smooth, fist sized stone. Every article in both the clean and unclean piles were all skins of various animals and possibly, if the length was anything to go by, fairies. They lay heavy and flat, some curled in on themselves in various shades of fresh pink on the undersides to cracked and pale leather. The stench was never soiled wear; it was blood and biological rot.

Panic set in. “*Fuck—!* We have to get out of here, Cillian *put that down* for Christ’s sake—” Elliot swatted at the pelt in his hands, sending it into the water.

“Calm down! What’s gotten into you, hey?”

Cillian didn't know what to make of the outburst. As

far as he knew, the man had sent a perfectly fine pair of breeches downriver.

There was no time to lose. Elliot grabbed a bundle of fur and held it over the gushing water. "Look at the reflection!"

Cillian did as he asked, and everything crumbled. Like his friends, he saw the grotesque piles for their real substance and scooted away from all of it.

"Hell!" he shouted.

Elliot threw his revolting 'shirt' into the river out of frustration as well. "It's been keeping us distracted with this *useless* task!"

Dread overtook Cillian. It struck him that they wouldn't have come this way if not for ditching Murmur. Regret wasn't kind to his stomach. Neither were the skins. He retched.

"W-what do we do?" asked Arthur.

"We, ah...um," Elliot began, his head spinning, "If we head back where we came, it will notice us. Can't go that way. And god only knows what that thing *actually* is..."

Ramona picked up one of the stones. "Could try bashing its head in."

“I doubt that would go very far.”

There was a twitch in Cillian’s ear as he wiped his mouth clean. He thought he heard shuffling, but all the talk was making it difficult. “Shhh, quiet,” he said, so he could concentrate.

He heard a grunt close to the hovel he’d been convinced was a home, but the creature was out of sight. They were still definitely within earshot of it. *This one’s Nameless alright. Those trees got eyes, how’d I miss that?* he thought.

The Hill had many trees, but aspen and birch were few and far between. Cairn always told him to stay away from the trees that could look at you. He said they were the markers of Nameless grounds, and that if he saw one, he’d gone too far. They were a terrible sign, a rare sight that struck fear into the heart of anyone who knew what they stood for. He’d had his doubts, but the black-eyed trees in his memories still made him shiver.

So did the beast that emerged from behind the lump of earth it called home. He bristled all over when the formerly small, pitiful animal walked towards them with its hulking stature. The Ronans gasped, he couldn't tell who, and stumbled back far

enough that one of their hands sunk into the silt of the bank. He reflected on the irony that they were once again stuck between a threat and somewhere wet. In the same day no less.

The fur that stuck out in sharp mats from its temple to its shoulders cut an intimidating silhouette as it advanced. There was a flicker of distortion across its span, like heat rippling from summer asphalt; a mirage that compressed the height back into itself and came billowing back outwards when it couldn't hold any longer. It was trying to salvage its illusion, insisting that the companions shouldn't worry and continue with the washing, but now they *knew*. It had no voice at all. It spoke no tongue, had no real meaning, and its lovely lies were irrevocably broken. Its soot black form writhed with frustration, a predator vexed by prey grown wise.

Elliot didn't move. His heart was seized in the cold vice of terror. It was going to catch them, kill them, and shear their skin away. He could do nothing. Its growls and rasps only grew louder, closer. He inched back as far as he could go, eyes locked with the unbearable white stare of his oncoming death.

Then everything went cold. He couldn't breathe. He had been struck in the chest incredibly hard, the site still burning with pain. The world was a mess of grays and green and brown when he could see light, and a swallowing void when he could not. He was pushed around, heavy and weightless at once. Water filled his mouth.

For a few confusing moments, Elliot was certain he'd been struck by the beast so hard it sent him careening into his own internal ocean. That he would never again resurface.

Something snagged his shirt and tore him up into fresh air. It was Cillian, and they were both in the river. Elliot clung to his shoulders, beginning to realize he wasn't dead. He was in a new kind of danger, now. When he craned his neck back, the monster had crouched by the bank, *seething* back at them, but it did not follow. He accidentally invited a gush of water into the back of his throat in the process, and swallowed about half of it trying to choke it out. Every cough and breath cast a spider web of ache through his chest.

"Sorry I kicked you!" Cillian shouted over the relentless, screaming water. He was fighting to keep

them both upright in the current. Thankfully, it wasn't cold enough to put them in shock, at this time of year, but it was cold enough the Ronans almost forgot how to swim.

Elliot gasped for air, the strap of their bag pulling on the back of his neck. He was helpless against the torrent. Cillian's tail thwacked against his awkwardly kicking legs, both bodies in a desperate tangle.

Their mind was far from quiet. Ramona was trying her best to find an accessible piece of shore, cursing when only smooth stretches of bank rushed by, while Arthur did everything he could to will useful glamor onto themselves. He came up short, their attention too divided. Elliot focused on keeping hold of their fairy in a death grip, and not much else.

It wasn't long before Cillian realized the burning sensation in his left leg wasn't from the strain of swimming. He cried out as the bag of black stones in his pocket rapidly heated from the water dissolving them, boiling his thigh. He quickly unmade the pocket of his glamored pants, clawing at it with a free hand so the water could carry away the dangerous stones. The fast current swept them into

rocks and other snags that protruded from the water ahead, which caused each black stone to explode in a shower of steam. In the commotion, Cillian was left unaware of what they were hurtling towards.

A large rock cut out of the water ahead, slick with moss and algae.

“Watch out!” Ramona shouted, tugging on his hair.

He flailed to get out of its way before the river could smash them into it. As they narrowly passed it by, it struck the Ronans’ right arm with a *crunch*. Just barely, their skull was saved from the same fate. The blow made them lose half their hold. Their fingernails dug into the fairy’s skin where they still had a grip, and held in a scream.

Cillian knew his scalded leg would leave their chances slim if he lost his energy. He had to do *something* if he didn’t want them all to drown. He grit his teeth and made a decision.

His shoulders rippled, and began to swell. All over he changed; his hair grew denser, his tail lengthened, and his limbs thickened with the necessary strength to swim. The wound on his thigh didn’t cooperate. It stung stubbornly, now a patch of

hairless, inflexible flesh. He huffed from the transformation, and put his all into maneuvering closer to one side of the river. He'd have to ignore the burn.

"There!" Ramona called out as a shallow offset of the river came into view. She tried to help paddle, and the elbow throbbed so hard it went limp. She was punished with a soreness that didn't go away.

Cillian thrashed against the current. He was powerful, but clumsy. At the very least his new shape was easier to cling to. The Ronans gripped his shaggier fur and straddled his back like a horse as he struggled on.

"Got it!" he grunted, clawing into the mud and stones of the shallows. He crawled onto dry land without further hassle, aside from the passenger on his back, and slumped against the grass. Safe, finally.

He laid there for a while to catch his breath. The sides of his beastly form rose and fell in great heaves that soon gave way to a slower rhythm. Miraculously, his sunglasses had survived the journey, resting precariously atop his new muzzle. His lips drew back at the incessant pang of his thigh.

The sharp edge of those molars made Elliot shudder. He reminded himself that this was the man who just saved his life. Nevermind the pounding in his elbow, or the itchy pain in his sternum—fractures could heal.

They slipped off his back, which wasn't a far fall, and flopped down beside him. It took some time to catch their breath. It hurt. With their good arm, Ramona gave him a congratulatory pat.

"We made it, dude," she panted, "I didn't know you could do *that*."

"*Don't look at me*," he growled through his exhaustion. "Close your damn eyes." His heavy tail lashed, sweeping the grass. He had a lot to be upset with.

They swiftly averted their gaze. The adrenaline high made sitting still a challenging task, and Arthur couldn't help but open his mouth for want of anything to do.

"It's okay, we don't mind how you look, Cillian—" he began.

"*I **said** don't **fucking** look at me!*" snapped the fairy. His claws dug into the soil as he tensed.

They kept quiet.

There was some shuffling as Cillian adjusted his position. After stealing a glance at the Ronans, he was sure he had his privacy, so he took the time to simmer down. Sounds of effort poured from him as he shifted once more. Pops and grunts, curses they'd never heard before, ragged breaths. He finished folding back into his more familiar shape after only a minute. Not that they could see any of it.

"...Alright, done," he said at last. "You can turn around."

He was sat with his knees tucked close to his chest and his arms folded over them, human-bodied once more. Only now he was stark naked, with the exception of his boots and glasses.

"I'm sorry," Arthur said. He reached for the fairy, but thought better of it. Especially when he noticed the large, red burn that stained his thigh.

Cillian looked up. "Why the hell are you sorry? That thing nearly *ate you*."

"You sounded... really upset..."

The fairy let out a long, bedraggled sigh. "I just don't like being seen like that."

"Why?"

“It’s too much like me and not enough like you.”

“What, is that your real form...?” asked Elliot, taking over for the sake of his brother’s nerves.

The fairy’s lips tightened. “Any form of mine is *true*. I can look like anything I want and it’s as real as anything.” He hesitated, then said “...but I don’t fit in enough when I’m all *that*. So leave it.”

Elliot scooted closer. He was alien to it, but the desire to comfort someone who was beginning to resemble a friend was strong. “Then I won’t speak of it, if that’s what you prefer.”

“Sure is,” he said. “As far as it goes, you never saw a thing. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Cillian drew a breath. “Great. Sorry about your bag, by the way.”

“What? *Oh-*” Elliot removed the bag from his shoulders and inspected it. It was *drenched*, so saturated with water that it dripped and pooled into his lap. It dawned on him that everything inside must have been soaked as well. Stress wriggled up from his throat as he unpacked the bag. He threw pulpy notebooks, pencils, papers, gum, a very moist

thesaurus, clumped together candies, nuts, and a slimy bar of handmade soap to the ground. *Everything* was completely destroyed.

"God *damn it*," he seethed. He flung the soaked shoulder bag and fell onto his back in frustration. The grass accepted him with a mildly uncomfortable thud.

"Can't fix it?" Cillian asked.

Wough, that's bad. Thought Ramona.

Elliot groaned, mourning his belongings, her soap, and Arthur's precious notes. "No, it's all garbage now, I'm afraid," he said, dejected.

He patted the jeans pocket where they kept their money, and blessedly most of it was still there. Coins were missing, but that was trivial. A mixture of both relief and immense defeat welled up in his chest. The latter numbed him. He stared up into the bright negative space between the treetops and let himself grow distant.

There was a slowly spinning edge to the Ronans' vision. The perimeter of the sky was chased by a hazy cutout of its own glow, and the afterimage asserted itself in the hues of parking lot gasoline. In and out, breathing, swirling. There, too, was a

patiently growing plaster over the finer details that fled at the smallest twitch of the eye. Some backbrain part of Elliot thought of times where he'd stared at popcorn ceilings the same way, listening to muffled altercations downstairs with a faraway intake.

Cillian's face interrupted the view. He hovered over Elliot, with his sunglasses lifted out of the way. Those golden eyes studied him closely. "You didn't catch a chill did you?"

"I don't know," he said. Then, after some thought, "I'm cold."

"Alright, we ought to go. Up." He patted the side of Elliot's head, who didn't move at all. He offered a handhold to help him to his feet. Nothing. Puzzled, he nudged the Ronans' body with a light kick.

Cillian frowned. "You're not movin'..."

"Why bother?" Elliot muttered. He kept his gaze on the sky.

"Fine then, hold still." The fairyman crouched down and gathered the bag as well as some of its scattered contents. Then, he took a solid hold of the

Ronans' waist with both his hands and hoisted them up onto his shoulder like a sack of flour.

"*Ooph!*" The sheer surprise and impact of it shook Elliot out of his haze. Not only did it ache strongly where the fairy had kicked him; he had never been lifted or carried this way before. With their similar heights the position was awkward. That didn't stop Cillian from keeping him folded over his shoulder, though.

Cillian semi-confidently limped in one direction, searching for places to shelter. He was fine with holing up somewhere for the rest of the day so everyone could recover. To that end, it was convenient that they'd landed somewhere rife with old-growth trees and rocky hillsides. He wondered if they were near the foothills of the mountain.

Now firmly out of his foggy state of mind, Elliot squirmed. "Please put me down."

"You wouldn't walk, and I'm not letting you get sick," Cillian said.

Elliot's eyebrows furrowed. "I'm perfectly *able* to walk, I was just—"

"Well I'm able to carry you."

He gave up trying. He was too exhausted to argue with a man who could heft him so easily. He just had to bear the discomfort.

Ramona gave him a mental pat on the back now that he wasn't so bleary. "At least we can rest our feet, I didn't realize how much they hurt until now," she said.

"Mm. Yeah," he replied. "Everything today has only cemented the idea that we should get home as soon as possible."

"You haven't exactly brainstormed anything to give to the Court."

"Well...I'll get to that. Where's Arthur?" he deflected. He didn't want to think of all the time they'd wasted with practically nothing to show for it. They'd been so caught up in Cillian's assignments he didn't have time to compose anything complete, aside from a running list of admirable and curious traits he felt had their place in the tale.

"Oh, I'm here," Arthur said. He materialized next to them, seemingly only aware of himself again after being asked. He was a little shaken. "I see we're being carried..?"

“Yeah, taking a ride on the Cillymobile thanks to Ell losing his grip.” She ribbed him affectionately, but he just felt down.

Arthur brought a knuckle to his imaginary teeth in thought. “I see.”

She nodded. “We’re *alive*, though. Today’s been fucking ridiculous and we’re still standing—uh, dangling. I don’t blame you Ell.” She was exhilarated from living through it all, despite how much it had taken out of them. Elliot definitely earned the right to lay down and dissipate about it if he needed to.

“Right...” After everything, he was grateful they were still in one piece. They were fortunate they made it out with only chafing clothes, a broken elbow, and a sore chest. “Cillian, where are we going?” he asked aloud. After all, his view for the past few minutes had been nothing but grass, patchy carpets of moss, pine needles and plants, twigs, and Cillian’s ass.

“Looking for somewhere to hunker down,” he answered. “Gotta dry you off.”

“I see. You don’t suppose we could build a fire too?”

His tail faltered. "I lost all my stones in the river. They burnt the shit outta me." He felt like a massive fool for that, but there wasn't any time to discard the pouch before the beast was upon them.

The day's mistakes had only piled up for him. "This wasn't how it was supposed to go. I just wanted to have some fun, and now I've dragged you through hell and high water. I can't even give you the relief of a warm fire while you're all soaked."

Elliot stroked his back reassuringly, which is a little awkward to do when you're upside down. "You're ah, trying your best. We'll figure it out."

Cillian sighed, and gave him a similar rub with the arm looped around their side. Fondly, he echoed his companion. "Yeah...we'll figure it out."

Chapter Twenty

Above the canopy of conifers, the sky had cleared enough to reveal the late afternoon warmth of the waning sun. Horsetails and maidenhair ferns swayed in the breeze, and small creatures with better places to be scurried along before the curtain of nightfall descended. The shelter Cillian settled for was a wall of stone, soil, and roots that was hemmed in by a handful of low-skirted trees. The ridge up above jut out just enough to keep any rain off the spot, and the trees only further assured its dryness. It wasn't perfect, though. The pinecones and dead needles were a prickly reminder of just how lost they'd become.

Elliot had all of his clothing, besides his underwear, hung up to dry on the branches of a nearby tree. Being so exposed around someone else chafed him more than the soaked clothes. It was only when the afternoon grew much colder that he got over his modesty, because the only source of heat around was Cillian.

How had his life come to this? Clung to the side of a furry man he'd only met a couple of days

before, bare, damp, and nursing an injury that begged for a trip to the hospital... He could almost see the look on his grandmother's face. Twice now, he'd been fooled into following fairies. She was probably rolling in her grave!

Thankfully his friend had re-donned his illusory clothing, but that only left Elliot feeling more naked. At least the textures were nice. He ran a hand through the jacket's fur ruff as he leaned on him.

"So much for that meal," he said, hoping to focus on something other than the growing chill.

Cillian groaned in disdain. "Ugh, don't remind me."

"How's your leg?"

"Stings. It's all blistered and raw." Cillian dared to touch it, and winced. The sensation made him hiss through his teeth as his fingers left a white imprint on the tender flesh. He couldn't glamor over that burned patch of skin, now, which meant his pants' facade was missing a large blot.

"As I thought... is there anything that could numb the pain?"

He shook his head. "I'll bear it, you don't worry. I've had worse than a scalding. And you,

what's the damage?" Cillian asked, and poked him in the chest.

"Ow!—well, congratulations, you found the first spot." Elliot pressed circles in the area to alleviate the pain of the poke.

"Whoops. Again, I'm sorry about that. I had to."

"It's fine, I've been recovering there. Better to be sore than dead."

"Aye, and what's wrong with your arm?"

Elliot looked over it. He rolled up his sleeve with some difficulty. It was swollen at the elbow, stained with the darkest bruise he'd ever seen. He flexed his fingers and rotated his wrist to test it again. The resulting flare gave him a jolt. "...I think it's broken."

"Shit..." Cillian studied it closely. "We gotta get you back to Mound."

"I'd prefer home," he said.

The fairy hesitated, then wrapped his arm around Elliot's shoulder and gave him a light squeeze. "That's up to Cairn. We'll get'cha patched up, alright? Just give it a rest so it don't get worse."

“Alright...” he said. He was too chilly to mind being smothered.

As for the other Ronans, Ramona paid more attention to the hunger pangs in their stomach than anything else, thinking of what food they could scrounge around for, while Arthur was absorbed wholly in enjoying Cillian’s textures. There was a haze of mixed needs whorling within their minds and body. Elliot could feel the sharp of Ramona’s teeth edge into his tongue with every stomach growl. The budding of leaflets upon his temple at the shift of a sleeve. A blurry slush of consciousness.

Comfort. Discomfort. Touch that was human enough to warm. The cold unknown. Burgeoning familiarity. Being held, and being nothing particular. These conflicts danced hand in hand, step chasing step and claws trailing at the other’s surface. Feelings that were as animal as desire itself, for safety and survival and the sentimental.

Their hand clenched around a clump of Cillian’s ruff in the jumble of it all. When the fairy looked down, he saw a body that could not make up its mind.

“Woah there, what’s riling you?” he said. He ran his palm over their shifting hair; dark, chestnut, and sandy brown hues all fought for territory.

“I’m...” *Hungry. Exhausted. Comforted.* Their coalesced voice shook. “...I’m fine.”

“I don't believe it.”

They grimaced. The body made its complaints clear through worsening cramps, and Ramona slipped into center focus. “We haven't eaten much,” she said, grip tightening.

“I haven't either.”

She made a move to stand, but faltered. Cillian pulled her back into the crook of his shoulder easily. “Nope. You’re not going anywhere.”

“It’s cold.”

“Sure is,” he said.

“We need to eat.”

“Sure do.”

She tried again, and failed again. Their arm hurt like hell. Cillian was quick to catch her.

“You’re not gonna get far like that,” he said.

She growled. “What else am I supposed to do?”

“Stay. See about shifting yourself a nice pelt so you don't freeze while I find us something to eat. But you *stay*.”

She considered it, but Elliot was resistant to the idea. A coat of fur was too inhuman. It would itch and pull in the wrong places. They were all too worn out for that much concerted focus, anyway.

Still, some petty and agitated part of her let their bodies' nape prickle with a light patch of fuzz just to press his buttons.

“Can you leave me your jacket?” she asked.

“Afraid not, that's my skin. Try growing your own. I won't leave until you're set, but make it quick for our sakes.”

She looked down at the bare canvas of their body. It was gangly without her full influence, pale, absolutely riddled with freckles. Their sternum was patchy with bruises from Cillian's kick. She could see outlines underneath them where the chest muscles attached to that slip of bone in the middle of the ribcage, and found herself staring at the cleft that ran from their collarbone to their navel. It had always been a little pronounced.

It struck her then, her odd physicality for what she was. She'd been a girl since she'd woken up twenty years ago. Nothing had ever been as sure as being the 'big sister' that Elliot needed. Even though it was a boy's body they shared, a slim, rectangular assortment of bones and edges, whenever she wore it it was hers. Whenever she spoke, and the softer flatness of Elliot's voice was bled over with her casual, saturated tone, she felt more like herself. The only thing she'd ever felt at odds with was their lack of strength. Their slim physique. A bust was irrelevant to her, and in her opinion, looked better on other girls.

Still, it hovered in her head for a moment. Now that glamor was on the table, what *could* she change about herself?

Touch up the shoulders... she thought, craving broader, *and maybe more padding all around-*

A sharp pain in her gut reminded her to focus; the hazy edge of their hunger was addling her. She reigned her train of thought back on track. *Right, a jacket. I need a jacket.*

She knew what wearing a jacket *felt* like, all she had to do was pretend hard enough it could fool

their body. It should have been just like any other facet of practicing glamor.

It took several attempts to even nearly mimic the texture of fabric at all, but every patch of pretend clothing only sunk back into nothing after a few seconds. At one point she was able to get half of a sleeve before it unraveled. It was all wrong, it didn't behave like hair or fur or anything that was supposed to cling to the skin. The illusion of cloth was unbearable and itchy, and none of the Ronans could let it stay for too long without starting to irritate. Try as she might, she wasn't in the state for it.

She grew frustrated. "I can't do it. I'll just come with you," she said.

"You sure? While all cold?" Cillian asked.

"Walking might warm me up."

"Alright. That was a good try, by the way," he said.

She huffed. "Yeah right. Didn't amount to shit."

"Easy, Ray. It takes practice. You weren't even raised here."

“Feels like I should’ve been.” She wriggled out of his hold and stood. Ramona was quickly reminded that their shoes were busy drying as the scattered debris poked at her feet. She’d rather trade her feet for paws than trudge around in soggy shoes. With glee, even.

Cillian rose as well, lending her an arm to steady with. He lingered on her words. “You *should’ve...?*”

A deep-seated, instinctually driven part of him shuddered with warmth. His jacket rippled like a cat scratched in just the right place.

“I mean, I wouldn’t change my past, what-ifs make me itchy and, I like having my *me* exist, even if it was because of shitty circumstances... But I’d be lying if I didn’t admit it would have been nice to grow up with all this, what, magic? Whatever. You get it right? I’d be untouchable.”

He nodded, trying to keep his cool. “I can tell you what your life would’ve been like here, would you like that?” His tail swished, hoping for a ‘yes’.

“You know what, sure. Tell me while we walk,” she said.

Still holding onto consciousness by a thread, Arthur keenly listened in. Elliot spared an ear out of curiosity, even though indulging such a fantasy felt taboo in every fiber of him.

Holding in his grin in like a mouthful of water, Cillian started. "So this is assuming it'd be only you in that head, like you'd always had your own body, even though it ain't accurate to your workings. Play along." His boots crunched the woodland floor, still soggy as ever because he refused to take them off. Ramona kept up, and out of necessity she changed her soles into thick, dark pads to tolerate the prickling ground.

"Sure," she said, "It's not the biggest stretch." She could easily imagine a life in which it was only her. She'd craved it now and then.

"So let's assume you were stolen away as a child. Even with all the folk who dislike humans, in the Hill, a child's a child and you'd be a Nameless bastard not to give them a home. In this way you'd've been raised by whatever handful of folk decided to keep you well, and been taught how to live off the land. A community's kid."

“That’s how you were brought up?” she asked. Having so many parents sounded both stifling and...reassuring, somehow.

He stepped over a log, careful not to trip, and continued. “Mhm, but the difference is I was born here. Not that it changes much as I see it—*oh, would you look at that.*”

Cillian crouched by a large stone, having spotted a cluster of edible mushrooms out of the corner of his eye. He pushed his sunglasses up so they didn't obscure his vision in the dimming light and motioned for his companions to come over.

“Doesn’t change much?” She sat on the rock while he pulled the mushrooms out of the earth.

He smiled. “Like Silas said, I don't think we’re so different. There’s plenty of folk in this Hill that were human before. You spend enough time somewhere, really letting it in, it changes you. Flipwise, you got humanfolk out there from our cut of the cloth. Most of ‘em have no clue—”

He tossed Ramona a mushroom. “You know what that is?”

She nearly fumbled the catch. It was dark with a rumpled top, and the center of its crown sloped into a funnel shape. "Uh, I don't know."

"Black throat. You're in for a treat."

"As long as it's edible..." She tried not to think about the clench in her stomach and handed back the mushroom. "But yeah, go on? You're saying it goes both ways?" she asked.

Cillian nodded, and shoved the remainder of the mushrooms in his pocket. "Exactly. I'm saying if you'd like, it could happen to you."

He downturned his face as if looking for more mushrooms, but really he couldn't stand to show his nerves. He didn't mean to play his hand so openly.

Ramona went rigid. Something about the sentiment struck her in the core, and she was reeling from the echoes of it. Arthur was swept up in the clamor too. If anything were to tell him that's *exactly* what he wanted, it was the wake of warm green froth that rode the emotional wave roaring past. The sweet taste of potential on his tongue.

He couldn't stay down when such promise consumed him. Ramona was left disoriented while he pushed past her and assumed their good hand to

clutch Cillian by the shoulder. Leaves and fronds pooled from his head like water as he struggled to prominence. Their body's hunger clawed terribly at them as he was claimed by his glamor, his tail unfolding behind him.

Cillian was hiding his face, but the sudden grab had him turn to witness the man bloom into being.

"Do it," Arthur said. He was already imagining what prolonged exposure to the waters and nourishment of the Hill could do to them. What opportunities would be left open. If they were bodily a fairy, he reasoned, they wouldn't have to worry about the cold, about being lost; they could go home and back again at their leisure with no concern for the disorienting threshold in their way. Elliot could have his time in Alderhill, live life more or less like normal, then they could visit their new friend whenever they wanted. The perfect compromise. It would serve them all so well.

Their hunger had narrowed his thoughts. He could feel Elliot tug at him in disapproval, Ramona reach out, but couldn't quite catch the words. He leant further into Cillian's space, and between shaky lips, said *"whatever it takes, do it to me."*

Cillian would've been happy, but he saw the lack of focus in the man's eyes as he steadied his shoulders. He wasn't in his right mind.

"Woah, hey! Let's get you fed before you jump to it. It's already happening to you anyway."

"Right..."

A breeze rustled through the leaves in Arthur's hair. He took his time to soak it in. For a moment he lost his hold, caught up in the sensation, and it was a moment too long. Elliot struck.

"I don't want a part of this," he protested, "I don't want to be changed into something else, I just want to go *home*—"

"Calm down, you're still you," Cillian assured him.

"*For now.*"

"Well..." Cillian started.

Ramona took the mouth from Elliot. "Now's not the time. If I don't get *something* to eat I'm gonna start with *you*, Ell. For fuck's sake."

Elliot deflated. Right now, in this hazy revolving door, his body felt like anything but his own. The discomfort hit him hard, but worse was the seedling hope of escape. A light at the end of the

tunnel where he could run far away from his disappointed aspirations, his past, his commitment to doing something notable with his life, and let go. He could stop being the Elliot in the mirror who always looked so *tired*. He could be something new.

Right away he flinched away from it. It was too much.

Cillian was worried about the Ronans' mixed responses. *I should've waited longer*, he thought, *I'll have to smooth things over*. He stroked their shoulders. "Let's eat before getting ahead of ourselves, yeah? I can look around and pick us a few more things, and we'll be set."

Ramona kept Arthur and Elliot at an arm's length. The brothers regarded each other with some melancholy stare she couldn't parse. "Yeah," she said, "Let's finish up before it gets any darker."

The black trumpets were cut in half and rinsed in a small stream, removing as much grit as possible. Since there was no chance for a fire, the pickings were to be eaten raw. Cillian had also found

a number of worms and slugs in the damp soil to snack on, and a bird's nest full of thumb sized eggs. He would be just fine, as he'd always known the places to look for something to eat in the forest.

Ramona ate the mushrooms in small bites—bigger chunks only made her stomach clench. She sat with her back against the rock wall of their shelter, still draped in Arthur's glamor and nausea. She agreed more with *him* than she did Elliot, but she knew deep down Elliot's desire to go home unchanged was reasonable.

She'd never seen Arthur act so brazen before either. It wasn't a mystery why; she experienced the same *click* he did. It was the fact that he made up his mind so quickly and confidently without discussing it first. *That* was new for the guy.

With the mind's eye she cast a glance his way. He looked like a sulking willow tree, his head pressed into the crook of his arm, knees brought up to his chest, and fronds spilling from his head to trail on the grass of their space.

She walked over, sat down, and leaned on him. "Hey."

He looked up a little. "Hi."

“Look, we both want the same thing,” she said.

“We do. I know you. You want this as much as me.”

“So let’s work together here.”

“Yes. Just think about it, Mona. We can keep this. Keep our own faces, do what we like, when we like. We’d have a foothold in this place. And It’s not too dangerous if we just stay with the rest, so—”

“No, I know that, but I mean like... We go all in, and then what? What about Elliot? I wanna get him on board first.”

“It’s always been ‘*what about Elliot*’ and I’m beginning to understand that I’m sick of it.”

Somewhere across from where they were sitting, Elliot hung his head.

“You’re talking to the one who’s been *sick of it* for half a decade,” said Ramona, “but I still care about him, I guess. If we don’t like him walking all over us then maybe we shouldn’t turn around and do it back.”

“...and let him do it all over again?”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Arthur,” said Ramona.

“I’ve had a lot to reconsider lately.”

As afraid to hurt them by asserting his decisions as he was to let them make their own, Elliot was at an impasse. Earlier thoughts still tugged at him too: those uncomfortable promises of escape and absolution from the stresses of mundane life. He looked up, failing to arrive at a conclusion.

From beneath a curtain of green, Arthur returned his gaze. He studied his face for a while. “What scares you, Elliot? About these changes?”

“...What isn't scary about it?” he replied.

“There are things I cannot control and that I don't fully understand happening to our body, and both of you are *rooting for it* to overtake us.”

Ramona couldn't help but chuckle. “That makes it sound like you're going through puberty again.”

He was abashed by the implication. “That's not—this is serious!” he stammered. “What if integrating with this place does something to our health? Our minds! What if we can never go back to how things were? Or can't go home at all? Of course I'm afraid!”

“Okay, relax,” Ramona said, “Cill said it’s been happening, and I feel normal. You’re absolutely yourself, no one else could be so fucking paranoid.”

“Explain Arthur’s behaviour.”

Arthur straightened his posture. “What needs to be explained? I felt a call, and I answered it. I was...enthusiastic, that’s all.”

“A *call*? That was an impulse. We’re delirious and you got excited.”

When the torrent of feelings were crashing into each other like a sea, Elliot was present. Ramona was certain about it. “You felt it too. That was more than an ‘impulse’,” she said.

There came that same flinch again. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Too bad, we’re talking about it,” said Ramona.

“No, I think I’ll take my leave—” he said, standing up.

Arthur glared. “Do you really hate what you’d become, or are you just afraid to step that far? Afraid to be *different*?”

“I don’t want to talk about—”

“You’re not getting out of this. Answer me.”

“I don’t *know!* I don’t want to know!”

Meanwhile, Cillian was looking around for more to eat in their immediate area. The Ronans were clearly busy with themselves, so he couldn't leave them alone for too long. His exposed burn was still bothering at him whenever it was touched by the breeze, and every so often he'd brush his hand against it and grit his teeth.

He peered into a little hole in the earth, nestled by the stone overhang. He figured it had to belong to some animal or other. A snake, weasel, whatever slippery beast liked to burrow and hole away. He was desperate to get his friends something more substantial to eat than fungus, so he thrust his hand down into it.

Nothing. It was barren, save for some clumps of dirt. He patted down his arm and looked elsewhere. There had to be *something* around.

Dandelions were congregated in what little patches of ground gave them daylight when it wasn't so dark. He'd usually ignore them because of the bland taste, but flavor was currently second to fill. He plucked as many as he could, as well as some other scattered greens that squatted in the same

territory. He didn't have names for all of them, but he recognized what he'd been taught to forage.

When he had plucked enough to sore his fingers, Cillian set the handful in front of the Ronans, who laid with their head against the stone of the wall, eyes closed. He nudged them. "Hey, I got you food."

They mumbled something he couldn't catch. He wiggled them again.

"...Hm?" An eye cracked open to look at him. He couldn't tell who was there.

"Look," he pointed to the greens. He had gathered an assortment of shoots, bulbs, flowers—whatever edible weed wouldn't make them sick.

The Ronans stared at them thoughtfully, and slowly picked out a dandelion. "...To eat?" they asked.

"It ain't the best but it's something. Go on."

"*Just...a moment please...*" and they faded again.

On the inside they were a mess. They'd all fallen into each other trying to answer Cillian and had to regain their bearings.

As he peeled back, Elliot looked at Arthur with a mixture of concern and fear. "For the record, I'm just worried about us," he said.

"I get that," said Ramona, "but...your worries shouldn't make all your choices for you, you know? Or for us. Especially if we can handle this stuff. I think it's time for you to recognize that."

"You realize that *our body* is a *group effort*, right? We should all be on the same page and I am not."

That touched a nerve. Ramona's calmness made a sharp decline. "Rich coming from you. Our body wasn't ever a fucking *group effort* until it was convenient for you"

Elliot was incensed. "Well it wasn't either when you nearly *killed our liver—!*"

"*Shut up,*" said Arthur.

They both turned to him.

"What?" asked Elliot.

"Stop talking," he repeated. "This isn't going anywhere." He walked between the two and, instead of pushing them further away from one another, pulled them in close to himself. "You made your decision back at Cillian's table when you ate with

him. I made a similar decision when I drank from the pond. The difference is that your choice was made in order to survive, and my choice was made in order to live. They've led to the same result. We are changing. We have changed. There is no turning back the dial you and I have both set in motion."

Elliot grimaced. "I know."

"You never did handle change well." Arthur always had a way of digging into his feelings, and now he leveraged it against him, laying him bare.

"I don't. It's terrifying."

He hooked Elliot with his eye. "Then I can promise you you'll stay just the same. If all of this goes how I expect. You'll have what you need."

Elliot looked away, Arthur's gaze proved too intense even through the leaves and mental murk that obfuscated it. "...We've almost died here. More than once. We are starving, far from home with a useless arm, and bound by Cairn to stay. The whole reason we are here is because we've been stolen. Is this really somewhere you would like to tie yourselves to?"

"I have never felt more alive or myself than I have in these woods. Elliot, I need you to understand

that for once I have been able to consider myself as more than just your keeper.”

Ramona piped up. “Same. And people almost die all the time from far less. We’re still standing! We made a new friend! We’ve been trying to do that, right? He counts. He just...went about it in a bad way.”

Elliot embodied a deep, but shaky breath. “I want to go home.”

“We *will* go home,” Arthur assured him. “Just not forever.”

He felt himself teeter on the edge of instability. The stomach pains and fear were beginning to wear him thin. “...Please, if only for a day.”

“More than that, trust me. I don’t want to abandon the village completely. I like it there. You can take a nice long shower when all of this is done.”

“Please...”

They felt Cillian nudge them again.

“Oh, right, he brought us something,” said Ramona, “I’ll go deal with that. Are you two, uh, fine?”

“I’ve calmed down,” said Arthur.

"I'm not sure I can accept what's happening to us, but I have no choice but to let it," said Elliot. "Go eat. I know it's more fairy food, but...fuck, it's far too late to matter. I won't stop you."

"You'll be okay, alright? Don't worry about it. We're not gonna die or whatever. Chill! I'm out." She turned around and took on the helm like throwing on a coat.

Her eyes snapped open, and she woke up with Cillian hanging idly against her shoulder, rolling stems between his fingers in boredom. It was dark, the night had more than made itself comfortable, and she could see the beginnings of stars over the trees if she leaned her neck forward.

Cillian noticed her stir. "Oh, finally. I thought I lost you for the night."

"Nah I'm good, just-" her stomach cut her off with a growl. "Yeah. That."

"Hope you like greens," he said.

She lifted Arthur's fronds out from her face and stared at them. "...You think these are edible too?"

"Probably," he said. "But it'd taste of blood. It's you, after all."

“Mm. Still tempting.” She picked up a dandelion and turned it around in her hands. She didn't have any idea how to go about eating it. Start with the leaves? The flower? She noticed a small, black mite crawl between the petals.

Cillian watched her with an air of encouragement, like a mother bird, or a cat that's brought its owner something small and dead.

Ramona chanced one of the leaves. It was bitter, but the longer she chewed, she was able to convince herself it was part of a salad. The stem, on the other hand, was incredibly acrid. She noticed a sticky, milky sap weep from it. It wasn't very tolerable, so she spat it out and decided to try the head. The flower itself had a more pleasant taste; almost sweet if she really strained to taste it. Much better. She'd almost forgotten about the mite.

“Is it good?” he asked.

“It's something,” she said, mouth full.

He glanced away in thought, then propped his head on his palm. “What had you out for so long?”

She swallowed. “Hard convo. Elliot's having a hard time coming to terms with everything going on. Uh, he's focused on all *this*.” She gestured to their

surroundings, the modest handful of plants, and their injury. "But even while I'm sitting here freezing my ass off, I think the sky's pretty tonight, don't you?"

"I do. Sorry it's been so rough. He might come around eventually." He said so knowing he would fish a star from the sky if it meant persuading him.

"Here," she tossed him a dandelion and grabbed a fresh one for herself. It landed squarely in his lap. "Cheers to making it out of today alive," she said.

He raised it up in solidarity. "Cheers."

Chapter Twenty-one

Morning tasted like chlorophyll and phlegm. Arthur awoke with his face pressed into a mat of fur, because somehow Cillian managed to hug their body like a pillow in his sleep. The fairy was still out, his sunglasses haphazardly tucked in his hair. He slept like a stone with a grip just as firm. There was something charming about it. The pressure was...nice.

Their body had also shed its fronds overnight. They littered the ground around their head as if someone had gone around pruning the green. It put an emotion in Arthur he couldn't quite place. Like something had been too short lived to see its real potential. A chrysalis with no butterfly.

The sun was already up, but their spot was cloaked in shade. The air was no longer uncomfortably cold and had turned into a gentler cool. He was hungrier than he'd ever been. Their clothes were still hung up, he could put them back on and look around... If they weren't dry yet, they would dry in the sun just outside of their little hideaway. He tried to rise. His elbow shot a viscous

shock of pain through him. A sharp whimper rolled out of his throat. Cillian didn't budge.

His arms were pinned by the fairy's hold, but he had enough wiggle room to poke at him. He coughed his way through a morning clog to speak out.

"Cillian. Wake up," he managed. It would have been nice to linger, if not for the pulsing ache and the urgency of hunger.

No luck.

"Cillian?" he raised his voice and put more pressure into poking him.

"Mmn?" Cillian was finally jostled awake, and blinked his heavy eyelids open. Arthur was yet again struck by the sight of the black and amber beneath them.

"Um, could you let me go?"

Sleepily, Cillian rolled slightly to the side without removing himself. "Whyyy would I do that? You're comfy...warm..."

Arthur wheezed as the air was hugged out of his lungs. His sternum twinged. "*I need to get up, it hurts,*" he breathed. More fur pulled across his tongue, which nearly made him choke.

“Mm...jus’ a lil’ longer...I haven't had a good cuddle...since...” The fairy trailed off, feeling his accidental hostage writhe around. Arthur tried his best to pry himself away, gasping from the effort. Something in Cillian’s head clicked and suddenly he realized what he was doing. He let go, and Arthur tumbled out with a soft *thump* on the grass.

“Oh hell! My bad!”

Arthur sat up and collected himself. The elbow throbbed insistently. “...It's alright. I’d like to get dressed. Now that it's morning, we can resume our search.”

“Huh? Oh, for food.” Cillian sat up and stretched deeply. He yawned, and for a moment Arthur marveled at his mouthful of teeth.

He averted his gaze quickly. “Do you know which direction we should travel to reach your house, or the Court?”

Cillian rubbed the crust out of his eyes with his thumbs, and squinted at the sky. “Beats me. I can't tell the lay of the sun from here. Let’s get something to eat and see if I can figure it out.”

Discomfort bit down again in Arthur’s midsection. They were well overdue for an actual

meal. His fingers shook as he buttoned his shirt.
“Please.”

They had more success in the clarity beneath the summer sun. The area was quite beautiful in the morning, with the edges of its hills, trees, and outcrops glazed in gold. Thorny shrubs thick with rose hips were found on the fringes where the canopy broke and spilled sunlight onto the forest floor. Straying closer to streamlets where bushes crowded for water, sweet berries mingled with stinging nettles like old friends. Cillian was careful as he harvested the nettles. He wrapped the thicker leaves of another plant around the stems, and plunged them into a cold current of water to soak.

“You wanna shock all the little hairs, they got the sting in them. Then you crush ‘em as best as you can.” he explained. After they’d finished soaking, he rolled the plants against a flat stone and pressed them flat with his palms and knee.

Arthur was impressed. “I didn't know you could eat those.”

“It’s good for you! At least that’s what I was told.” He snapped off a few leaves and popped them in his mouth, then offered some to Arthur.

The nettles tasted something like spinach. Arthur swallowed, a slight tickle sticking to his tongue he hoped wouldn't last. At least his hunger was finally beginning to ease. The two of them had gone around sampling just about any edible they could procure. "I'll have to remember this when we make it home, there are so many plants we wouldn't have paid any mind... I could make teas and things, maybe share with my neighbors, too." He liked the thought of that, going out for foraging walks and putting together something nice afterwards. He even thought to all the market stalls, and wondered if there was space for one more.

For a wonderful moment, Cillian had forgotten the Ronans were still going to leave. He could pretend he'd finally caught some friends he could spend all his days picking herbs and fooling around with. Alas.

"That'd be nice," he said.

"I'd think so. We could gather some hillish plants as well." Studying them from the comfort of their desk and garden sounded ideal to Arthur.

That gave Cillian a hopeful direction to push. He washed the smudge of green on his palms in the

stream and stood as cheerfully as he could carry himself. “You know Art, that reminds me. There’s plenty of medicine plants around the Hill. Is your elbow still sore?”

Arthur rolled up his sleeve, wincing. The injury was still swollen, bruises as dark as the day before. “Yes, though it needs more serious—”

“Great! We’re gonna go look for something to soothe that. Come along now.”

“Alright, might as well.”

Cillian knew he was slipping. He couldn’t conquer the urges that ran deep and powerful inside of him, not when he was so close to his dream. There was a belly to the beast that was the *cuckoo*, the changeling, and it had to feed sooner or later. The company of others was too honey sweet to let go of. The delight of waking with someone tucked in his grasp, the thrill of their scent, their joy—he’d fallen again. With a catch like no other, too.

The Ronans were starting to break, though; they were in a bad way from their tangle with the Nameless monster and the river, and it was only a matter of time before they all decided to get working on that tale for Cairn, and go home. How terrible it

was for them to get hurt under his watch... He could feel the itch of his Court promises reach up his core.

He was their guide. Their protector. It was only fair that he patch them up himself, right? What good was he if he couldn't keep them from danger, couldn't mend what he had caused them? He reasoned he could take care of their needs, scrape together whatever meals and accommodations they needed once they got back to Mound, and they'd never need to leave. At least, not without him.

That poisonous twinge continued along. He was the reason they were in this mess. It was his fault. His responsibility.

...But wasn't it Cairn's fault? He had grown up estranged from his purpose, thanks to the oak. Try as he might, he couldn't settle for a usual life. He *needed* to take, *needed* to leave his mark on something new. He was denied at every opportunity, left bereft from the only attempt that got close. *Walt...*

It's only natural to hunger when meals are kept from you.

These ones were locked in *with* him, for a change. If the Ronans weren't allowed to leave, the

least he could do was make them as comfortable as he could. Fit in. Have a chance at life. Who could say for certain Cairn would even accept their tale? Maybe he'd change his mind last minute. Maybe he'd hate it.

Hadn't Cillian shown them what a nice home this place could be anyway? It was his cage when he was on his own, sure, but with *them* it was born anew. He wasn't ready for it to lose that spark. They were only getting started.

It took some time for the other Ronans to wake. The toll of hunger had hit them mentally as much as it had physically. They were foggy in detail, as if recollected from a dream, or peered at through frosted glass.

Elliot found himself in the bed, despite not leaving himself there, with Ramona at his side. He pushed aside a frond of pine needles that had grown from the headboard and settled against his cheek. It felt a lot more real than he did, at the moment.

Gnawing at his psyche were many adversaries. The destruction of their belongings and lack of any progress towards their escape, to name a few, but worst of all was still that little voice that continued to urge him to fold. To just give in.

Ramona stirred to consciousness with a groan. Last she knew, she felt like a starving husk. Now she was a husk that'd had something to eat. An improvement. "Morning Ell," she said.

"Morning."

"Any idea what Art's up to?"

He fell silent. There were smatterings of movement and light, and gradually it came to him what Arthur and Cillian were doing. "Foraging, it seems."

She tuned in. "Looks like they found some stuff."

"Yes." He sat up, trailing a vaporous shadow behind him, and honed his focus. "Berries and things... Currently he's being offered some kind of...pond weed?" All the flavors trickled back to him weakly.

"I hope they found something to numb all the...you know, ouch," she said. Ramona wasn't exactly all there.

"The pain, yes."

Something was off with their activity, but Elliot couldn't pinpoint what it was. He chalked it up to his own discomfort. Still, he wanted to see what it was exactly Arthur was putting in their body.

"I'm going to watch," he said. "Get some more rest."

"Alright, see you." She didn't bother to rise, and instead gave him a blurry wave of farewell.

Cillian was busy fishing out a tangle of water weeds from a pool when Elliot came into front. Arthur had expected one of his sleeping siblings to crop up eventually, but the fact that it was Elliot put him on edge. He didn't greet him.

"I see you two have been busy," Elliot said aloud. Freckles peppered half the face at his entry.

Holding a dripping handful of weeds, Cillian glanced back at the boys. "Ell?"

"That would be me," he said. Exhaustion had softened his tone.

“Hey, I was gonna share this. Want some?” He held out the tangle of green.

“Ah...” Elliot could not express enough how badly he did *not*, despite his brother’s keenness. He could still taste the wet slick on his tongue from the other things he’d eaten. “...Arthur can try instead. What is it, even?”

“Shallow’s knot. I don’t usually go picking it on account of the sour, but Art wants to have a taste of whatever we can find.” He began to pluck the leaves and buds off the plant, and tested one. He squeezed his eyes shut at the taste.

“I’ll give it a go,” Arthur said.

He accepted a bud, and rolled it around on his tongue. It tasted like lemon, or maybe vinegar. It gave the strong impression of something that had been pickled. It occurred to him that the people of the Hill didn’t have access to any citrus, and this was likely one of the most sour things growing there.

“Interesting, is the rest edible?” he asked.

“If you boil it.”

“Oh, we could bring some back to your home and have Lake boil it. I’d like to try it.” A spark of experimental interest returned to him.

“Hah, she won't let you boil anything inside her, she's not a pot. Walt regretted trying that,” Cillian said, picking more buds and leaves from the tangle, “but she'll be happy to provide the water.”

That piqued Arthur's curiosity. “Who's Walt?”

Cillian froze. He realized exactly what he'd let slip from his clumsy mouth as old memories dug their teeth in. “Was,” he said. He couldn't stop himself.

Though the sun shone bright, the atmosphere began to cool. His mood had veered sharply downwards. He was hiding something.

“Who was he?” pressed Elliot, a worming feeling in his backbrain nudging him to insist. To investigate.

“Don't worry about it.”

“I thought you didn't have any other friends.” For just a moment, there was the strangest, yawning possibility that maybe once upon a time, Sienna had gone by a different name.

Cillian ruffled. The set of his jaw held finality.

“He's dead.”

They sat steeping in a tense pause. Cillian huffed and shoved the shallow's knot in the shoulder

bag like a chore. He thrust his arm into the pool for more of the weed, and didn't seem to care when the water splashed up in his face. When the muck of it clung to his sleeve.

"We're going back to my hollow. I've figured out which way to go," he continued. He shook off a spattering of droplets as he tugged up another handful and tossed it to his side. "There's a guy who makes good stew back in Mound. He sort of owes me a favour...I could make it work. Your arm needs meat to heal. Real food."

The Ronans remained quiet.

"...Mm, should get you a splint soon too. I don't know how to make one."

"Was...Walt a human being?" asked Arthur. The question fell like a stone.

The fairy's throat twitched. "What's it matter?"

"Cillian..."

His tail pounded the ground, once. "Stop."

"What happened?" Elliot bled into his words. Their words.

Twice. "Stop."

It was Arthur who halted. He didn't want to hurt Cillian, but something wasn't right. This wasn't

just grief. He could nearly taste it, that waft of a secret tracing the fairy's voice. His gut told him to keep going. His heart told him to heel. His head settled on watching Elliot wield the conversation, so he could glean from the aftermath like a vulture.

His brother took the role without knowing.

"What are you hiding?"

Cillian flicked his hands dry. "I said we're going. Get up, or I'm carrying you again." There was a twitch in his wrists, sizing up their weight again. He wasn't kidding.

Elliot was irritated, now. Their appearance shifted as he took control. "Not until you tell us what's going on with you."

"No." *Leave me alone.* The plea bubbled into Cillian's conscious alongside the salt-sting of oncoming tears. His throat bobbed. Not yet. Not yet.

"You're being suspicious."

"So what." He couldn't afford to flinch now. He would lose everything.

Elliot at once remembered the tapestry of pains in his body. Hunger pangs, blood pumping into places still bruised and worn, exhaustion beyond any walk or errand the last year had put them through.

They shouldn't have been able to keep up, but they were, somehow.

"So, we're barely keeping it together here, after everything—and now I'm certain you're hiding something from us for a reason. Spit it out."

"It's one less thing to worry over. Thank me, maybe. You're stressed enough as-is."

"You know it will stress us out more, being left wondering."

From his impartial perch, Arthur began to wonder if this was really worth pushing for.

Cillian didn't budge. "Keep your mind off it then. Play, swap around, work on that story you were supposed to do. I'm sure Cairn still wants to hear it..."

Elliot glowered. "Don't treat me like a child."

"Then don't go poking your nose where you shouldn't."

They tested each other's patience. A tail's flick traded for a sneer.

Despite the rising tension, Arthur still did not intervene.

Elliot carried on without notice. He knew every inflammatory sentiment was nothing to the fairy.

Cillian was on the defence. The real meat behind the carapace of deflections was shivering. Ready to crack. He knew it with the certainty of a shucking knife.

“This Walt, what pried him from you?”

Cillian growled. He couldn't handle any more of this either. He threw the Ronans' bag at their chest. “Shut your mouth, or I'll make you regret it. We're going.”

It stung. He'd aimed there on purpose. They put a palm to the impact and stroked an echo of the boot heel that had saved their life.

Arthur felt the darkness behind him stir.

“Are you threatening me?” asked Elliot, the wet shoulder bag now pooled in his lap.

“I am.”

They'd faced worse just yesterday. The blow had loosened his tongue and capacity to care alike. “What,” he said, sarcasm budding, “did you kill him?”

Thump.

Cillian had him by the throat. They were pinned. Those amber sunglasses had fallen askew,

revealing an anger there was no name for. "Take that back!" Cillian shouted. "*Take it back!!*"

The Ronans eyes fluttered in shock. They couldn't breathe. They flailed to push him away, lame arm useless in its electric agony. Then-

Ramona woke up to the feeling of thumbs digging into the underside of her chin. There was a man on top of her. Angry. Heavy. Dangerous. She sent her knee as deep into the softness beneath his ribs as she could. He buckled and let go, crying out. She coughed, sputtered, and rolled him off of their body with the one arm that still had its strength. The panic of a kid caught between a wall and a father's fist coursed through her. What was happening? Who was he?

He laid prone in the grass, clutching his gut. Tail curled around him.

"Cillian??"

He didn't answer. He was coughing too. There was a glob of red on his lips, lending a thin string of spittle whenever he parted his mouth to shudder in another breath.

She knelt down and shook him. "Come on, say something!"

"I'm sorry!" he wheezed, finding his air.

"Are you okay? Did I break something?"

He shook his head feverishly, and she wasn't sure which answer was which.

"I'm sorry," he said again, *"I didn't kill nobody, I swear, I swear it-"*

"What are you talking about? What's going on?"

"Don't say I did, please don't say nothin' like that again," he begged past her. His face was greased with tears, teeth bared through another wet cough.

"Who? You were just choking me out!" Her chest hurt in tandem with her throat. Elliot and Arthur weren't okay. Nothing made any sense.

Cillian curled up into a ball of regret until the pain of it kicked his legs out. An animal, only an animal would lunge like that. Nothing with a Name, surely. Nothing worth keeping.

When she touched his side to steady him, his floodgates blew open.

"Walter!" he blurted. *"He was a boy from outside! He'd still be here if I- if I wasn't a fucking idiot!"*

His claws dug into the damp soil. He coughed again.

“...I didn’t give him enough of me, I put the wrong ideas in his head, so he got himself *killed*.”

Elliot wasn’t finished. He came through again, ignoring his sister, and tore their body away from the fairy’s side as he stood. “So you’ve tricked someone else into this place before!” he said.

“He *wanted* to be here, he liked this place. He just...he took things too far, didn’t listen to me when I tried to stop him, I failed.”

Cillian brought himself to his feet and wiped his slick face. Honesty dribbled out of him with the rest of his fluids. “He wasn’t even like the others. He was kind, eager... I wasn’t sweet on him like he was on me, so he tried to fuckin’...*impress* me. He thought he could handle a monster if it meant getting some praise, and-”

His breath hitched. He could still hear the moment it had happened, a shock of clarity that tore through his memory like lightning.

“It *ate him*.”

Elliot felt his stomach drop. *Others*.

A want to console and forgive struck Arthur, but he already chose his place. The bystander. The witness. Another question was on its way, probing and cautious and cruel.

"...How many people have you taken?" asked Elliot.

"I-I don't wanna talk about it anymore," said Cillian. He held his middle, the jab of Ramona's knee still pulsing where she'd stuck it. A trickle ran down his lower lip. He looked ill. "Let's just go, forget it."

Ramona couldn't organize her thoughts. She'd hurt her friend badly, but he'd *throttled* them. She didn't know who to trust anymore, which side to even fight for. Frustration raked against her reason like a cat's tongue. Something had to give.

Elliot took a clinical step forward. "*How many?*"

The fairy curled in on himself. His clothing lost its stability, rippling in mats of hackled fur as he tried not to answer.

"Are they dead too? Did they become something else? *Tell me!*"

He couldn't contain it. "*Five!* And they left, alright? I never meant anyone harm!"

Five. Five human beings, and not one of them was still here. Elliot's head swam. His eyes darted around the wilderness. How far could he run?

No, not yet.

"Why didn't you tell us?" he asked.

"I didn't want to scare you off!" said Cillian.

"Scare—you're a fucking kidnapper!"

"So what!" he yelled, halfway between a sob and a snarl. "They're just fine! You're alive! Walt's the one who sowed his own damn grave!"

Elliot was beside himself. Ramona felt the weight of her anger break and took the chance to overtake him. She'd seen enough. They fought, pushing and shoving, stumbling as they did, but she came out on top. The body was her own, again.

Her next target wasn't far. She locked eyes with the fairy and marched towards him. It didn't take long for Cillian to realize she wasn't approaching with good intentions.

"Wait, wait," he said, backing up. "Hold on—"

She was the protector. She was going to do what she was made for even if it meant hurting them both.

“You led us along like we meant something to you,” she said, voice low, collective emotions of broken trust and confusion coloring every word. The pain she carried, burning hot in her chest, was not all her own. “You said you’d take us home, but we’re just here to fill a gap left behind by a string of other people. Were you planning to keep us here forever?”

All he could utter was the truth.

“I am.”

The floor was a moving tide. Her heart had pitched deep into cold, numbing waters, and she couldn’t escape the vertigo of it all. She swayed as she moved, lacking anything to hold onto or believe anymore.

Left to spectate, Elliot cursed himself. He should have been more wary of Cillian’s intentions from the start, and he’d made the mistake of letting his guard down, of developing positive feelings. It was nice to be wanted, but at what cost?

Betrayal and desire had Arthur at a crossroads. The world was off-color. He saw the fairy’s efforts for what they were, now. The spasms of a desperate heart. Could he cradle that vulnerable thing in his palm, knowing what it had done to keep beating?

Ramona snarled, those wolfish teeth bared to air again. Her brothers' feelings weighed on her every step. Betrayal. Pity. She didn't have the room to be the judge, now, only the axe. "I thought we were actually *friends*," she said, "not *replacements*."

"You are!" protested Cillian, fear rising in him. More tears spilled hot and heavy down his face as he backed away. "Please, I'm sorry!"

Thorns pushed out from her nape. Brambles slithered out of her hair into furious vines. She knew he meant every word. That he did care, truly. It gutted her to tear into him, but she was already rolling full steam ahead. There was no hitting the breaks.

She shoved him with one arm. "Then why didn't you just be *fucking honest* Cillian? You could have asked us, instead of hoping we wouldn't notice you slip the collar around our neck!"

"I couldn't—I couldn't risk it, I couldn't lose someone else! Cairn waived my promise, you were my best chance to—" he only got so far before she knocked him in the jaw.

"We aren't a **chance**," she roared over his sprawled body. Despite his size, he'd gone down easy.

He rubbed his face, dumbstruck. This was a new kind of iron.

"It would've been better if you just said something before," she continued. "All this going around picking herbs...god, just seeding us quicker, huh? Making it harder to leave?"

His eyebrows furrowed, shock quickly giving way to anger. "...That hurt."

"Yeah. That's for keeping us in the dark."

"If I'd said it all, you'd have turned away sooner. No one wants a *cuckoo* around here." He dragged himself off of the ground again. "I know you've been paying attention. The way that word hangs outta folks' mouths when I'm around... I'll lay it out for you if you need to know so badly, if you need another reason to hit me."

"Tell me," she demanded.

He lumbered over, growing as he did. Joints snapped and popped into place. His jaw strained into a new shape, pushing outwards, the corners of his lips blooming into petals of black behind canid teeth.

Those smattered, lichenlike patches bristled across him with the rest of his golden pelt; across his gangly arms and thick, thrashing tail. He loomed above her, the same beast he'd been in the river.

The skin of his muzzle clenched, admittance paining him more than the punch. "I'm one of those *baby-stealers*," he said. "My folks were gonna take me to your village, leave me on some poor sod's doorstep, swap me for the real child and raise it instead. I would've become a human being in the end, like you. But that didn't happen. So I became one of *them*."

Instinctually, she took a step back. He continued pushing forward, leaving almost no space between them.

"After the war, it was considered dangerous and taboo to swap for human children—I was born in the after. My folks didn't like that. They left me behind here, 'cause I was useless under Cairn's rule, and fucked off. I *hate* them, you know? But I hate Cairn more. He kept me here like I was ever meant to be loved, when I'm not. He disapproved of every single human I slipped past the trees, when it's in my blood to take. But he's raised me the most out of

anyone, and for that he owns my life. I'm sick of it! I'm sick of being a mismatched *freak!*"

Ramona's back hit the solidity of a tree. He'd pushed her far enough that she had no more space to go. There was a claustrophobic lack of space between them, his heavy scent and fur hanging around her like the wolf leader a lifetime away from now. She was blurring with Elliot, their maelstrom forming a vitriolic slurry of a human being. "You're worse than your parents. Cairn had the right idea."

"You take that *back*," he growled.

"Why should I?" they said. The rest tumbled out before she could stop it. "Give someone a real choice next time, before they get trapped here with you."

Cillian flared. He'd been such a desperate fool he'd wormed his way around honesty until it was too late. A hate for himself bubbled up inside, stronger than his feud with his false father, Cairn, or the parents who'd left him behind. He might as well have been Nameless. A thing acting on urges and impulses without any consideration for his prey.

The tree shook when he slammed his palm against its bark. He felt the tingle in his molars, the

slab of his tongue leant against them. The Ronans shivered in their skin. With ease, he could pick them up, ignoring their protests to heft them over his shoulder, and drag them back to his hollow. He could lock the part of him that cared away, throw that damned bell in with it. His final catch, slaked at last...

“Go,” he found himself exhale. His claws dragged flakes from the bark. His nature held his throat like a noose, but he forced out another demand past his monstrous grimace. “*Get out of here!*”

Some basal part of the Ronans kept them in place. Their eyes locked onto his maw and that wild, amber stare. Every muscle burned, heart pounding blood into their legs that stood frozen and useless beneath them. *Flee*, said the calculating fibers in their spine, *move*.

Cillian shoved them, and stepped back. He gave his precious catch some room to finally escape.

Their feet danced to catch them from the shove. When they discovered themselves again, daring to breathe, they blinked back up at their captor. They drank him in warily, what he'd become: the face that laughed, smiled, brimmed with

fondness and belonging, now twisted in grief and regret. Eyes that cried *I don't deserve you*.

They ran as fast as their legs could carry them.

Chapter Twenty-Two

There was no telling where they were now. Every landmark was a reflection of another, all boulders and trees and endless green. The river would have been something to follow if they hadn't strayed so far from it. The sun shot needles of heat into their back each time they passed under its gaze, and the shade brought no real relief. They wandered, aimless, a bundle of nerves and feelings that twisted in on themselves. Every sensation was too much.

Arthur wanted to turn back. Despite his better judgement, despite his siblings. Regret was his clearest companion in Cillian's absence, even when the thought of the fairy made his heart quicken into sickly rhythm, and hardened the pit of his stomach. Even when he couldn't be sure of what he was worth to him. It had only been a few days—he tried to remind himself of that, a few days with a stranger. Too soon to get so attached, and yet, too soon to let go of what was only just beginning.

He could hardly form a sentence's worth of thought, let alone speech. His frustration bled out in tears, in exerted breaths as he pushed foliage aside

and tore at his own green tangle. It grew back again with thorny persistence, driving a spike of hunger into his core. He cried out for the only friend he had ever made on his own merits, and nothing answered. Their body kept moving.

They stumbled through bushes and high grass, as if the Hill was grasping at them with its own hands, tripping them up and pulling them in. Every step forward was a step out of its clutches, of Cillian's reach. The boundaries between each other were hard to map, so worked up from cutting him loose that they had all become a swaying ocean. Recognizable facets surfaced for air in the confusion, all in various states of misfortune.

Elliot's buoy was his fear. It propelled him utterly. He wanted out, he was sick of the temptations ringing through his head and the confusion of ideals the whole ordeal had brought him to. The flickers of a life worth living, of a freedom unknown and deadly-sweet. Since when did he beckon change? It had always swum around him like a current, through houses and places and people, the mark of it never touching his bareness. Whether he had never let himself near, or it had left him

behind to chase better quarry, he didn't know. Only now could he feel it at his heels.

Echoes of wolves snapped in Ramona's wake. Her blood was iron-hot, she could hardly find herself inside the clap of pistons and hiss of steam she'd become. Momentum incarnate, she barrelled through the woods. A dog. An axe. A machine. Nevermind that her engine was burning, that the pressure cracked her chassis and warped the intake. The only directions were forward and through. Forward and through. A mantra on repeat, pounding her shoes into the dirt. Forward and through.

So they all carried on, body and mind whorling, changing, crashing through the brush and muck like their world was caving in. Thorns tangled with fronds, and every thought of Cillian only bore a new smothering sprout.

Eventually their foot caught the underside of a log and they collided with the ground. A bed of moss and clover embraced the fall as if to catch them. Tender green hugged their arms and cushioned their knees. They wept. Even now, after everything, the Hill was gentle with them. It was quiet, bird calls and rustles in the distance, the rush of water, *life*. There

was room to breathe here. They dug their fingernails into the grass.

"I'm so fucking sorry," heaved the part of themselves that was still Ramona enough to retch an apology. Guilt wracked her for bumping into Cillian at all, and for taking him away with such finality.

She hung her head from the dizzying pressure. Thorns pressed uncomfortably against their shared skin, and she knew they belonged to her.

Arthur's tail whipped across their legs, a reminder that they weren't quite human anymore, and would never be again, for better and for worse. *"Can't we go back?"* he pleaded, recalling his voice.

"No no no, no," Elliot stammered. Complexity was growing out of his reach. *"Home, now, please."*

"...We'll be stuck here if we stay lost," Ramona said. *"We'll have to get used to it, figure it out."* Her resolve hardened. She had to get a grip or they wouldn't even make it back to the Court.

"No!" Elliot was dangerously close to teetering back into the state of mind he'd reached after the wolves. He had no control over anything, let alone himself.

“We’ll survive,” she assured. A layer of detachment steadily isolated her from the sea of turmoil.

Arthur winced. “It won't be the same.”

“Nothing will. That’s fine.” She pushed their body up, and rose, one palm, one knee, one foot at a time. She latched onto a thick cord of thorn vine trailing from their hair, and snapped it. It hurt, but pain was on another planet.

She studied it closely, taking in its weight and texture. “This is what we are. This is our body. You were right, Art, we’ve been given a gift.”

At the moment he didn't really care. All that occupied his mind with any real gravity was the desire to undo everything.

Ramona raised the vine to her lips and savoured its velvety warmth. It was blood that thought it wasn’t, convinced into another shape. The tough outside skin caved once she bit down. She ate, knowing it would be a waste not to. They'd at least have something to fool their stomach into being full with. To buy some extra time.

It slid thick down their throat. Arthur nearly choked it back up. "What are you doing?" he asked, through the metallic tinge.

"Adapting to the circumstances," she said. She wiped the blood off the corner of her mouth, staining their cuff red. "Whether or not we go back to the village, we're one of the Hill's things now."

The crawl back home was bleak. Cillian figured out which direction was southwards and marched without pause. Cairn would be there, waiting. He'd open those big arms of his and welcome his little disappointment back home, scold him for another heartbreak, and be done with it.

He didn't bother wearing his human face anymore, feeling every bit the monster the Ronans made of him. The burn on his thigh stung with each step. He let his claws swing across it now and then to give it a good scrape.

Here I am again. Another loss. They'll probably be dragged into some maw, but they don't want my help. He grit his teeth. Too soon. The poor things

were probably lost without him, he couldn't help them if he tried.

A tree branch interrupted his thoughts as it brushed into his face. He felt it click against his shades. He stopped in his tracks, pried the sunglasses from his muzzle, and held them in his claws.

He caught his reflection in the glass. What stared back at him was no friendly, human face. He'd recreated one for most of his life. That soft little ideal no one ran from. Now all he saw was an animal. His reflection stared back with those telltale golden eyes he'd tried to hide from prospective friends.

Ramona's words stuck in his head. *Why didn't you just be fucking honest?*

He remembered the time he'd approached a human being out on the firewood trails. Walked up, no glamor or pretense. Said something like, *'hey, what brings you this far out?'* with a grin and an open heart. The details were fuzzy now, but he remembered the trails were real empty after that.

And his peers, Hill-folk he knew wouldn't find his appearance funny, well... Tough luck for a

cuckoo. On the inside, they weren't enough like him. Some feigned their politeness, only to keep their distance. Others treated him like the things without Name. Cairn tried to push friends his way, at least, but it never landed right, never had the same zeal.

Only Sienna had managed to latch onto him, but as he grew, the less she fulfilled in him. Eventually, he just couldn't stomach it.

He thought to how the Ronans had treated him, though, despite his omitted truths. They had a way of navigating him, cracking him open little by little. Insisting on his details. Interest! Real interest. Maybe they were right, if he'd just spilled his contents for them, he would have stood a chance.

He snapped the shades in half and dropped them to the forest floor. No more secrets, no more hiding, even if it was far too late.

Ramona's composure led them forward. She put whatever she could chew between their teeth and down their gullet, from flower heads to bugs, to

the few frogs she could catch. Their body acclimated. It had to.

The problem was Elliot's tolerance. Every time there was a nauseous turn, she blamed him. She dug her spurs in his side and made him face it. They were starving again. This wasn't a matter of taste. If he was gonna be a weak link, and choke on every squidgy, watery thing she forced in, then he had to be ignored. It was either *get used to it*, or get used to not eating at all.

Crestfallen, Arthur could only follow along. He took part in the unrecognizable thing that they were, now, still human in shape, but lacking the restraint to act like it. Dissonant, hungry, pained every which way. Their transformation, the idea of which had stoked his fervor high just the night before, did not excite him without its proper audience. He was bereft of the pride he craved. Those tender touches across his fledgling features, the congratulations laughed belly-deep from the one who had given him the key. How maddening to have praise kiss his cheek for only a breath of time.

Once in a while he would perk at the sight of a plant or insect new to his eyes, some fleeting piece

of fairy nature. He tried to let them entertain his sense of wonder, imagine what the life of such creatures would be, what a day crawling on their legs and drinking deep from the earth might entail; but he couldn't slip the grasp of what they'd all cut short. It always circled back.

The plan—or about as close to a plan as their ravenous mind could put together—was to gather what they could, pick a direction, and walk until something stopped them. If they hit a boundary, they could either turn around and try another direction, or bother a tree into sending someone their way, assuming they had the means to do so. If tipping a tree caught Cairn's ire, surely they could grab his attention in some gentler way. They were sure he was wondering where they were by now. It was easy to picture him sitting aloft, drumming his thick fingers in wait.

"I think we have enough to get moving," Ramona said as she tucked another few greens into their bag. It was full of scraps they could *sort of* consider food.

"What if it isn't?" asked Elliot, who's anxiety pressed like a razor's edge against his throat.

“Then we have all day. Breathe.” Not that he currently had *lungs*, relegated entirely to the headspace as he was, but she wanted him to stay quiet. Out of all of them, *he* wasn’t the one who’d lost a friend, right?

Without anything better to do, Arthur took to his old role and gave Elliot a shoulder to cling to. It was an almost automatic process to slide into that cloudy shape of care. “We’ll make things work,” he said, his tone as soft as tulle. “We’ve made it this far. Please, stay calm.”

It was as hard to suggest as it was to believe. Elliot didn't have anything to say in turn. He was unconvinced, upset, longing for this uncertainty to end already. He curled into the crook of Arthur, sidled up against the coolness of his being, if only to staunch the oncoming spiral.

It was still early in the day, so Ramona found east by the slant of the sunlight that filtered down through the tips of the pines basking up above. From what she could recall about their journey, they’d traveled vaguely north before getting lost, so south was their best bet. She surveyed for a thinner stretch of plants to traverse, and set off.

There were no convenient trails to go by. She had to push through the thick vegetation, even if it meant getting scuffed or prickled at. Now and then she'd thrust one way forward, and encounter an obstacle that forced her to backtrack and try another route. Several times, she'd wrestled through a choke point only to emerge and spot an easier path nearby. Whether it was a stream she couldn't hop, or a cluster of dense trees and shrubs packed so tight they formed a wall, it became increasingly clear how convenient following a fairy had really been.

Eventually Ramona broke through into a small clearing. It was open to the sky, dominated by clumps of brush and young saplings. Between them stretched thin grass and dry soil that crunched beneath her shoes. If she turned her head in the direction she'd come from, she could see the nearby mountain in all its glory. The giant that towered over it all, the lone peak of the Alder-hill the village and these woods were named for. Nothing about the clearing was otherwise out of the ordinary, so she decided to stop for a rest. She sat and leaned against a cedar's trunk, breathing like she'd been holding her breath for too long. She grew bored after

a few minutes of pushing air back and forth, and reality seeped in enough to drag her down to earth.

“Still no idea where we are, great.”

She patted her knees idly, and tried to come up with something to occupy herself with as she stared up at the mountain. At this point, she would have pestered Cillian or struck up a conversation with him, an urge that pumped a new shot of remorse through her veins. At least she had her brothers, but they were busy. In the background of her mind, she could tell Arthur was still keeping Elliot in check and soothing his nerves. It wouldn't be good to bother them any further. The two of them were shaken enough.

One thing she noticed in her boredom was that her breathing, heavy as it was, didn't carry the same strain as it had before. That esophageal burn of running too long, that scratchy sort of itch just behind the tongue, was missing. She rolled her shoulders while assessing it, and discovered the abnormal comfort in her muscles. Hadn't they been pushing their frame to the limit?

The sound of heavily rustling leaves drew her focus back to the external. To her right, an ash

tree's canopy shuddered. She knew something was lurking in its branches, so she pressed herself against the bark of the conifer and kept the disturbance in her sights. Out fell a pale, almost weightless object, and the rustling paused. She thought it was a leaf, but it drifted closer, flapped, and fell onto the ground right beside her. A moth.

Before she could piece together who it belonged to, another, much larger shape tumbled from the branches and voiced its surprise. It had been following the moth, clearly, and alighted clumsily on the ground behind it. She was never more glad to see the red, doggish face and teal sheen of a cockerel-hound than she was in that moment. This was the one with the generously curled feathers, who'd been so much gentler to them during the Court proceedings.

"Oh! Oh my! I finally found you!" he said, delighted. His feathers puffed with accomplishment. "I've been following that with little luck thus far, and here you are at last! Greetings!"

Ramona blinked. "I...just got here, you're luckier than you think."

He bowed briefly. "Truly, truly lucky. You're the Ronans, yes? I almost didn't recognize you—I'm not sure you looked at all like this when we first met. All covered in weeds...?"

He tilted his head, eyeing them up and down.

"No, no it's grown out of you. Quite impressive, my apologies for—oh! That's right. We haven't properly met. I'm Carmine of the Court, you know my sister of course. She's told me a lot about you." He outstretched the talons on his wing's wrist for a shake. Ramona got the idea he had a constantly meandering train of thought, and was pretty sure he was trying to hide his real accent.

It took a moment to register what he was offering. Recalling how to be a person, she took his scaly hand and with a single, firm shake. "Ramona Ronan. Or, well, Ray. For short."

"It's a pleasure to be introduced." Another bow. He liked his formalities, apparently.

Arthur's attention was pulled by the appearance of the cohort, especially since he'd spent the last hour or so putting his all into being nothing more than a calming presence for his indisposed headfellow. A flicker of hope ran through their

mindscape. Even Elliot, quiet and small as he was in Arthur's arms, spared the hound a glance. They'd been found!

The cohort crouched beside her to place himself at a more convenient eye level. He picked up the moth in his talons, which had expired upon arrival, and threw it into his maw. Once he swallowed, he said "So! Why haven't you returned yet? And where might Cillian be?"

She sighed. "Long story."

Chapter Twenty-three

As Cillian stumbled out of the deeper wood and passed through Mound's Head, he got plenty of wary looks from passersby enjoying the sun. He looked as Nameless as he felt, with his large, haphazard form, his haggard face, and the forest debris that clung to his coat. Others got out of his way, tucking their tails from his path, and the ones that didn't care kept to themselves. Really, Cillian was heading for the most harmful thing he could think to do to himself, and that was visiting Cairn.

Silas noticed him along the way and offered a wave, but Cillian was too focused to even notice the man. If he did, he would have seen his head swerve around in confusion. Puzzled, the owl-headed fairy caught up to him, the beat of his cane making Cillian's ears swivel.

"Wait there! Cillian! Is that you?"

That turned his full attention; he recognized that distinctly reserved affect. He stumbled slightly, coming to a stop. "Silas?"

“Whatever has happened to you?” he asked. “You’ve forgone all your clothes, and I can't help but notice that’s not the only thing missing.”

Cillian didn't expect him to be concerned. It threw him off.

“...Well, I fucked my chances something fierce,” he huffed. He would have shoved his hands in his pockets to close in on himself further, but he didn't have pockets anymore. Not with that blistered wound in the way. He was in the mood to mope.

“My door is open to you, if you would like to tell me about it over tea. You could use a preening too-”

“Sorry, I’ve got stuff to do.” He turned his head back towards his route, ready to walk off. He wasn’t going to have a heart-to-heart with a man he barely knew. The thought of baring his woes as if they could ever be consoled with warm drinks and sad prattle? No, no. Silas wouldn’t have a polite guest by the end of it.

The historian clacked Cillian’s heel with his cane. “Turn around, would you? I feel as though I’m chasing a wall.”

He wheeled to face him again, and stared him down. "Why do you care?" he asked, loud enough that it drew looks.

"You have lent your help to me. I'm returning the favor, if I can. You seem troubled."

"Troubled is putting it lightly," Cillian grumbled. "You don't wanna have me around like this. Maybe later. Trust me."

Silas didn't press. "Very well. My offer stands."

"Thanks." He turned to resume his march, but something tugged at him. "...I appreciate it, you know?" he added.

"I understand." Silas patted him on the back. "Be seeing you, hopefully."

"See you."

Without much ado, Cillian walked on. There was a brief warmth in talking to someone who still felt alright about him, and it only weighed him down further. He couldn't stand the absence that hung over his head. Its mouth hovered by his nape, breath cold as farewell.

Walter. Memories of his time with the boy he'd buried in the mud of his subconscious were stirred up into his mind's clearer waters, clouding it with

bitter silt. There was a time where Cillian had been particularly full of hope, and he'd gone off to pluck a human as if to spite the misfortune of the last. He figured he could do better than his first, who's name he'd long since purged out of his head, and pick out someone who might not betray him. He was right: the next human was a gentle sprout of a thing, but he'd keep his heart behind his back, this time around. Just in case.

Walt was ambitious. He was helpful, wore his feelings out in the open, had such a restless appreciation for things unlike himself that put Cillian in mind of Arthur. There was always this lingering idea that Walter was a showoff, though. He'd do something for the sake of doing it, for the fairy to witness, thinking himself capable and daring. Something about it always bothered him in a little way, not enough to make him broach the subject, and it was only later into their relationship that Cillian realized all the flaunting was an attempt to court him.

Not that he ever felt the same, but he wasn't just gonna *throw away* a human's advances. They did some rolling around, for the sake of keeping the

boy sated. He didn't like it, but it made his lovely Walt purr and quiver, and that was enough.

Still, he'd been just a touch too cold to his catch. After being used and tossed away by the last human, he decided it was much safer to keep his feelings and praise at an arm's length. That didn't deter Walt, who was always eager for his attention. He demanded so much of it, it made Cillian wonder if *he* was really the one who was desperate.

He seethed and shook his head. Thinking about it made his insides squirm. The feeling of those hands slipping where they weren't welcome, those lips tracing phantom blessings along his navel... He shivered in disgust. Walter was missed, but not like this.

He was on his way out of Mound's Head. Burrows and homes dwindled in count as the trees and empty trail became his only company. Where no one was around to see, he couldn't chase away his memories. They retaliated with teeth.

"Do you like the sound? I do, I think it's nice."

He saw Walt hold a bell up to his ear. He'd found it washed up on the shore of a creek, nestled in between smoothed-over stones. The clapper was

encrusted with minerals, and it didn't ring so much as it clicked. The boy was taken with the thing.

"Pretty useless for a bell, but if it makes you happy, keep it," Cillian had replied. Walt's face was the first human face he'd seen smiling for more than a moment. He didn't let on, but he liked that very much.

Even such a small kernel of a memory was worse than iron's scald. Cillian gripped his head. *"Stop,"* he hissed, as if a spoken word would dismiss his thoughts. It only encouraged them.

Walter's echo continued. *"I don't think something has to be useful to be good. It just has to be itself."*

"Hm. I guess so."

Another memory flooded forth as the first faded. He saw himself call out towards the outline of a human that faced the mouth of a cave, with a metal rod in hand. He remembered the unease that poured from the opening; a presence, a heavy, inaudible hum that urged him to leave and never return. He also remembered how close he'd toes to it, as close as he could get despite everything that told him to go.

*“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?
Get back over here!”*

Walt said, as loud as he could without openly shouting: *“I’ll set things right. It’ll be fine, it’s just an animal.”*

“That’s no animal! You’re out of your fucking mind. Put that down and turn around, I’ll be taking home your body instead of you, if you play hunter. Don’t be stupid.”

Present day Cillian cursed himself. “Enough,” he snarled. He tried to focus on his path and counted every large stone he could spy on repeat and spoke it like a mantra. He etched the outlines of them into the back of his skull. Still, he was haunted by the persistent memory no matter how hard he tried to evade it.

“I’m not an idiot! I can prove that we’re as good as you say we are. We could help you hunt these things down, make Mound a safer place for everybody. We could change it for the better, together. Trust me!”

“Walt, don't go in there.”

The boy hadn't listened. He'd rushed in, his pathetic iron point and oversized confidence at the ready.

Cillian had lunged forward, too late to grab his arm. "WALT!"

The scream that echoed from that cave never left him. It was the worst sound he'd ever heard in his entire life—only second to the silence that followed.

Cillian stormed ahead, the wound in his heart peeling open like it was fresh. He clawed boughs out of his way as he pushed forward through the trail, tail whacking flat any weed that dared grow within its swing. He kicked aside pinecones and twigs with his currently ill-fit boots. Everything was an obstacle, including himself.

He was thankful he was alone, if only for the fact he could act out without an audience. Not a soul was around to gawk at his ugly muzzle or his dribbling tears, save for the simpler creatures that scurried away from him and his frightful grieving.

The Ronans, *his* humans, were still out there. They weren't as foolhardy as Walter, sure, but they were in just as much danger. They didn't deserve an

early grave. He kicked himself, wishing he'd just kept them anyway. So what if they hated him? At least he could make sure they were still alive. He'd get Cairn to find them, or else.

The breeze blew playfully against Carmine's feathers as he led Ramona along. He preferred to fly from tree to tree rather than walking ahead, as the ground was too dense with growth for him to navigate. The position had its perks; he was able to spot and point out places to avoid, and he didn't slow her down with his much shorter stride.

His presence was a relief for an otherwise melancholy journey. Quite effectively, he filled the space that had previously cultivated dour thoughts with his unfettered, cheery demeanour. Maybe it was the loneliness talking, but Carmine was starting to grow on her.

He'd even dragged Arthur out of his shell again. It was all too hard to resist the way the hound wagged his tail and chirped his pleasant conversations.

A great many thoughts bounded off his tongue towards their situation. He was completely fascinated, eager to muse about it at length. Like Sienna, he took their glamor, their metamorphosis, to be a novelty.

"I do think you've come along quite well. Oh yes. Commendable. Terrific," he said. "Love the tail, it's quite darling on you."

"Thanks...he thought so too." Ramona sighed, stepping over a stone. "...I don't think we'll ever be normal again."

"Well normal is relative, very relative. Anything could be normal if it happened enough. If you mean *human*, though, then I wouldn't know. I don't see a reason to distinguish now. Does it matter much to you?"

It did, in a way. It mattered to Ramona how useful their body had become. The strength granted by way of welcoming green. She could feel it as she walked, that rejuvenation seeping everywhere. She wanted to hold onto it, the healing power that could take back the damage she'd done so long ago. Her greatest apology yet.

Arthur, thawed ever so slightly in Carmine's presence, could appreciate what they were nurturing within them. He allowed himself a thought towards what new shapes might lay in his future.

Elliot, held close, felt that same trickle of promise drip into him. It whorled like milk in his coffee-dark self. He quietly observed it, kept it secret and contained for fear of it blooming any further. Change, that wriggling, fickle creature. There was an odd peace in holding the thing that scared him most like a bug in a jar.

He hadn't any say in their state, anymore. Not when he was so thoroughly exhausted, half composed of something new, fingers slipping from the grip he'd maintained too long. He still struggled to grapple with the fundamental basis of their biology being hurled into question, but at least they weren't dead. Maybe that's what was really important.

"Not really," said Ramona after their considerations, "Except for Ell. He's touchy about it."

Touchy? Elliot thought to himself. That pulled him out of his ruminations. *I would have described it*

as 'uncertain.' But what does it matter...they know me better than I know me, don't they.

"Condolences. Watch your footing there."

"*Whoop*—thanks." She dodged a divot that would have otherwise tripped her up. The area's ground was uneven, and a stumble or misstep was bound to happen. She had Carmine to thank for the lack of scuffed knees.

Now that they knew exactly where they were going, and had someone with them, they should have been able to relax a little. The thought of heading home to the village was supposed to be a comforting eventuality, but it lay draped across their shoulders like a sack of concrete. It felt so unfinished! There'd be no farewell from the one who brought them here, no memories to hold onto that were left untainted by Cillian's absence.

"Carmine," asked Arthur, warily, "if we leave the Hill, could we come back?"

The cohort took a moment to think. "Well...you weren't supposed to be here in the first place, but come to think of it, there are two particulars as to why."

He fluttered to another tree before continuing. "The first would be your status as 'human.' You were something unlike us in make and nurture. Something that has historically ruined us. Concerning, as you can imagine, but not intolerable! So far, you've been helpful rather than harmful. Very good as I hear it. Besides, that issue has been resolved."

"And the second issue?"

"You're unregistered. Your Names haven't been met, before. That makes you unknown, and unknown means potentially dangerous. Or, as I like to think of it: dangerously full of potential." He giggled to himself, feeling clever.

"...You have a registry...?" asked Elliot.

"Why wouldn't we?"

"...Fair."

The hound cleared his throat. "We can put you in the records and give you passage in and out of the Hill as you please, so long as you behave."

Arthur released the breath he was holding.

"That doesn't sound so bad."

Ramona agreed. "Yeah, that would be convenient. There's no catch?"

“No catch! It’s simply a measure to keep the safety of our people in order, but the people vary in number, don't they? I don't think it would be a mistake to welcome you. You could even make a home here if you’d like! Oh it would be *my pleasure* to show you around the area-”

She raised her eyebrows. “Wait, you mean live in Mound? Like, part-time?”

“Why yes! That’s exactly it. A part of the time, or all of the time; there’s room.”

She sought Arthur’s opinion. He was keen, and she could already see him piecing together an idea of a humble little hideaway, somewhere cozy just like...

Cillian’s hollow. She watched his mood instantly deflate.

“Sorry,” he said. It was too soon to mourn visits they’d never have.

Elliot limply nudged him with his elbow. He didn't want Arthur to apologize. Not for that.

As for a second home in the Hill...

Provided they spent adequate time in their original home, Elliot supposed the arrangement didn’t sound *awful*. It wasn't an immediately comfortable idea, but it was fine. He wasn’t quite in

the mood to speak up about it, so he projected the thought to Ramona and hoped she'd get the gist.

Ramona shrugged and said to Carmine, "You know what, sure. Get us in the books. I wouldn't mind the opportunity."

"Then I'll discuss it with the King. I'm sure he'd be amenable to it, should you carry out his terms." The cockerel-hound gave them a toothy smile, which despite his best efforts looked every part like a grimace.

That tickled Arthur. The expression looked downright jarring on that snout. Even mired in the fresh depths of his sadness, he broke a smile of his own.

"What're—*what are* you amused about?"

Carmine asked. He caught himself quickly.

Arthur covered his mouth. "Nothing much," he assured, "I appreciate the gesture."

"Right, I'll get the hang of that eventually. A-anyhow, I know you humans must be nervous about our laws, but I'm on your side, too. Here to help!" Carmine flapped to the next tree, branch swaying to accommodate his weight. "As much as I am able, that is."

A beat passed as the Ronans clambered over a heap of old, fallen trees. They earned a few splinters, bowing branches out of the way as they tried not to make any faulty steps. Their broken arm burned when they pushed it against a particularly heavy weave of boughs, (they had forgotten, somehow, in the lull of Carmine's company), so they tried with their other and made it through.

Ramona took a moment to breathe and stretch before she carried on. She could still feel the burble of their hardly full stomach, so she selected something dense from their bag's contents.

"You know, speaking of help, I heard you took care of that other fairies' problem?" she said between bites. She was wondering what had come of that.

"Murmur? Yes, I found what Murmur was looking for. A misplaced scarf. I located it fairly quickly actually, fairly fast indeed. Its issue was merely a lack of color sense."

"What do you mean?"

"It couldn't tell the difference between red and green. Poor soul. The scarf might as well have vanished for them." Carmine bobbed his head

thoughtfully. "It wasn't all that much trouble if you were worried, yes, only a small errand. I had you in my thoughts, though, where you might have squirrelled off to. Wishing you safety and such."

"Oh, thanks." It was surprising to her that someone they'd never spoken to directly kept them in mind. Her fingertips travelled to the bracelet Joanne had given them.

The journey ambled by at a relaxed pace. They paused whenever they felt the need to. To eat, to drink, to rest. Gone was the whorling force pushing them forward. Sore joints could have their breaks, and the pangs in their arm and gut were present, but not so heavy, now. Ramona's thoughts were not so violently shuttled into duty with Carmine there to lead, and Carmine liked to take his time.

When they happened by a thick enough stream, Ramona took a moment to make a hook like she'd been taught. It took some tries, but she managed to snag a fish with enough meat on its bones to count for something. It no longer mattered that it was raw, their body clamoured for protein and fat after how little they'd eaten. She picked at the bones after gnawing them dry, thinking of future

fishing trips that would never be. Their second catch went straight to Carmine. He began to eat it with a messy, canine snap before remembering himself, and adopting more delicate bites.

Look at him, he's trying so hard. What's his deal? Ramona thought.

Elliot didn't have anything better to do, so he mustered up the will to speak just to give his two cents. "He takes pride in his role," he noted, startling the hell out of her.

"Christ, dude, try knocking first?" she said. She found his face in the fog—he was a tired-eyed smear before he bothered to solidify.

"What else do I have to keep me occupied? Besides, your thoughts are loud when you aren't making an effort to keep them private." For just a moment, his tone took on that old, cynical lean she was used to. A good sign, for once.

She shrugged. "I guess. So, about Carmine..."

"Hiding something? No, not that I can think of, aside from his natural cadence. He's definitely trying to seem *dignified*."

"I bet he totally sounds like his sister when he's alone. I can see why he wouldn't want to associate with her."

Elliot felt a twinge. "She *did* help us. Maybe there's decency in there somewhere."

"So sympathetic!" she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Listen. I'm giving you more wiggle room than I have, and it has me thinking more about...well, *intentions, troubling behaviour...*"

"Yeah?"

"...I've neglected you, so you've been acting out, right?"

"Yep. Thanks for the apology, by the way."

"Fine, I'm sorry. *Anyway*, It stands to reason that Sienna's also having a rough time, much like you," he said.

Ramona gave him a look. "...I don't think we're *that* similar."

"What, you and Sienna? I see it. Foul-mouthed, rough, excitable, a little cruel--"

"Cruel?!" she laughed. "To you maybe, but I'd never hurt Art."

Elliot appeared smug, an expression that hardly ever touched his features. "Oh, I wasn't finished," he said. He began to make a list, counting on his fingers as he spoke. "You wore a dog's face, you've taken to growling, and you're the second to eat one of those 'plants' off our head..."

Sienna plucking and swallowing the glamor-borne leaf was fresh in their memory. Elliot was loath to recall the terrifying wolf encounter as well, but he wanted to bite back at Ramona a little, just for fun.

"That's unfair, I was desperate! We're way different. I get your point, though, she wasn't doing great."

"...I don't know, you seemed to warm up to her after your little scuffle, Mona."

"It's nice pushing someone around. That's all."

"Sure, and if I pull on this memory-"

A hot puff of air from between clenched teeth, the feeling of your palms pressed into wrists wrapped in feather and scale as she struggles beneath you, those bones you know you could snap with ease if you really put your weight in the right spot, but you don't, the sweat trickling down your

back as his voice and her voice clash like daggers, it would be an annoying squabble if you didn't like the sound of it so much-

"Hey!" She made as if to throttle him, but it didn't go far before even the simulated sensation of hands upon throat made them both shudder.

Too soon.

"Wow, I hadn't looked too closely at that one," he said, awkwardly brushing off the melancholy.

"You're the worst," she said.

It struck them that they were having an actual conversation. No contempt, no real arguing, just the back and forth of two who knew each other fatally well and had finally reached something resembling an understanding. They regarded each other in silence for a moment, and drank in the return of a relationship they broke forever ago.

"Hey, I love you," she said. "You've been my biggest pain since I started being yours, but I think you and me are alright."

Caught off-guard, he turned his head away. So many moments like this were lost to pointless bickering. Ramona had caused them a lot of trouble over the years, but she was his oldest friend. Maybe

the time had finally come to reconcile. Fondness crept across his face. "I love you too, Ramona. I really am sorry."

"No, I should be sorry for this whole mess, if I had been paying more attention to where I was going..." she trailed off.

"...Then I wouldn't be sharing this moment with you," he said. "I'd be pushing you away again, trying to work on *Weary Waves Beneath* or whatever I would title the nothing I have so far." The past few days had put him through the wringer, but they'd also torn off the bandage he'd mistaken for skin. He was ultimately better for it.

"I guess not. That name isn't awful, by the way. But I think *Wicked Waves Below* works better. More bite." She folded the facsimile of her arms and leaned back a bit.

"Hm. It's not what I had in mind..." he was ready to reject it, but he stopped to reconsider. Perhaps it was time to give collaboration a try. "I'll think on it. You've always preferred more of a punch."

"There we go, *thank you!* That's all I've ever wanted. Some actual consideration. Almost feels like my birthday."

"When is that again?" he asked. To be fair, he'd misplaced his own birthday relatively often. No one celebrated it aside from his gran.

"June...twelllfth? Yeah. Broken plate. You remember right?"

The sounds of a plate shattering against the wall beside his head, the pieces skittering across the floor, and his father's voice crossed his mind, which made him flinch as he did back then. The two of them shook off the memory of her first emergence like an unpleasant bite of food.

"Ah. Yes. We missed it then," he said. The green murk of the space around them whorled as slowly as the bottom of the sea, indifferent.

Ramona rubbed the back of her indistinct head. "...Whatever, I get a freebie. Happy birthday to me. And to a new era."

"Here's to fixing things," said Elliot as he materialized a drinking glass to raise in solidarity. A rosy beverage swirled within; he hoped she could tell it was just punch.

She grinned as she raised her own in kind.

“Cheers to that.”

Arthur rustled from nearby. He pushed his way through a bush that hadn't been in the way that morning and strode over new undergrowth to reach his siblings. He appreciated the changed feel of their mindscape as it left its leafy impressions upon him.

His own glass formed in hand, he stood at last by their sides.

“To growth,” he said.

The three of them held a toast within their inner space. They broke forgiveness like bread, made amends as best as they could manage. It wasn't easy, nor was it comfortable, but it was what they needed. If they had anything that day, they had each other.

On the outside, they waited for another fish to bite their hook. The stream burred calmly, their new companion busy preening himself at its edge. How polite that this body of water wasn't dangerous, for a change. Momentary relief.

“So if we're going to put everything aside, I have a request,” Elliot said, dismissing his glass. He clasped his hands together in its absence.

Arthur cocked his head, listening. "Yes?"

"Oh boy," said Ramona. She braced for the usual stipulations, still trying to keep an open mind. *I hope he doesn't ask me to stop pushing his buttons.*

For that thought, he briefly gave her an unimpressed look, but he shook his head lightly and carried on. A murmur of warm currents saturated him as he stood before his fellows. He allowed himself to smile.

"I'd like to write with you two."

Chapter Twenty-four

Dappled was the light that filled the Court's glade. Cairn, Sienna, and Amaranth were seated in their perches, discussing recent happenings and upcoming events to prepare for. There wasn't much else to handle then, with the tree-toppling situation resolved and requests for assistance trickling in at a crawl, so business rolled along as usual.

Until Cillian burst in like a squall.

"*YOU,*" he belted in one violent syllable, finger poised like a stake towards Cairn, "don't you *dare* say '*I told you this would happen*', I'm sick to hell of it and I just need..." he trailed off, noticing the cohorts too late.

Amaranth curled his lip. "No greeting?"

Cillian returned a grimace. "...*Hi.*"

"You're alone, I see."

"I—That's none of your business," he huffed.

The cockerel-hound received a wicked glare. "Maybe they're just catching up. What's it to you?"

"It's *my* business." Cairn inclined his head to gaze at Cillian. "You pledged to guide those Names. To protect them from harm. Where are they now?"

He was harboring a growing concern, and his voice wavered a touch, not that most would notice. Cillian was the first to hear the falter.

“Dismiss your dogs. I don't wanna talk to all of you at once,” said Cillian. A sudden twist clenched his guts, the effects of an unmet promise threatening to bite. “...Waive my oaths while you're at it. They don't matter now, and I know you don't wanna see me puke, Cairn.”

Sienna kept her mouth shut. She'd told her King things were going just fine for them, and now Cillian had gone and fumbled the chance. The humans he was so obsessed with were missing, he was clearly in shambles, and it was absolutely his own doing. She could only imagine how much he'd lost this time around.

Cairn raised a hand towards his loyal cohorts. “Please go.”

“Of course, my King,” said Amaranth. He had no desire to talk to Cillian any longer than he had to. With a few flicks of the wing, he and his gaudy train of tail feathers were gone.

Though she had received a direct order to leave, Sienna lingered for a breath longer. She

stared at Cillian, failing to catch his eye. She could smell the salt on his cheek, the weft of fury coiled around the warp of his heartstrings; hear how the tip of his tongue hitched heavy to a stop behind his teeth, like it was never enough to simply speak. It itched at her being the one constant to stand in the shadow of his every loss.

“Sienna.”

Cairn inclined his head just so, and she was off with little more than a nod and a flap.

Now they were alone.

A handful of grating seconds passed, the two men locked in standstill with one another. Not a word spoken, not a sound but the regular movements of wilderness at the height of the day, and the distant hum of voices on the wind. Muffled routine and hubbub. Farway normal.

Cairn broke the silence first. “So you left them.”

“They left *me*,” Cillian seethed. “I didn't treat them right. Lecture me all you want, but it won't be any worse than what's growlin' in my own head. Problem is, I don't know where they are, they could be in danger, and I need you to *get them back*.”

“Get them back? After they’ve left you? You haven’t been one to pursue to this extent.”

“There’s a Nameless thing about, Cairn. Please.”

The King’s crown of insects stumbled mid-flutter. He stood from his seat, boughs shifting to let him. “How close?”

“It found us beside your Hemlock! Was waiting to have its fill of newling, I bet. It was a rude fucker too, got in our heads and our eyes and made a mess of our senses. Damn near killed us.”

“I will have it dealt with. You have my word.”

“And what about my humans, Cairn? I won’t be settled until you have *them* safe and sound! They don’t gotta see me, just get them back in Mound or you’ll never hear the end of it. I’ll hurt you. I’ll make your life hell.”

Cairn descended from his throne. Branches creaked and folded slowly to bring him to the ground, where he could converse more personally. He closed the distance and, even with the threats thrown his way, took his adoptive son into his arms.

“Ease, my boy. With you so far from our haven, I could not afford to leave you be. Far too

much time had passed since Sienna's return, and there was still no sign of you. I sent Carmine out with one of my guides. It has withered; It found its mark."

Cillian wriggled in his grasp, giving himself some breathing room. "They're found??"

"I believe so."

"Fuck," he uttered, hand over his muzzle, "that mutt better get through to them or *I'll wring his neck-*"

"*Ease.* I'm sorry that this has happened again. I know the toll it takes on you. Consider your promises on hold until they return, dear."

Relief coursed through Cillian's body in ample waves, but still he huffed and tried to push away. "You wouldn't know 'sorry' if it kissed your prick! It's always the same with you! *'My condolences, my sympathies...'* You toss me a hundred sorries like it wasn't you who did this to me in the first place! Like you understand at all!"

Despite his struggle, he was held firm in Cairn's arms. He grunted between inflamed words. Every second of it was the exact kind of torture he'd been expecting. He'd sought this out.

“...You know what I am, you knew my folks, what they left me for—you left me wanting and wanting and *wanting!* Why did you starve me? What’d I do wrong?”

The ruler of fair Mound and all its people, a war-hewn warrior and cherished oak, a man, who, by all accounts was broader than most and twice as sturdy, whispered, “*I was afraid.*”

“*What?*” hissed Cillian.

Cairn tightened his hold, as if letting the words slip had sent a crack through his veneer.

“I am so much more afraid than you could ever know.”

It made no sense. This was the man who could stay any threat from his kith and kin, be it hounds and rifles, the jaws and wiles of Name-barren beasts—he had fought ruthlessly for his people! It was he that wrought sanctuary from the smoldering wilds around him. He who feared nothing.

“*How could you be?*” spat his son in disbelief.

“You are always just out of my reach. For every human you lead into our midst, I only see another wound in your Name, I see blue coats and iron, I see the hungry eyes of your forebears

pursuing a life without you in it. There is nothing to truly calm you, when you fall so deeply, not even I. To watch you remain so empty for so long, with nothing to give you, watch you recklessly run into danger to grasp what you can... my boy, it haunts me more than anything."

The changeling felt himself splinter. There was a seed of iron in the very center of his heart, a tight, dense ball that eclipsed any rational thought. "*Fuck you,*" he said. Then *again*, and *again*, until there were tears getting in the way and hiccups jostling his curses, but he did not stop.

A firm hand stroked his riled mane. He sank his claws deep into the oak and scratched like an animal to get the overwhelming pressure out of himself, and to make Cairn hurt as much as he did. Every gentle touch was met with clawing and biting the likes of which Cairn had endured countless times before, ever since he had taken on the task of rearing such a troubled child.

Cairn withstood it all. "I don't blame you," he said, voice heavy, "you were born this way. It's in your nature, one I've had to push against at every turn."

“All this trouble to punish me for being me? It don’t make *sense!*” More teeth sunk into the burly man’s shoulder, laced with guttural howls of rage.

“I thought that, if this continued on forever, you would end up truly broken. I tried all I could to dissuade you. Yet, despite my best efforts, you’ve always slipped away.”

Tear-struck spittle trickled down, hot as fever. Cillian pulled away from the humid bite and pounded his fists against the wide chest before him. How unfair it was, that Cairn had dangled his newest catch in front of him. “Why did you let *them* stay?”

“You’re not the only one who is exhausted by the same song and dance. I tried something new. Saw to it that if I were to confine you and your quarry to these grounds, that you would finally sate your hunger for good. All these tasks and favors were to keep you busy. To prove the humans’ merit, to observe how you would act when allowed to keep them by your side. How disappointed I am to know it’s gone awry.”

“You planned it?” he seethed.

“It only came together when you stood before me here, and I gave you my terms. Though, that

Elliot of yours made quite the scene. Your taste has always been somewhat unfortunate, I had to make sure—"

"Oh spit on me while I'm *fuckin'* bleeding, will you!" Cillian shoved him as hard as he could, successfully throwing off Cairn's balance and sending him a few paces back. "I knew you'd say some—some *downwards* shit. I bet you put Silas up to this whole charade too!"

Cairn righted himself. "I did not plan your pain. And no, Silas truly made a request for help. Though I suspect it was more for the company, in the end."

"I don't care! It hurts! You could've told me. I'm sure it would have saved *them* worry, if not me. Fuck's sake, this whole time... Daddy let me have a playmate for once in my life and I didn't know. Thanks a fucking lot."

"I did not know if they were safe for you, yet. You know you've been taken advantage of before."

"So you get to decide what's good for me, and I don't?"

"Cillian..."

He shook his head. "No, no. Call me what I am to you," Cillian growled. He longed for the release only hatred could give.

"My *son*," said Cairn.

"Wrong, tell me what I really am to you, what my folks were, *say it!*" His pelt bristled from head to tail.

Cairn's face hardened. "Do not ask this of me."

"You never put any trust in me for what I was, I could tell—"

"*Stop*, Cillian, you are so much more than your origins."

"Than a *cuckoo*," he spat. "It's loud and clear. I've always been your bad egg since the '*urges*'. I'm not good enough. You can't cure Nameless."

Thick rumbles spilled from his throat like approaching thunder as he continued. "*They* didn't hate me for being what I am, you know? It's what I didn't say outright. I could've asked for them to stay. She said it, said I could've just *fucking* asked. And I didn't, 'cause I didn't know I really had their trust until I broke it. It's just how I am! If I wasn't up to the gills in mistakes I wouldn't be me. For fuck's sake, stop trying to moult me out of myself,

you're only gonna find me again under the skin. I'll disappoint you." The snarls gave way to more tears as his eyes welled full. He shoved his palms into his face to cover the embarrassing spill.

Cairn softened his countenance. "Slow down, that's no way to talk." He kneeled on the clover-laden grass, and patted the spot across from himself. "Please, sit."

Cillian lowered his slick hands. He recognized that tone. There were several rituals he and his old man shared throughout their days, constants that weathered everything. This was one of them, and despite all his boiling, roiling, *burning* frustration, he played along. He stomped over, and sat down.

They planted their hands on the grass together, and Cairn willed all his moths to circle within the space between them.

"Now, breathe," he said. "Slowly."

Cillian wanted to crush those moths into dust. He took ragged, spiteful breaths, until he was lightheaded and couldn't help but even out his intake as pinpricks of light dotted his view. "This is dumb," he mumbled.

That didn't stop Cairn, who began to hum. It was a simple melody the both of them had carved into their memory. There were plenty of nasty things Cillian wanted to say, but that song had him caught. There was no name for the tune; it had only drifted through their lives and touched down when necessary. He found his throat itching to join in.

"I get you're tryin' to soothe me," he spoke, over the melody, "but have you even heard a word I said?"

"Aye," said Cairn, in a gentle lilt. "I would like to reflect on it with you."

"Mm. Fine."

Cairn slid his palms over Cillian's tense fingers. "You've reminded me of something I've forgotten, because I've been so preoccupied with my own concerns. You have been grown for some time now, and unlike I, you grow so fast. In my eyes you are still the child you were when your first promise was broken against you. The very same who would sit on my knee and ask for all the stories I knew."

"Yeah, you've been treating me like a child. What's new?" He scowled at Cairn, but let him speak.

“That’s what I’m getting at: Mound has gone quiet. Despite all my fears another conflict will not arise, and we will not face ruin, but we are stagnant. Your outings are not so dangerous as I once thought. They could breathe new life into our grounds...”

The oak ran his fingertip down the fairy’s taut knuckle. “...You have a good heart. It’s been weighing on my mind for some time now, that perhaps you are to be given the freedom to make your own decisions, even if they break you.” The oak clenched his jaw. “Even if I have to *watch* them break you. You are grown.”

Cillian averted his gaze. His eyes were glossy again, and he sniffled. He balled his hands into fists and tore at the grass beneath them in the process. “I don’t get it. You’ve denied me for years and years.”

“It took far too much to sway me, but my mind has changed at last. Look at me, dear, look.” Cairn held his hand against Cillian’s wet cheek. When the boy’s amber eyes were finally focused on him, he said, “I will never hold you back again. Please forgive me.”

In the solitude of the empty Court, with the breeze at their backs, the two held fast. Cillian was stuck nestled against Cairn for a long while, running everything back through his head. They were on the precipice of change. It would be a lot of work to open Mound to fresh faces; laws would need adjustments, announcements were to be made, as were talks of safety and such...but for now, it was an idea still finding its gait.

He wasn't happy. There was an incredible numbness where an emotion should have been. Every time mused on the statement, that Mound just might welcome humans into its midst, he only thought of the Ronans. It sored him.

He had his fill of the conflicting embrace, so he pulled away and stood. "I'm goin' back home," he said, "I need to be alone."

"I will be here if you need me," said Cairn.

"Don't expect me."

His burn still itched incessantly as he trudged off. When he'd made the short walk home, past the sunny greens and rote activities of Mound's End, he

stopped at his own doorstep. He stared at the implements on the outside walls of his house and grimaced as if each one was buried in the meat of his heart. He kicked the garden gnome face-down. Doug could see him when he was feeling better.

He swung the door open and slammed it, just barely missing his own tail. Most days he wasn't so big. He had to stoop to enter, and was greeted by the sight of cups left on the table, set for two, and the bedding he'd tossed onto the pile of fabric by the wall. He saw ever-loyal Lake. The gifted jar of honey at her side. These articles drove him to climb up the laddered wall and squeeze into his loft, to bury himself in the nest of fabric, and curl into a tight ball.

With his ferocity exhausted, his body shifted to account for his state. He found himself back to the way he was before. The human frame he couldn't let go of, worn since he was young and primed for his purpose. To never be loved by his own. To always want the touch of something other.

In his mind, he wasn't a good fairy, and neither was he a good human being. He was something uniquely awful, caught between.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into the cold blankets, *"they should've just swapped me."*

Chapter Twenty-five

Afternoon had struck by the time the Ronans set foot in Mound's End. It was a relief to see its familiar landmarks again after hours of trekking through uncharted woodland. They spent the journey questioning Carmine about life in the Hill, and used it to weave together a tale fit for Cairn's ears. Elliot found the process of an interview more pleasant than he'd expected, noting what was relevant and prodding for more. It was bittersweet to formulate so much of it from their time with Cillian, but necessary.

Arriving at the Court, they found Cairn leaning his shoulder against the stone podium as he sat cross-legged on the grass. He was twirling a sprig of clover between his fingers, deep in thought. An ear perked when he noticed the unexpected guests approach.

"Oh, so you've returned..." he said, listless. "I don't care to stand, so please, sit with me. It's a relief to see you."

Ramona, still at the helm for the most part, took a seat across from him, and Carmine crouched

close beside. She rested her elbows in her lap. "Good to see you! You wouldn't believe what we've been through."

"I have an inkling," he replied. "Welcome back, Carmine."

Carmine nodded once, his comb bouncing along. "Salutations, your elegance, I have much to discuss with you. There have been some developments." Given the token to speak, he would have launched into the laundry list of matters he could hardly wait to explain, but he waited for permission.

Cairn folded his hands. "As do I. Mound is doing away with closed borders."

There was a bout of silence.

"It...it's *what?*" Carmine asked, his feathers all ruffled. He dropped his accent in disbelief.

"There will be no more of this isolation and fear. I'm leaving it wide open." He waved his hand as if the care had left him.

"You didn't think to consult us, your honor? That's quite the change—"

"My decision is firm. We have let ourselves stagnate for my overcaution, and I think it's time to

renew the flow in and out of our Hill. I should have known sooner. You've seen it Carmine, the wary trot of my people. The ache for old indulgence. Look at our homes and tell me we are not something like mankind in make. Tell me we are not reflections of one another."

"I defer to your wisdom as always, sir. You've far more stowed in the annals of memory than I."

"A 'yes' would have sufficed, Carmine. I'm not always wise..."

"Yes sir."

Ramona's jaw fell loose before she remembered how to work it. "But what about the— weren't we supposed to tell you a whole story and everything? We can just *leave*?"

"Aye. You may egress at your leisure. Forget about our agreement."

Elliot was swamped with relief, but it didn't sit right with him. He had finally opened borders of his own, creating side by side with his headfellows. They'd poured their shared experiences into the tale, all their troubles, fears, and joys. It was a first step towards their future. A collaboration at long last! Now it was *redundant*? That wouldn't do.

“Cairn,” he said, ditching any formalities, “we are going to tell you that tale whether we need to or not.”

“Why? You’re free. I don’t wish to hold you any longer than I must. You’ve made it back safely, that’s all I needed to ensure.” He picked another clover flower to trouble himself with.

Ramona fidgeted with their plant-riddled hair. “Well...this place isn’t so bad. We’ve learned things about each other we wouldn’t have figured out on our own, here. There’s a lot we like and want to learn about this place. We’re definitely not gonna stay *forever*, just, maybe if visiting is in the cards...?”

“You...like it here?” Cairn asked in earnest. He had rarely heard such a thing from an outsider.

Arthur stepped up to answer. “Yes. Personally, I think pursuing a life here would be an interesting venture—but I recognize it’s for the best that we don’t. Especially not as far out of Mound as we’ve travelled.”

The King gazed up at the swaying canopy, considering their words. “You have shown me many reasons to trust you. Visit any time you wish. Silas was eager to vouch for your character, despite some

initial misunderstanding, and I haven't heard from the hemlock personally, yet, but I've heard it's doing just fine. As for Cillian, well..."

He slumped further against the podium.

"...He's utterly distraught without you. I'm not sure what drove you apart, but he demanded I keep you safe in...no uncertain terms. Carmine, I appreciate you escorting them."

"Gladly!" said the hound.

Cairn continued. "Cillian doesn't wish to keep you, should you still be upset with him. It seems he respects your decisions."

"Wait, so he's back already?" asked Elliot.

"Indeed. He's retreated to his hollow, now."

"I see... Well, we'll do our best to respect your grounds, should we return." He bowed his head politely.

Carmine piped up. Unable to hide his enthusiasm, his reserved speech fell to the wayside again. "We can arrange a place for you to stay on occasion! A lovely place if you're willing to pitch in the work for it, a hollow or perhaps a mound!"

Cairn's sullen face cracked a light smile. "Ease, Carmine! Such things can wait."

The cohort tucked his head to his chest, embarrassed. "Yes sir."

"That sounds nice," said Elliot. The spectre of never returning home had finally left his shoulders. Though it was new territory, he dared to let himself settle into the peculiar opportunity they found themselves in.

Ramona agreed, a little more wind back in her sails. "Yeah, looking forward to it! Let's pick a good spot sometime."

Cairn breathed out a bewildered chuckle. "My, what odd creatures you are. I could not have expected this."

"Tell me about it. How things change..." Elliot replied.

"They do, don't they," said Cairn, a wistful taste on his lips. He found himself relax a touch. "I've been too afraid to change. In trying to avoid harm I've caused it tenfold. My, the shame is immeasurable."

"I can't possibly explain how much I relate, I'm still in the process of figuring that out myself," said Elliot.

"Really?"

“Really.”

Cairn was thrown by the idea that this human, who had so quickly earned his ire before, could look him in the eye and find common ground. He floundered for footing.

“Alright—tell me your tale. If I may take some of your time afterward, I would like to talk.”

So they presented their story. It followed, as one might expect, the plight of a human lost in fairies’ territory: a wanderer. Carmine was already well acquainted with the plot, and sidled up in Cairn’s lap to enjoy the full telling.

Ramona was eager to regale them with the perils of coming face to face with a Nameless trickster, with wolves and other dangers, and just as well the freedom of falling into the ways of something wild. The blood-pumping thrill of escaping death by the skin of one’s teeth, and the nurturing breath of a forest that pulled at one’s every fiber. The wanderer found his heart had changed.

Elliot described the dignity found in unexpected places. The comradery in the inhuman, the persuasive power that shared meals and friendly exchanges held in making biases come undone. How terrible it is to miss home, to be lost, but that it can be overcome. That being truly alone is at times worse than being astray. The wanderer found his mind had changed.

Arthur's focus lay in the beauty of the Hill's nature; wondrous flora and fauna both familiar and unknown to mankind. He spoke well toward the incredible gift of glamor, the gentle mentorship one can find if they stay earnest and willing. The craving to take in the Hill as one would take in a breath of ocean air, and find themselves refreshed. The gradual incline towards the green, the delight of becoming something flexible, strange. Newfound sights and turns of senses, roots of transfiguration taking hold. The wanderer found his body had changed.

At the end of it, the wanderer made his way home. He decided he would keep his adventure to himself, indulging in the secrecy of his journey for many years. He revealed what he had encountered

only to his children long after. Children who found themselves tip-toe close to the treeline, always certain within the depths of themselves that something was waiting for them out there, in the woods below the mountain.

They took their turns narrating the tale. It was a work mired in poeticisms more than structured prose. To convey it more effectively, they used glamor to present new faces and concepts alike. Even Elliot, who still had his reservations, gave it a go for storytelling's sake. It flowed so much faster than the chore of pinning words like insects one by one; that delicate work that bred deliberations and nitpicking ad-nauseam. He found he could perform a tale with far more satisfaction, more whim and wit, and it reflected in the others just as well.

Afterward, they touched on the particulars of what really inspired their tale. The wolves, the river, the painstaking delivery of a hemlock in moult. They were so caught up in the motion of recounting it that they didn't fetter a thing, and the ache to reclaim their friend came tumbling out in tides. No interruptions were thrown their way. Only patience, only kind ears.

There was an imprint left in Cillian's shape. Scarcely anyone had ever waded deeper than the shallowest of their waters; a few days of being his precious catch had formed within them a bond taut as rope. Frayed, but the fibers could be woven together again.

Cairn was incredibly moved. Their perspectives were fascinating to him, and he was pleased with the respect upon their tongue. The difference between the first Court meeting and now was stark. To say nothing of the palpable affection for his son, who he thought they had turned away from entirely. He allowed himself to hope, for Cillian's sake.

He offered his palm, and clasped their hand when they reached out to accept it. Carmine crawled out of the way, delighted by the performance, and to see his ever-troubled King at ease.

"You put such care into the burden I handed to you. After everything you have endured... I've nothing to say besides *thank you*, sons of Ronan. You have earned more than I know how to give. I could not have fathomed your situation would lead to...to *this*. I am grateful to be your audience," said Cairn.

Elliot jolted the same way he had when Joanne gifted him the bracelet. As if he was pushed from a ledge and somehow stayed afloat; a touched vertigo. Cairn's sincerity was resonant.

"It's an honor," he said past the seize in his throat. He was aglow.

Cairn turned his head, eyes squeezed shut. When they opened again, a tear trickled down the side of his broad muzzle. "...I must confess, I've hurt him. For all this time I thought I could force his nature to change, I did not realize the suffering it would cause. *My perspective was the one to transform, in the end. I see now why he desires you so.*"

The Ronans' stomach dropped. "Is he okay?" Arthur asked, unable to stave off the question any longer. Their face became his own, for he was pulled so strongly.

"Of that I'm not certain."

"Ah... Well, we've both said things we regret," he said, "we were quite upset with him."

His shoulders fell. "You do not have to associate, then, if that is what you wish."

The idea of cutting Cillian out of their lives forever was unbearable. Arthur gripped Cairn's forearm with his free hand, and said "please, I need to see him again. Even if it's just goodbye."

A glimmer touched the King's eye. This could very well turn out. He nodded, firmly. "Do not wait, then. Go talk."

"Thank you," said Arthur. He rose, quickly, and broke into a sprint towards Cillian's hollow without a moment's hesitation.

The Ronans were soon gone, a warm sort of feeling residing in the space they left behind. Carmine crept back into Cairn's lap, his favorite spot after a long day, provided his siblings weren't around to see. He nuzzled his head against his sire, trying to provide some comfort.

"I hope it works out, don't you? Sienna told me they were downright inseparable."

Cairn stroked him from crest to tail, sending little shivers down the cohort's back. "I do."

Chapter Twenty-six

It had become smothering inside of the loft. Humid from hot breath and ample tears, and air recycled through the lungs of a creature who had lost everything he cared to lose.

Click. Click. Cillian had fished out the one keepsake Walter left behind from the crook in the wall it was lodged in. The bell was still as pathetic as it had been back then, unable to sing with its encrusted shell and clapper. He mouthed *I'm sorry* with every unfinished peal. Why he kept it for all this time was a mystery even to him, but he clung to it as if it still held traces of Walter's Name.

He'd landed himself in this lonely aftermath before. Not all his catches were so sorrowsome—Noah, his third, only left because he had no other choice—still, even amicable partings put a sense of mourning in him. He hadn't had the Ronans as long as he'd had Walter, but they were his best. He could hardly stand to think about their whereabouts now.

Click. The bell was terrible company. Unlike Lake, it didn't rumble beneath his touch when he was feeling down, nor warm him with tea. Still, he

passed it between his fingers and listened to the screeching of jays trickle in faintly through his window. *Click. Click.*

Knock.

He startled. Could it be a messenger? No, they knocked with urgency. Whoever had given his door a tap was uncertain about it. He moved an ear out of the way with his knuckle to listen better.

Knock...knock. Hesitation. Suspicious of the sound, he slowly and silently crept out of his bed. He held his breath and tried to pretend he wasn't home, just so he could get a better idea of who was crashing his pity party before he opened the door.

"Cillian? Are you there?"

Oh. He definitely knew that voice.

He reached for the handle, but froze. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Usually, he'd tear himself to pieces, try and fail to forget it ever happened, then do it all over again in a couple year's time. No one came *back* for him.

"...What is it?" he asked, for lack of anything else waiting in his head.

"We want to talk, please."

Arthur, it was definitely Arthur who spoke that softly. He'd committed that to memory, not that he had much of a choice.

Cillian pulled on the handle, ever so slightly, before the realization hit him that he was completely fucking naked. "Uh—a minute, yeah?"

"Oh, of course," came the reply.

He quickly formed a pair of pants upon his legs. Not that he cared about nudity, and they'd seen him undressed before, but the moment called for something more presentable. His scar was still there, seared into his thigh where a pocket would have been. No matter, there were more important things at hand than a marred pocket.

"Alright, come in."

Arthur opened the door. The moment he saw Cillian he made a small noise and sharply looked away. "Sorry."

He glanced down to check if he'd covered up properly. Nothing out of place. "...Something wrong?"

The Ronan turned back and shook his head. "No, nothing wrong, just...it's you. It's really you."

"I'd hope so," he said, flatly. Then, "...and it's really *you* again. Why?"

Arthur didn't immediately answer; instead he threw his arms around the fairy and hugged him as tightly as his frame would allow. He didn't care if it hurt. He buried his face into the crook of Cillian's neck, which made the fairy shiver. "I'm sorry, for everything."

"*You-!* You have the wrong idea coming back here!" He said. He wriggled, trying to escape what was now a *second* overly sentimental squeeze that day. The tip of his tail brushed the floor in agitation. "I don't get it, I didn't do right by you. Tried to force your stay, got you dinged up, kept secrets--"

"That doesn't mean we want you *gone*. The whole way back we were thinking of you, how could we not? You changed everything for us. You're our first 'close' friend, even."

"First? You're just saying that. No way that's true." Even though he could hardly stand her, he at least had *Sienna* in his life. Arthur wasn't the type to lie, though. "What about your village?"

"We're still new here."

“Can’t just be me, that’d be stupid,” he said. He realized he’d loosened his tongue, and remembered himself. “Whatever, you should stay away from me. I’m no good.”

Arthur shook his head deeper into the embrace. “That isn’t true.”

Cillian huffed. “*I’m* the whole damn reason you’re here. I took you. I’ve done this before and I was gonna do it again. You’re count five—no, six, in a line of folks I’ve stolen away. Is that really what you want? Is that what *‘friends’* do?”

Arthur’s chest rose, full of Cillian’s smell. The atmosphere hardly called for it, but being pressed up against him was like lying in a sunbeam. “I don’t think that matters anymore.”

“Hey—no, that matters, idiot!” He pushed Arthur off of himself and crossed his arms. Something was pressed between his fingers, and he realized he was still fidgeting with Walt’s bell in his off hand, clicking it feverishly. He silenced the thing and continued.

“You folk told me exactly how I hurt you. I knowingly kept you from home. That ain’t right.”

The Ronans were over it. He'd told them off, kept his distance... It couldn't be clearer that he never meant to hurt them in the first place. By pushing back this way, he only bolstered their trust.

Arthur continued. "There's no changing what you've done, but we've made peace with it. We're still alive aren't we? Still free to make our own decisions?"

He grumbled. "...I guess."

"And Cillian," Arthur added, "I think in some ways we needed this."

Cillian walked over to the table and sat down on one of the seats to steady himself. All his blood was pumping too fast. "Now *that* don't make any sense. I don't get it."

"Well, you pushed us out of our comfort zone, and here we are. You gave us the means to explore. Get over our hangups."

Cillian balled his fist around the bell. "Could've done that without me," he said.

Ramona was getting impatient. She switched into control, strode over and tugged a dangling ear of his. "You have no idea how long we did *not* do that for. Without you, we'd be at the same stupid

desk with the same stupid problems rotting us from the inside out. You *matter* to us! I'm so, so sorry I said all that shit to you when we fought, but I guess it had to be said. Now we're fine. We're cool. You get it."

"Ow—I'm not used to this, alright! You're confusing me." He dropped the bell on the table and pressed his hands over his eyes. His tail curled around his thigh. "You're the first to pull a stunt like this, you know. Give me a second."

Ramona sat down across from him, and rested her chin on her fist. She leaned in expectantly, so the three of them could watch him, curious what was going through his head.

After he had some time to breathe, Cillian carried on. "I don't know what to think," he said, "I remember talking morals with Ell... Nickin' people's in my blood, but I care about every one of those people yeah? They rub off on me."

"Mhm?" she hummed.

"Aye, so, their way of thought gets into me. You have me asking myself what's right. How I could do better. I *wanna* be better." He wasn't even sure

what *better* meant yet, but it definitely wasn't how he'd been just some hours ago.

Ramona smiled. "You already are, buddy. Look at yourself."

He gave himself a once-over, but all he saw was regular old Cilly. He scrunched his nose.

"What?"

They couldn't help but find that amusing. Elliot stepped forward, and said "you're putting more thought into these things. That's a step in itself."

"Oh." He was mildly distracted by the way their faces changed from one to the other with such natural fluidity. It dawned on him that the thing wriggling in his chest was his pride for them. Even their voices were starting to sound more distinct. *Do they realize?*

He simmered on his thoughts. He'd *marked them* this way. Getting them into glamor at all was just another one of his tricks to draw them deeper, but they wouldn't carry on with it if it bothered them, would they? Even *he* had to admit there's no use in trying at something you hate.

Oh. That's it.

*They're trying at **me**.*

He slumped on the table, shoved his face into his arms, and let out a groan. "I'm such an idiot."

Elliot reached out, hesitantly, and gave him a pat on the head. "It's alright."

"You're givin' me another shot and here I am pushing it away."

"Sounds familiar," Ramona quipped. Internally she nudged Elliot, who gave her a sidelong glance. He'd done his fair share of pushing and he knew it.

"...but you're fine, Cill."

She kept her palm on his head, tousling his hair with her thumb. After a minute, she felt him lean into it ever so slightly. The tension left his shoulders, and his tail fell still from its nervous lashing.

"...Thanks," he said.

"You wanna be friends again?" she asked.

"I do," he said, "I want that more than anything."

Cillian inclined his head to look up at her again. He was close to tears; a weariness hung off his grief-sober face like frost in the light of spring. He allowed the warmth of the Ronans' hand, their presence and kindness, to thaw him.

In turn, even the small hint of hope left in Cillian gave Ramona a shock of closure. Already she could feel the delight of being in his company trickling back. She wanted nothing more than to drag him outside and wrestle again, or fish, or find whatever oddity was waiting for them if they dared to go looking for it. She stayed the adventurous flares in her heart in favor of keeping the present moment alive.

Arthur's heart broke anew when a tear rolled past an upturned corner of Cillian's lips. A smile, after everything... He could only return one in kind. His hand slipped down to cup the side of the fairy's face, tracing circles around the pale splotches on his cheek. He remembered the pondside discoveries well. The first flurries of being *seen*. Looking into those eyes again, unfettered by shades, was enough to stir tears of his own.

"Oh don't cry, come on," Cillian said as he propped himself up. He wiped the wet off their face with the ball of his hand.

Arthur's guise slid back into focus. He stood, leaned further in, and set his forehead against Cillian's skull. As if to cling further, his plants

sprouted up and coiled between locks of the fairy's hair. He was silent. There were no words that could accurately describe his relief.

Cillian Bristled. Memories of Walter persistently trying to cozy up to him came to mind, and he pulled away slightly. With some alarm, he asked "You don't like me or nothin' do you? You know. The Way. *That* way."

"Oh—no," said Arthur, "I'm a stranger to that, and Ramona isn't much for men. Elliot avoids it entirely."

"I...I see." He relaxed somewhat, leaning back in. The familiar realm of friendship was best for him. He didn't fully understand it all himself; only that he was disgusted by the feeling of someone's tongue stuck where it didn't rightly belong.

"Thank hell," Cillian said at last. His mouth parted into an open grin as he chuckled. "You were rubbin' on me like a cat."

Arthur's leaves twitched with amusement. "You're the one with the fur," he said.

"And you've got a fine tail yourself," Cillian responded, peering around him. The thing was swaying behind Art like a weed in the wind.

It only swished faster when Arthur noticed it was there. "Oh! I, um... It wasn't..." He turned his head to look, but the leaves tugged at Cillian's hair. He found himself snagged for but a moment.

A moment Cillian took to grab hold of his chin, and weave a hand beneath his own hair to free them both. "Careful, your greens are a bit eager. Got a mind of their own?"

"Just mine." He sighed, drew himself upright and looked out of one of the windows to clear his mind. He saw someone run past, a parcel tucked under their arm. They were only a blur, but he wondered what they were up to, as with anyone he'd spotted during their journey. People had whole *lives* here.

Click.

The Ronans turned to catch the noise. Their gaze fell on Cillian's hand, holding the little tarnished bell. He was playing with it again, rolling it around on the tabletop. Now that there was time to register what it was, they were curious.

"What is that?" asked Elliot. He resumed the seat across from Cillian, smoothing Arthur's sprouts back into nothing.

Cillian's eyes flicked into focus once he realized he'd been caught. He'd been lost in his thoughts in the interim. "Just a keepsake. Was Walt's, before... Mm." He turned it around in his fingers, clicking it more while he hesitated to speak. "Nevermind."

If Elliot had learned anything from Silas, even the tiniest object could hold great significance. He was intrigued. "You can talk about it, if you'd like. I won't be..."

Touchy? Ramona thought towards him.

"...bothered by his mention this time. I'm truly sorry, I understand it wasn't easy for you." Elliot gave his best attempt at a heartfelt tone to ease him.

Cillian pressed his eyes shut, inhaled a deep, bracing breath, and set down the bell with a soft *clink*.

"Alright. If you're absolutely sure, I'll tell you all about Walt and the others. You'll know exactly why no one stuck around 'cept you," he said.

"Go ahead."

The night was fair. Small insects flitted round the lantern in erratic dances, touching down where the cloth failed to cover its glass. Droplets of tea congealed into sticky dregs at the bottom of the empty mugs left beside it. Lake steamed comfortably, her billows buffeted by humble gusts through the window as she did not sleep and did not dream, and barely felt a thing at all.

The Ronans were treated to the warmth of Cillian's loft space, held firm against the curve of his taller figure. They were drowsy from the evening tea they'd shared with him, but found their mind restless. His snores and occasional, drowsy mumbles set the ambience for their late night thoughts.

He'd shared more than they bargained for. Enough for them to understand that he was not only just as lonely as they suspected, but that his luck was quite terrible too. The potential friends he'd sequestered into the wilds all brought their own complications with them. At every turn, something would eventually go wrong. Shockingly, it had more to do with his quarry than himself.

The first human had been a cruel thing. He was young, then. Didn't know what he was doing,

why he was doing it, only that his chasm of a self needed to latch onto some stranger and drink its fill. Their name was scrubbed clean from his memory, he'd said. Put in a little jar and smashed to pieces. Thrown in the river of time, washed sea-glass smooth of any finer details. Gone.

He'd kept it brief, that one. Obviously, the whole kidnapping thing hadn't gone over well. The human had been outraged for a time, then grew more tolerant when they got their share of meals, lodging, and his utterly undivided attention. At long last, after the coals had cooled just enough, they'd asked him to make a promise.

"Promises make me sick," he'd explained against his better judgement. *"Mean, burrowing things they are. Never make a promise or it'll make itself at home."*

It was a promise he couldn't fulfill if he tried. That's all it took. Just like that they'd slipped away, and he was a broken thing left crushed in their wake.

Walter Hawthorn was the second to leave his life, but the longest to stay. Cillian spoke of him like a dog. He was loyal, charmingly simple, and begged persistently for even the smallest affections. They

made quick companions, especially once Cillian had learned how to meter out praise as not only a reward, but a rare gift to strive for. That was his biggest mistake.

As they recalled Walter's fate, the Ronans couldn't help but squirm with uneasy sympathy. Two young men had pulled each other by the leash: Cillian, dangling the promise of love in front of the boy's eager teeth, only to keep it at arm's length, and Walter, devouring the fairy's time, attention, body—he was the only person Cillian could call his very own, and he certainly knew it.

Walter was so easy to take advantage of, apparently, that the thought had never occurred to Cillian that he'd been exploited at all. Cillian recounted the sexual favors like they were only a trivial cost. The nights spent enduring the skin-crawling heat rubbed into him were just compromise. A bit of give for a bit of take. He could afford to be disgusted when he was alone.

He at least spared their ears the particulars, but they had to wonder just what he'd been begged to perform. It sounded like Cillian had really loathed it.

Regardless, they let him move on.

According to him, the human named Noah was alright. This was Cillian's chance to strike the right balance between too sincere and too cold, but it was short lived. Noah was pleasant enough, not too bothered by the excursion—the only real issue had been a medical necessity. It couldn't be neglected, so they parted on fine terms. Ultimately, Cillian didn't learn much about him, aside from his distinct flowery smell and his appetite for pacing around, but he let the Ronans know he still thought about the man from time to time. He hadn't seen him since.

The fourth human was someone he only recalled as "Jone." He'd hardly been acquainted with her before Cairn intervened and had his catch promptly escorted out of the Hill. Another denizen of Mound had followed her in secret, to make certain she stayed quiet, but as it was told she simply went back to her business as if nothing had happened at all, and was soon left alone.

The Fifth never made it past the threshold before they decided it was all too much for them, and fled.

The impact of so many unrealized relationships was not lost on them. Cillian had weathered loss again and again, repeatedly finding himself without anyone to turn to but Cairn, who scolded him, coddled him just enough to keep him ticking, and let him sort things out on his own. Rinse and repeat.

No small wonder then, that he had sunk his claws in just as they were nearly ready to go.

Now as they were nestled against him, his grip tightening at each little stir, it was comfortable. They knew if it got to be too much, they could jostle him awake, or slip away and sleep below, but they stayed put even through his more intense squeezes. There was something about the knowledge they *could* go that made them more content to stay.

All three of them put their faith in him to respect their wishes. His heart was worn well on his sleeve when he didn't have the wherewithal to guard it, and he really did care.

Elliot couldn't really complain about being so close to another body. There was a warmth to it that radiated in pleasant pulses and sent shivers throughout him. From nape to shin, his hair stood on end whenever a breath crossed his skin or a finger

grazed his stomach. It was overstimulating to an almost awful degree, and yet, he waited for each ephemeral touch with bated breath, chasing the high of being a real living thing sharing a bed with another. A reminder of his own loneliness in kind.

He allowed himself the indulgence. There was nothing so compelling in that moment as the alien sensations playing across the terrain of his body. He was drowsy, and still hiding behind the excuse of how his *everything* was now a total tossup, so *why not?* The part of him that patiently waited for him to give in finally won its war of attrition. It did so kindly.

He welcomed it when Arthur and Ramona settled in beside his being, resting in parallel to Cillian. They had their own pleasant fuzziness to their mental touch, but it was well humbled.

Tomorrow, they would leave.

Tonight, the whole world was one loft, a tangle of blankets, and despite everything, a friend.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Morning had come with little fanfare. The Ronans were disoriented when they opened their eyes. They'd had a dream in which they fell into an enormous sea, but instead of drowning them, it rocked them back and forth in its heat. Weightless, calm, *happy*.

Then, the tug of Cillian's arm brought them to reality. He was still asleep and draped over them like a blanket. Though the dream was over, those sensations persisted. A sense of belonging, of slotting into just the right place.

They all wanted to soak in the moment for as long as they could, but it was morning, and that meant it was time to go.

Elliot woke first. He was still unused to waking in the clutches of another, and it took him a good minute to gather himself. "*Cillian*," he whispered, pressing his shoulder.

"Mmm...Ell?"

"Yes, it's me, how did you sleep?" He wasn't sure why he asked, but it felt like the right sequence of sounds to make at him, so sure.

The fairy pondered a moment. He was still caught in the afterimage of his own quickly fading dream, in which he was cradling the sun itself to his chest. "Oh very well," he said, waking further with a wipe of his eyes, "I haven't slept so sound in a while. Yourself?"

Elliot forgot that the key to posing conversational questions was having an answer of his own. He paused to consider. Memories of drifting off to the man's tender, unconscious touches flitted by, and in his morning sobriety he chased them away. "...I suppose we slept, ah, quite well ourselves. You make a decent bed warmer."

Wait, is that a strange thing to say? He thought to himself.

"Mm, one of my many talents." Cillian tousled Elliot's bed tangled hair. "You've got a knack for it too."

"Do I?" he asked. In the back of his mind, he reminded himself they should have been getting ready to depart by now.

"Comfy as a cat," he grinned.

Elliot's eyes narrowed. "...How many cats have you met?"

“Oh plenty. Every visit to your village I’ve come across one or a few, I made a habit of bringing them minnows and the like. They cuddle real close. Little bundles of sunlight. You’re like that.”

Elliot wasn't sure what to make of the somewhat fuzzy feeling that roused in him, so all he managed to say was “I like cats.”

“You got any?”

“Yes—I mean no, not anymore, but my neighbor does. Paprika. A ginger.”

“Ginger...I might’ve met it then.” He shuffled and rolled over to give the Ronans space. “We should eat.”

Elliot nodded, scooting over to the edge of the loft and climbing down awkwardly. He missed a step and almost fell, caught only by the snag of his claws in the wood.

His claws? Startled by the concept, and the pang in his elbow, he let go and met the ground with a yelp and a *thud*.

“Woah! You alright?” Cillian hopped down without bothering to climb and was at his side in a flash.

“Ough...” he was winded, having landed squarely on his back, but he was otherwise fine. He examined his fingertips, only to find a set of poorly tended to (but average) human nails. *Was that a reflex?* he wondered. *Or did Ramona catch me?*

Arthur’s interest was piqued. He ventured closer, and greeted his headfellow with a mental tap. “I’m surprised you didn’t land on your feet. Something on the mind?” he asked. That made Ramona snicker.

It seemed the two of them were more awake than Elliot thought, not that he bothered to check.

“Only you, now,” he replied internally, dodging the implication that he was *anything* like a feline. Then, to Cillian, “I’m fine.”

The fairy slid a hand under his shoulders. “Here, I got you.”

He helped Elliot stand and sat him down at the table. Then he began to rifle through the cupboards. “Hmm...I got some jarred things, mushrooms...haven’t gone hunting in a while.”

“Where do you even get the jars anyway?” Elliot asked, imagining some fur-laden glassblower living in Mound.

He didn't hesitate to answer. "I take 'em."

"Ah. Of course you do."

"How do you like this kind?" Cillian pulled out a basket filled to the brim with flat orange fungi, ruffled in texture.

"I have no idea what that is, but as long as it's edible, I suppose it will do... Yesterday's '*options*' have left me less choosy." Elliot promised himself he would either purchase something indulgent from the market or pull enough favors to enjoy a home cooked meal for all his trouble. Maybe he'd pack some leftovers for Cillian if he could help it.

"It's sunnyshef," Cillian said, "but I've heard folks call it *woods-chicken* before." He plucked a fungus out and tore off a strip. True to its name, it was as white as a cooked cut of chicken. "Here, have it."

It tasted like it would have been better cooked. It left a lemony tack on his teeth, but it wasn't *terrible*, and the more that it lingered, the more amicable it was to his palate. The two of them had a breakfast of it and other goods from Cillian's pantry. The company itself tasted sweeter, anyway.

At the end of their meal, Elliot said “I should tell you something.”

With one last mouthful of mushroom and honeysuckle taking up his mouth, Cillian could only cock his head. “Hmm?”

“We’re still planning to leave.”

The fairy swallowed. “Leave?”

“We need to go home and take care of things. Take care of ourselves,” said Elliot, still yearning for the bliss of a *thorough* shower.

“But we’ll be back!” Ramona reassured him, elbowing her way in. “Carmine said we could have a place like yours here, Cairn’s gonna let us visit whenever we like. We got passage.”

Inside of his chest, the changeling’s well-weathered heart burst. It thrashed its wings and teeth and flashed its colors, screamed and howled and shimmered with want, *want*, **want**.

“Really??” he said leaning in.

“Really! We’re keeping you.” She flicked his nose, because he looked so starstruck she felt something bob in her throat and wet her eyes.

“Kick me, that’s a first.” He shook his head as it sank in. His mouth trembled, then broke into a

smile again. "Mound will be better to have you. You make a fine fairy already, Ronans."

Arthur shuddered. He was out and fronting in a heartbeat, like a wash of paint had brought him out from the canvas. "You make a wonderful human."

Cillian couldn't contain himself. He stepped up and leapt from his seat to *pounce* on the Ronans, knocking them onto the floor under his attack. Cups clattered to the floor to make way. He pressed his head into their chest and screamed like all the air inside his lungs was an obstacle, screamed like there was something terribly wrong with him, like he was being fucking murdered.

Of course they were shaken by this, but when he lifted his head he was beaming. His tail lashed and his arms were locked around their sides. "I'm *never ever* lettin' you go, if—if *that's alright*. If you want."

"We'll see how it goes," Arthur laughed, relief settling his nerves. "Thank you."

Cillian could only push out muffled sounds as he buried his head again.

Ramona was surprised. Not just by his behaviour itself, but with how closely it mirrored her

own impulses. Some feelings were too loud for words.

Now it was her turn to give in. She got the go ahead from Arthur, and bloomed into front so she could roll, shove, and pin Cillian down, all with one arm.

*“You’re the one stuck with **us**,”* she rumbled, her teeth bare and voice a satisfied growl. “If you don’t come around Alderhill to say hey and grab a bite to eat, I’ll *make you*.”

His face burned with excitement. He returned a grin just as full of sharps as hers. “Of course I will! You better come ‘round the Hill just the same!”

She grabbed the side of his face with her free hand, claws digging into the softness of his cheek as she wiggled it. “I wouldn’t miss out on it if it killed me.”

His grin faltered slightly. Thoughts of death stood near. “Don’t talk like that.”

She caught on quickly. “Shit, sorry. I just mean I really wanna be here with you, as long as we can do our stuff back home.”

“I get it, thanks.” He paused, tail swishing as he wound down from the escalation of it all. Then, he

pushed her, and rolled so that they were lying facing each other, locked eye to eye. They both stared for some time, deep into the hollows of each other's pupils and the colorful moats that guarded them. He wondered, if he looked closely enough, could he see who was there?

"You can't hide those, can you?" Ramona said after some time.

"No, they stay the same. It's why I kept glasses. Can't glamor over them no matter what." he answered.

"Keep them out. When you visit, keep them out."

"What?"

"You look like a dork with those sunglasses on."

"Hey!"

"Listen, if nobody cares whether or not your eyes look weird, you'll be fine with the rest out." She smiled.

He considered it. "You think so?" He'd always been self conscious about them, and how they betrayed what he considered a near-perfect human guise.

"I don't see why not," she said.

He dug his palm into his brow. "What if they avoid me? And if I let the rest slip, there's no telling what somebody'll think."

"Who cares? Whoever sticks around even so—*they're* the ones you keep talking to." She bumped his arm with a soft fist. "Not the jerks."

"Thanks Ray."

She snickered. "Hey, actually, I lied about that. It's Mona. At least that's what the other two call me."

He laughed too. "Oh you *really* are Hill. Love it. I'll call you both."

"Great, maybe I'll collect more just for you."

"I look forward to it."

He sat up, yawned, and glanced at the mess he'd made of the table. He hadn't knocked Lake over, at least, but the retro cup was spilled and several things rested on their sides. Soon his hollow would only host himself and his kettle again. Just not for long.

"...I s'pose I should walk you home, are you ready to go?" he asked. He couldn't help but think about Noah, who he'd done just the same for. This

time it wouldn't sting so much. Maybe now that he could show his face around the village again, he could drop in for a visit. A renewed trickle of hope met his heart.

Ramona turned to the others. *Well? Time to get going?*

Arthur nodded.

"We're ready," said Elliot.

He got to his feet and extended a hand. "No point in wasting more time then. Come along."

Arthur took his open palm. He stood on his tip-toes to bump his head against Cillian's, a token of affection. "It's not a waste with you."

Chapter Twenty-eight

For the days they'd spent in the Hill, the beech tree was just the same. Chimes still hung from its stalwart branches and swayed in the wind. The sun sang through its green. With everything more they had come to know, the siblings wondered what sort of being lurked within the core of its ashen shell.

Cillian greeted it with a rub on its worn side, marked with thinner, smoothed bark. "Hey there, sorry for the blame. Things'll be different from now on. A lot's gonna change."

He motioned for his friends to come and do the same, so each of them had a turn giving the tree a traditional farewell to mark their exit. A hand laid on the wood for a grateful moment, like tens of hundreds that had come before. The tree remained silent, but Arthur could have sworn it was feeling him in return.

Elliot lingered on the touch. Only days ago, beside this tree, he'd been full of confusion and fear. His grandmother had filled his head with ideas of terrible creatures, things that lurked in these woods by the droves, but he had met very few of her

monsters. Notable, deadly, but few. It wasn't the deathtrap she'd warned him about.

In retrospect, the situation was almost amusing. A rather gentle kidnapping to sate a man's loneliness was nothing compared to the horrors she'd spun from her afternoon tales. He considered himself lucky to keep his skin after the encounter with the beast that chased them into the river, but the place wasn't as *infested* as she made it seem.

One fingertip caught on the whorl of a knot. A blip in the flat surface, smoothed down from the roughness it must have been before. Things were looking promising. Ramona did not have to justify the space she occupied, brushing against the particles of her brothers' presence as they reflected on thoughts of their own. She was trusted by the one whose trust she'd broken. The man she'd made her biggest enemy. She couldn't fathom what that would look like, now, but she was content.

The peal of a chime in the breeze caught Arthur's ear. His shoulders were lighter with the knowledge he wouldn't have to mend another schism between those two. He was free to slip the constraints of being a neutral, passive thing, and

tumble into his own share of life headlong. He remembered Phoenix, so eager to burst their chrysalis and careen into something new. His own shell had splintered in kind.

Some minute shift in his peripheral compelled Arthur to steal a glance at the fairy. He was at ease, palm flat against the beech, just as lost in his head as his friends.

“That was quite the walk,” said Arthur.

Cillian shook his head, a fondness spreading across his face. “If you can call it that.”

“I’m looking forward to the next.”

“Me too.”

Hands fell from their perches on the bark, met palm in palm as the bodies departed. They found the unseen Threshold again, with Cillian’s guidance, and slipped through with remarkable ease. He kept his companions close as he had before, ready to catch them should they falter, but the disorienting nausea did not arise. They could feel out where the Threshold was with clarity. It was an awareness that simply was, relying on no mundane senses.

They crossed it as if it was nothing but a crosswind. It clung, a little, as water clings to a

cloth, but it didn't hamper them at all. As the last of Mound's bounds drifted away, they were left with a faint notion of longing to return, as one wants to climb back under the toasty covers when faced with a cold morning.

Through brush, weed, fern and grass they tread onwards. There was no insistent pull of charm or mystery to drag them home. Every footfall was as deliberate as the last, hand in hand with a man who was strange, but no stranger. Where the canopy didn't conceal the forest floor, it was as sunny and as lush as the day they walked in, a day that was worlds away.

Sounds of the village emerged slowly from up ahead. The endless green began to look like a trail, again, and Cillian put away his tail and ears in case they met with someone out on a hike. They could see houses and people through breaks in the treeline. Heavy daylight from beyond made them squint.

This was it. The final step.

Cillian let go, tail flicking this way and that. He was never good with goodbyes.

“So, you’re gonna head home?” he asked. He pointed at the road with his thumb. “Just over there a ways?”

“Yes, it’s not far, but then again, nothing is far from anything in a village.” Elliot said. *If only he knew what a colossus the city is.*

“It’s much smaller than our fair grounds, that’s for sure. You’ve kept up well for a homebody.”

“‘Well’ is high praise, my joints were in agony.” Were. All the roaming and running had left his knees sore throughout, but now he’d come to realize the pain had more or less subsided. Even his damaged elbow, aggravated as it was, slipped into a dullness he couldn’t deny. Something had changed.

“Go eat some of that minnow-fin you told me about when you make it home, then.”

“...Acetaminophen?”

“Yeah, a seed of minnow-fin. And a nap, too.”

“It’ll be an impressive task to pull me out of that bed, mark my words,” Elliot laughed. Here on the brink of safe return at last, he was at ease. His mind strayed to the fairy’s plans. “What are you going to do with yourself?”

Cillian shifted his feet. "I dunno. I'll probably just keep myself busy until you visit. Folks'll still need an extra set of hands, I guess. Cairn could also use a talking-to that ain't a screaming match."

"That would be good for you, I think."

"Yeah. I would've wanted to kick you if you told me that a week ago, but like you say, things change."

Elliot nodded, the same sentiment ping-ponging around in his head. "Certainly."

"I'm glad for it though. It's what living things are made for," said Cillian.

That warmed Elliot. *Living*, that's what they'd all be doing, from now on. A new chapter.

He offered his hand. "You're probably the most deranged specimen I'd ever consider calling a friend, but I think you've won me over. Thanks for the...walk."

Cillian took it happily, palm clasped to palm like an oath. "Thanks, you're pretty odd yourself. I had fun."

He shook his hand roughly, like he had when they first met, big up and down swings melting into enthusiastic waggles until it broke into a hug instead.

Cillian caught Elliot in his arms and hoisted him up into a spin, joy spilling out of his lungs. It was contagious.

Elliot was dizzy when he touched back down, and he held onto Cillian's shoulders to steady himself. "You're *quite* tactile. Goodness."

He chuckled, and pinched the Ronans' cheek. "Don't be too long, yeah?"

Quickly, he was attacked by Ramona, who's farewell wasn't done. She squeezed the air out of his sides. "I'll see you soon. Count on it."

The fairy wheezed. "Gladly!"

Pressure left him like a gale, and he looked down to see Arthur wrapped around his frame instead. How had they become so fast at this? It was getting disorienting, but he loved it. He was so proud.

Arthur was quiet, his face buried. Cillian patted his head, and stems tangled around his fingers to hold the weight of his palm in place. He wanted so badly to take the fairy home with him.

The spare room could hold him, he was sure. He could paint the walls a friendly green, bring in some potted plants, build a nest of the stray bedding

tucked away in the closets...but that would have to wait.

“Meet me by the beech tree. If I’m not there, ring those chimes and I’ll come runnin’,” Cillian said, voice tender.

Arthur nodded, and gave him one last squeeze. Then, the body was under Elliot’s control, again, and the lay of his gaze said it was time. They broke their hold to truly bid farewell.

What is *fairy* if not merely another name? A confusion? It’s worn, of course, by the outsider from across the way, when he has naught else to be known by, and the generous stranger alike. Spoken in hushed tones, it’s the moniker of the unknown, the danger in the dark, the might of the wood; praised in the work of the deft-fingered jeweller, who plucks the very glimmer from the morning dew, the gleam from spider’s silk; the cattle who sheen bright with health as the lone calf withers; the neighbor who revels neath the pour of a storm and the crack of thunder, arms open, tongue lapping for just another taste of electric air. Nature’s cruelest touches, awkward prattle, the familiarly strange and strangely familiar—all could dance anywhere from

fairy to not, and back again. The Ronans had found themselves pulled across several strokes of it.

Now they stood on the verge of fate, restless. As they turned to depart, their voices united to spill their binding promise:

“See you soon!”

Epilogue

August sang its final verses over the village of Alderhill, with the leaves blushing September yellows and gardens harboring soon-to-be harvests. Busy hands plucked weeds and addressed straggling repairs. Those who were skilled with thread began work on winter clothes. Yet, the weather wasn't the only climate turning tide that year.

Rumors became discussions as new faces showed themselves in the village. Gifts left on doorsteps and serenades from the mountain's wake spelled the beginnings of eager greetings. Those who knew what this meant spread the word, and the few inhuman residents who'd eked out a living in the village breathed relief. Some made themselves known.

Humble trades were offered, parley was wrought. Any twitch of uncertainty was stayed by those who knew the touch of the woods had more to it than teeth. There was no violence, not a word of disrespect toward the men of tail and claw and frond. Especially not with their King in tow.

Even with ample hesitation on both ends, Alderhill was safe, for the most part.

Occasionally there was trouble. A bed of crops would be ravaged, or a hen dragged away by other hillish things that smelled opportunity—only, now, the strangers who'd been welcomed with open arms had no shortage of advice to give. There were tricks and remedies to ward beasts that stuck their noses where they shouldn't, and for things less skittish, they could stand to recommend the use of firearms. So long as the end of a gun was never fixed on themselves.

Even so, not much was different. People will always do as people do. Folks rubbed off on one another regardless of origin or look, going about their business as usual. Life rolled on in the Village with a few extra hands to prepare for the harsher months and that was that.

A sheaf of printed papers in hand, Elliot, Arthur, and Ramona Ronan strode briskly from dirt road to grass-laden trail, heading down a route that

had grown familiar across the many weeks they'd travelled it. Their steps traced through grasses and ferns, painted rocks and steadfast stones, past the boughs that waved silent hellos and under canopies that whistled in the breeze. The welcome-welcomes they knew so well. They had made quick work of any errands or groceries, because today was a special day.

Ramona had her promised fill of time with Relle the day prior. After some explaining and reintroduction upon the Ronans' initial return, the two had become fast friends. Ambitious as she was, her attempts at courting the girl were declined in favor of a richer friendship, and that was just fine for them both. As it was, Relle had seen some strange things of her own living in Alderhill, and they had much to talk about. Ramona wasn't too bad at making soap with her either, once she got the hang of it. Her choices for scent names on the other hand...

Oh well, at least Relle found them funny. *Blood, Sweat, and Shea* wasn't for everyone.

The beech tree was where it always was, with its welcoming chimes swaying, and a broad, worn

side that boasted more signs of passage than it had before. Against it leaned a tall fairy, his head nodded in sleep and his arms folded across his chest. There was only *one* person who'd drift off *now* because he was too excited to rest the night before...

"Cillian! We're here!" Elliot called out, waving his papers like a crier's bell. There was no more threshold to slip through, he simply approached and gave the tree a passing touch.

The fairy woke like he'd been set on fire. He wiped his bleary eyes and tripped over himself to greet them. "Hey! There you are! I've been waiting all day for you!"

"We don't rise quite as early as you... Besides, we had chores to complete—ah!"

He was interrupted with a hug that threatened to snap his slender frame. It was always like this when they came to visit. How their ribcage was still intact was a mystery.

"I see you're still plucking your whiskers, mister." He prodded Elliot's upper lip with a few playful jabs of his finger.

He rolled his eyes and swatted Cillian's hand away. "Well I still didn't *ask* for them. They don't suit me."

"I know, I know. These things got a will of their own, though. A tell's a tell. Anyhow, what's that you got there? Is it what I think it is?"

Any irritation was washed away by a wave of excitement. "Yes it is! We have a few chapters started—here." He pushed the papers into Cillian's hands.

The fairy riffled through the pages with an impressed whistle. "All this in two months?"

Elliot nodded. "We've been making good progress, especially with the new schedule tweaks we told you about last time."

"Oh yeah, working together really got things going," added Ramona. Both she and Arthur had cultivated their own voices well enough that they were impossible to mistake.

Arthur chimed in. "And we have more time for other activities, at least when Elliot remembers to pace himself."

Cillian smiled fondly. "Mm, dedicated time and all that. Very good! Gonna show this to the old man?"

He's been on the edge of his seat for more, you know."

He'd introduced Cairn to some books that the Ronans were kind enough to borrow from the village library, and it was doing wonders for the man's boredom. He'd cultivated a voracious appetite for storybooks that simply had to be fed.

Things were much better between him and Cairn, these days. They made their peace.

Elliot rapped the pages with a knuckle, satisfied with their growth. "I'm sure he'll tear through this in no time. His advice so far has been excellent. Feels a lot more solid after a revision or two."

"Perfect," said Cillian. "Come along then. Catch me up."

They stopped by Cillian's hollow to collect the kettle, tea, and something to eat, then carried on to their real destination. The Ronans' residence was only a stone's throw away, a modest mound with packed earth walls and a door that still needed paint. It was Arthur's personal project to decorate, and he had lined the shelves with whatever stones, shells, feathers and trinkets caught his eye. Cillian was

always eager to go collecting with him. The two were attached at the hip on those outings.

They spent the afternoon trading news and goings-on, gripes and pleasures, until sitting around talking was much too dull. A walk around Mound's End snowballed all too easily into a game of chase through the brush. Ramona was a wild thing in those woods, and if one didn't know her any better, they would say she'd crawled out of Hill soil.

She pounced and rolled and bit Cillian like a dog at play, and just as well he followed suit. The time they had spent apart vanished, as if they had always known each other's company. It was a fun way to catch up.

"Sienna's knocked you around plenty," he chuckled, noticing a thin, scabbed over scrape.

"Yeah," said Ramona, glancing his blow off her forearm, "gave me a mean scratch."

"A scratch," he said, "and a whole lotta compliments."

"Really?"

"Won't shut up about you," he said. He tried at another strike that didn't land, and blocked one coming his way. "Says you're a riot. Always askin'

me when you'll be back. Telling me how bored she is. Rematch this, rematch that—I think she fancies your weight on her.”

Ramona laughed. “Tomorrow then. I'll give her what she wants, and you can come and see the show.”

“I'll let her know. She's due to stick her muzzle in my window any day now.”

“Seems you've both been doing better.”

He sighed. “Guess so, yeah, but I didn't do much. She just started hanging around. Bit more tolerable now than she was at least.”

“Nice,” she said, before using the opportunity to bite him again.

“Hey-!” He turned on her and administered his own. Seamlessly, they fell back into their tussle.

When nightfall set in, they crept somewhere they could catch their breath and watch the stars sway overhead. They sang broken tunes at the sky like they could make it shine all the brighter. It didn't matter if their voices shook or bent out of shape, it was for the hell of it, and it was fun. Even the others had their part.

There would be more of this than they could ever possibly know. In that dying August, their friendship was an eternity long and a minute short. Such little time together, and they were already as close as a cockle to a hull.

“Hey, Ronans,” Cillian piped up after chewing on a moment of thoughtful silence.

Elliot paused his search for constellations.

“Hm?”

“I gave Walt’s bell over to Silas. Told him the whole story,” he said.

“Really? What did he think?”

“Well... He was happy enough to add it to his pile. Said he’d give it a place if I told him about its owner, so I did. I kept talkin’ until it wasn’t so heavy on me.”

He let the night air spool inside his chest before it escaped at last, and continued. “That thing always made me fuckin’ miserable. It was too precious to toss, you know? I told myself I was paying my respects, I tried to focus on the good times when I held it. Didn’t work. You know what he told me?”

“What?”

“He said it ain’t worth holding onto something that makes you upset, just ‘cause you feel like you gotta. I’ve been thinking about that.”

“Good advice really,” said Elliot, reminded of the death grip he’d had on his sense of control. “I hope that helped.”

“We’ll see. There’s just this thing...”

“Yeah?”

“Sometimes I feel like that bell, I guess. A burden. To you folks, to Cairn, a reminder of things gone wrong.”

Ramona piped up. “Cool it, Cill, you’re none of that.”

“Well, that’s the thing: even if I am, we’re still here. There’s nothin’ forcing your hand to keep me around but you do. You go outta your way to see me. Talk, play, whatever. You got more reasons than not.”

“Of course, why else?”

“I just never really got it until now. My worth, what you see in me. I’m still not sure I fully get it.”

She pulled him closer. “Relax, it takes time. Don't think too hard about it. We like you.”

“Truly?”

Arthur nodded, taking his chance to settle in.
"Truly."

Not everything in this world is worth holding on to. Some things hurt, when they once brought comfort, and sometimes it's the pain that comforts most. That familiar pang of memory, that guiding pinprick in the dark. You hold on because it's all you've got. Some day you'll loosen your grip.

And there are things in this world that, no matter how trivial, how strange, how wildly off the beaten path it may be, it shudders to life some quiet, hungry part of you. A spark that turns your insides. Pulls you in.

It might earn you a few odd looks, sure, but at the end of the day, if it makes you happy, *keep it*.

Extras

Woodland incident leaves ten missing

RESIDENTS SHOCKED as few return from self-proclaimed hunting party incident. Survivors claim unexpected fire was responsible for deaths while out on wolf cull. "A surprize gust must have hit our campfire overnight," said Amelia Ronan, "I woke up breathing smoke and the boys were in a panic. Two of the tents were on fire." When pressed for a reason for the excursion, survivors said local wolf issue was to blame, 'we decided to get it over with ourselves.'

Witnesses reported the sight of moderate smoke above the treetops at the time of the incident, some were convinced of a more natural wildfire from recent summer storms.

Storms continue to delay rail repairs

Weather still impacting rail repair progress as storms barrage local area. Unsafe conditions have garnered concern from workers and families alike. Community push for postponed schedule likely to pass.

LOOKING FOR JOB!
CARPENTRY AND
METAL-WORK EXPERIENCE

5TH HOUSE ON THE LEFT,
SPRUCE RD.

-TOM HARLEY

Man struck by mysterious flying stone

"It came out of nowhere!" said Bill Clay, recounting his experience with the stone that hit him in the side of the head while out on a walk. Clay entered the clinic at about six o'clock that evening, clutching his bleeding head, saying he'd been attacked. "I thought it might have been some kids causing trouble again, but I was well into a trail at that point, no way some tyke followed me that far out. There was no-one else there." Bill pins the blame on 'fairy mischief.' He reported feeling lost and confused, stating that he only recovered his bearings outside of the forest. Whether or not this was caused by his injury has yet to be confirmed. The man swears up and down that he was truly attacked by an entity in the woods.



The stone itself is smooth, gray, with the phrase STAY OUT etched upon its surface. Likely just an ominous joke. Clay has decided to keep the stone, and is presently receiving care from Doctor Orchards.

Old Yellers live at the market this Saturday

By Edgar Hawthorne

Bring your umbrellas, folks: a little rain won't stop the Old Yellers from crowing by the stalls this weekend. For those who can't bother to attend in such wet weather, we'll have the radio guy on scene to record live. Tune in!

A page from the local newspaper, the Alderhill Post, dated June 15th, Monday, 196X. Borrowed from the library archives.

Transcript:

Woodland incident leaves ten missing

RESIDENTS SHOCKED as few return from self-proclaimed hunting party incident. Survivors claim unexpected fire was responsible for deaths while out on wolf cull. "A surprize gust must have hit our campfire overnight," said Amelia Ronan, "I woke up breathing smoke and the boys were in a panic. Two of the tents were on fire." When pressed for a reason for the excursion, survivors said local wolf issue was to blame, 'we decided to get it over with ourselves.' Witnesses reported the sight of moderate smoke above the treetops at the time of the incident, some were convinced of a more natural wildfire from recent summer storms.

Storms continue to delay rail repairs

Weather still impacting rail repair progress as storms barrage local area. Unsafe conditions have garnered concern from workers and families alike. Community push for postponed schedule likely to pass.

LOOKING FOR JOB!

CARPENTRY AND METAL-WORK EXPERIENCE,
5TH HOUSE ON THE LEFT, SPRUCE RD. -TOM HARLEY

Man struck by mysterious flying stone

“It came out of nowhere!” said Bill Clay, recounting his experience with the stone that hit him in the side of the head while out on a walk. Clay entered the clinic at about six o’clock that evening, clutching his bleeding head, saying he’d been attacked. “I thought it might have been some kids causing trouble again, but I was well into a trail at that point, no way some tyke followed me that far out. There was no-one else there.”

Bill pins the blame on ‘fairy mischief.’ He reported feeling lost and confused, stating that he only recovered his bearings outside of the forest. Whether or not this was caused by his injury has yet to be

confirmed. The man swears up and down that he was truly attacked by an entity in the woods. The stone itself is smooth, gray, with the phrase *STAY OUT* etched upon its surface. Likely just an ominous joke. Clay has decided to keep the stone, and is presently receiving care from Doctor Orchards.

Old Yellers live at the market this Saturday

By Edgar Hawthorne

Bring your umbrellas, folks: a little rain won't stop the Old Yellers from crowing by the stalls this weekend. For those who can't bother to attend in such wet weather, we'll have the radio guy on scene to record live. Tune in!



A hand-drawn map of Mound, produced by Cillian of Mound. He has stated he “ran out of room to draw the Hill” and is “pretty sure [he] spelled something wrong, but [he] don’t know what...”

Drawn with graphite on an old scrap of paper. Figures and landmarks are drawn in a rudimentary, almost childish manner.

“Cairn”, “Amranth”, “Senna”, “Carmine”, “Silas”, and “Cillian” himself are pictured, as well as “Mounds Hed”, “Mounds End”, “Silas Mound”, “Cort”, and “Hill”.

Cillian has also mentioned he likes drawing “maps” like these in his free time.

Dear Cairn,

Following the kind assistance of your Cillian and his friend(s), my home is in wonderful condition compared to how it was before. I was wondering if you would like to see it for yourself? It has been some time after all! We could share tea and other pleasures like the good old days. Remember our last encounter?

You got your horn stuck in the ceiling fixture... sorry, I know how it embarrassed you. I just find it ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ charming, I suppose. How a king like you can be so regal and yet so personable at once, prone to just the same fumbles and mishaps as any of us. Trust that I mean this fondly! These are traits I find admirable. I don't think you'd make half as stalwart a leader without that heart of yours, if that makes sense. I'm notentirely sure I'm making much sense at all, it's quite late in the evening and I fear I am already losing the war I've waged against the clinging veil of the night. If only you were here to keep me awake.

~~XXXX~~,

Regards,

Silas Montague of Mound's Head

*A private letter addressed to Cairn, from
Silas Montague of Mound's Head. Never sent.*

Transcript:

Dear Cairn,

Following the kind assistance of your Cillian and his friend(s), my home is in wonderful condition compared to how it was before. I was wondering if you would like to see it for yourself? It has been some time after all! We could share tea and other pleasantries like the good old days. Remember our last encounter? You got your horn stuck in the ceiling fixture... sorry, I know how it embarrassed you. I just find it ~~endearing~~. ~~funny~~ charming, I suppose. How a king like you can be so regal and yet so personable at once, prone to just the same fumbles and mishaps as any of us. Trust that I mean this fondly! These are traits I find admirable. I don't think you'd make half as stalwart a leader without that heart of yours, if that makes sense. I'm notentirely sure I'm making much sense at all, it's quite late in

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I've waged against the clinging veil of the night. If
only you were here to keep me awake.

Love,

Regards, Silas Montague of Mound's Head

and took his hat in his hands, thumbing the brim. The sky churned a moody paynes' grey, and the Captain recalled in an instant the painting that hung inside the study of his landside mentor. He could see with clarity now the slick sea serpents that chased each other's tails, stirring an oil-stroke sea as dark as pitch, if not darker still. That vortex that drew the eye as deep as it could follow, a watery pit that swallowed light and hope. A work simply titled "Maelstrom" that lay stuck to the wall above a sturdy desk with nothing more than a bit of thick wire and a nail.

"It calls to us," he said.

"We'd do well not to answer," replied Egan, caressing his brow.

"Ought'a outpace it if we can cap'n," shouted the particularly boorish deckhand with the feather wedged in his cap, which the weather was not kind to.

The captain wheeled on him. "Hardly! The storm's coming in quick, you feel this wind, don't you? Easily approaching thirty or so knots of speed, a speed *Sea Dog* isn't built to match, let alone surpass. Seven's the fastest she can hope to go, and that's pushing it. She's big, she's old, and she's *slow*. I'd believe it if you said this was your first storm seaside."

"It is, cap'n," the deckhand replied, meekly.

"What did I even hire you for!"

Egan sighed. "If that storm hits us, Captain, we're not going to make it to port. We're already running dry on supplies besides."

"Well what do you suggest?" he growled.

"It's a regrettable suggestion..." The first mate began.

"Spit it out! We don't have the time!"

"Our only chance could be the amulet."

The captain shook his head. Even the mention of it tugged his fingertips towards his pocket, still sewn completely shut. If he had to use that damned amulet, they really were hopeless. And yet...

"You better slit my throat if I don't let go of the thing by tomorrow."

"As we agreed, Captain."

He turned to the deckhand. "You! Get out of my sight and prepare for the storm. Report to someone who actually knows what he's doing."

"Aye."

*A page excerpt from the printed manuscript
of 'Wicked Waves Below' by Elliot and
Ramona Ronan.*

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