



Tanaquill

By Akalle

Smashwords Edition

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CHAPTER 1
London 1802
Spring

The sun shone brightly into the busy front rooms of 22 Grosvenor Square. The house, which stood detached from its neighbors, was like a beehive humming with last minute instructions and pattering feet, exclamations by maids, one to another, quickly, softly, for an important guest was arriving. Careful directions had been given concerning all manner of details, from the flower arrangements that were to face east, to the variety of infusions to be served in lieu of tea. The curtains had been beaten, the floors glossed with wax, the windows rubbed until spotless.

Daphne Lockwood lightly dusted around an ancient Greek vase in a niche, her lithe figure not unlike its painted runner in peplos and sandals. She wore her soft purple day dress, covered in a pattern of small lake flowers, in honor of their guest. “When she arrives, I ought to simply *ask* her,” her voice echoed lightly across the tall drawing room.

“Out of the question,” her sister Chloe replied.

“It isn’t a matter of idle curiosity,” Daphne continued. “Her Majesty’s instructions placed such an unusual emphasis on keeping the princess’ visit secret, though we’re always very discreet. And it’s not everybody one could tell such a thing in any case, is it?” Daphne paused. “Chloe?”

“Hm?” Chloe was peering under the sofa, checking for dust that might have strayed across the gleaming wood floor. She pressed her hand to the sofa to support herself and stood. Frowning, she dusted down her dress. “The princess is the youngest daughter, there are bound to be strictures.”

“But could it be something more?” Daphne wondered. “Some unusual circumstance, too delicate to mention. Perhaps if we were to broach the subject first ourselves...”

“Without indiscretion?” Walking over, she pulled out a hairpin and pressed a stray hair back into place, pinned. “*Too delicate to mention*’—I doubt I could have put it better myself. Have I ruined my dress?”

Daphne took a careful look, studying the brick red velvet that brought out an attractive, ruddy warmth in her sister’s skin. Both avowed spinsters in their later twenties, they nevertheless

loved beautiful things and knew how to look smart. “It looks lovely. And your hair as well.”

“Thank you.” Chloe briskly brushed her dress’ front again. “Fairies are such tidy folk.” She ran her finger across the mantle, the white moldings absolutely clean to the touch—satisfying. Just then she stilled, trying to resolve a distant sound. “Did you hear it?” she said, crossing to the window. It was very faint. *Fairy trumpets?*

Daphne came to stand beside her at the large French window. Leaning over the window seat, they scanned the street below. Grosvenor Park was greening across the way, an oval hideaway of trees and lawn, with the wide roads surrounding it lined for as far as the eye could see with tall, pale stone terrace houses.

Chloe pressed her finger to the glass. “That smoke, do you see it?”

“Smoke?” Daphne said softly. She squinted but saw only sky and the unmoving treetops on a clear spring morning.

Chloe tapped the glass. “Just above the couple out walking, there, by Lord Osborn’s house. Doesn’t that puff of smoke seem to travel with purpose? There’s no draft carrying it.”

It would not have attracted the slightest attention, if not for how well the smoke held together. As if in its own world, the wisp of grey smoke glided over dark strolling hats and light silk bonnets, heading for the house.

Chloe sighed wistfully. “I wish Uncle were here to see this,” she said, for a moment allowing herself to simply watch.

Daphne took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. This home was the only one they knew, but in truth it belonged to the Earl of Sommerfeld, who might be dead or lost, as Chloe and Daphne had not heard from him for some time. Their uncle was frequently away indulging his passion for antiquities, but it had never been this long since he had written. After their parents had left for America when they were babes, the Earl had as good as adopted them. The sisters had brushed off the odd marriage proposal until they’d found themselves, with some sense of relief, left alone to attend functions like respectable matrons, living on in their uncle’s house in the manner they had since they were children, as if it were their own.

Suddenly the sound of trumpets rang out distinctly, that is, to anyone with hearing such as theirs. “Quickly, open it,” Chloe exclaimed, gesturing to the window.

Daphne unlatched the casement and pulled the window open wide, stepping back just in time for a tiny carriage to form out of the smoke and glide through the window on a sudden fragrant breeze. The sisters gasped gently as the light in the room changed as if a warm fire of blue and gold was kindling dusk in broad daylight, a wondrous sight as the conveyance grew more defined.

It was an equipage England’s prince would have envied. The carriage sailed through the room, its wheels turning on a road of gold pixie dust that vanished behind it. A magnificent

confection of antique mother-of-pearl, with gold filigree and blue-glass windows, drawn by six hummingbirds, a gift from the Americas, the vehicle appeared extraordinarily dainty, as if it would have crumbled at the slightest human touch. As it took its turn about the room a delicate whistling sound came from the spinning wheel-spokes, a sonorous accompaniment to the brassy flower trumpets and the soothing drone of the hummingbirds.

Even Chloe and Daphne, who were familiar with many strange occurrences, had never seen such a conveyance from the fairy realm, rather than merely catching a scent of meadow flowers in winter, or hearing a whisper of music on the breeze.

After circling slowly in the air the carriage began its gentle descent, and finally glided to a halt on the drawing room table. The trumpeters, small gentlemen in livery standing on the carriage's running boards, stopped trumpeting abruptly and lowered their horns.

The Lockwood sisters stood utterly motionless, staring at the inconceivably exquisite and exotic little object at rest on the table amidst all the ordinary things of life they'd spent the morning cleaning and arranging.

In the carriage window, which was wrought of a smoky glass as if cut from a frozen lake, a tiny head appeared to be moving.

After a breathless moment a footman stepped down from the platform, opened the seashell door and drew down the steps. The princess climbed out. She was less than a hand tall, with waves of blond hair that fell past her knees, and wearing a dress made entirely of just two flowers, a pink bleeding heart flower bodice and a bluebell skirt, woven with details in green cellulose thread. Her shimmering dragonfly wings buzzed as she looked about her with an expression of sober curiosity that seemed at once grave and interested. Her wings stopped, as if a train of thought had ended, and she looked up at the two sisters. She bowed gracefully. "Greetings, cousins. The Queen and King of the Fairies of the Lake wish that your days may be filled with joy."

With solemn formality, the sisters bowed in unison, unlike the curtsy they would have performed for a human noble. "Salutations, Princess," they replied together. Chloe continued, "May the Queen and King be ever honored. Chloe and Daphne Lockwood welcome your sublime presence to the human realm, to the house of Phillip Winyard, Earl of Sommerfeld, and into our hearts. May your stay in the realm of man bring joy."

The fairy princess tilted her head in recognition. "Thank you, cousins Chloe and Daphne Lockwood." She studied them for a moment, her tiny form intense. Then she looked carefully about her again. Her wings twitched, as if with curiosity. Chloe knew that the human realm must be somewhat surprising to her, if not alarming. The princess' face, as she looked about, remained disciplined to show but a shade of interest, though her tiny chest rose and fell. Finally, she seemed to steel herself and approached the edge of the table. She cleared her throat to address the

sisters once more, her hands politely clasped in front of her as she began to recite in a formal tone.

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“A woman’s face I will wear  
and hide a magic heart,  
if Maeve accepts my humble gift,  
and you answer for your part:  
Cousins,  
Witches and Kinfolk too,  
grant me your decree:  
What are we when we are not?  
And will never be?”

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Finished, she stood gazing up at the sisters with a hopeful look, apparently prepared to wait for as long as necessary.

Chloe looked to her sister. Daphne looked to Chloe. They knew exactly what had occurred, but having only heard of such things at second hand, she did not know quite what to do. All this work readying the house and now if they couldn’t answer her riddle the princess might not be able to stay. Chloe bowed. “You honor us,” she said, then immediately looked to her sister again, hoping to catch her eye with a look of urgency, but Daphne had quietly taken a seat on the sofa and was staring into the middle distance thoughtfully. “*What are we when we are not? And will never be?*” Daphne said to herself. The clock on the mantle ticked. Princess Tanaquill remained standing.

Daphne will know it, Chloe thought, with an impulse to smile kindly to the princess, but thought better of it and stood, trying to staunch her nerves. Riddles were sacred to the fairies. The riddle was a gift to their gods and frequently used in spells, especially by royalty. Solving the riddle would release some desired effect; but Chloe had never had to solve one herself. Daphne hadn’t either, of course, but Daphne had always been better at logic. Chloe was more practical.

Suddenly the silence was broken as one of the hummingbirds took flight and hovered in its harness. Chloe watched as one of the small trumpeters, a liveried fairy in breeches and buckled shoes, a curly white wig upon his head, jumped down to quiet the bird. The clock tick-tocked.

Princess Tanaquill looked from one human to the other, seeming grave, but also concerned. Then the princess took in a breath, and when she had exhaled her expression had smoothed. She stared ahead, her hands clasped politely in front of her.

She’s worried we won’t be able to do it, Chloe thought, realizing then how much the

princess wanted this visit. Chloe worried the same; she certainly had no notion of the answer.

“*What are we when we are not? And will never be?*” Daphne mused. She popped up from her seat. “*Castor!* I see it,” she exclaimed. “What are we when we are not—the matter in question both present and absent, if you will, as when remembered, and to never be again, having come to pass. A memory, isn’t it?”

Chloe’s brow rose. “A memory?” she said, then her eyes lit. “Good show, Daphne.”

The sisters looked hopefully to Princess Tanaquill.

The princess bowed. “Thank you, Cousin.” She lifted from the table and hovered in midair before them. “A memory is what I shall be, after my stay in your home.” She arched her back and extended her hands upward, her fingers elegantly reaching as her wings grew smaller to vanish from her back, and her feet gently reached the ground.

“Goodness,” Chloe said softly, startled.

Daphne’s hand went lightly to her mouth. “Remarkable.”

The sisters had always gleaned a certain perfection in the form of a fairy, but scarcely seen one, much less enlarged to human size and as plain as day. Tanaquill was hundreds of years old and yet looked twenty. Her countenance held the ancient wisdom of her kind along with the innocence of youth, and the sober awareness of great responsibility.

Princess Tanaquill stood before them, her bare feet firmly resting on the gleaming wooden floor, hands clasped in front of her. She wore a beige gown of muslin. The sleeves that covered her upper arms felt remarkably awkward, as if they grabbed at her. The high waist hugged her in an altogether strange manner, and the hem was tickling her ankles. *How peculiar that human ladies wish to dress so*, she thought. The dress felt heavy and coarse around her compared to her fairy gown. But her hair had not changed, she thought, pushing some back as she compared her cousins’ shorter, styled hair to her own cascading about her shoulders. She looked around her, noting the change in everything’s size. *I have grown so very large*, she thought with a little shiver of excitement down into her gloved hands. Her cousins’ home was extraordinary for its play of textures and depths, while the London street was intriguingly busy with the human world.

She wished to remember every moment of her stay in the human realm. In only a short time she would be married to Prince Rohmier of the Fairies under the Hill, and she treasured above all things this opportunity to see the human realm before she began her reign at his side, for which she had many cares.

Daphne gently shook her head, her hand pressed to her mouth as she studied her. Despite the loss of wings, with her unnaturally thick hair, blue gemstone eyes like tilted almonds, and small upturned nose, the princess still looked rather too much the fairy for human society.

Chloe took a step forward and made her own careful study of her cousin’s unusual features. Hers was a face that would have people looking once, and then turning to look again to be sure

of what they saw.

Her young cousin's eyes seemed to shift their color. "Your eyes..." Chloe began.

"My eyes..." Tanaquill said. "They change at times."

"Can you control it?" Chloe asked.

"I shall try."

Chloe watched as the storm calmed and blue skies returned. The princess' expression was regal again, colder, but it would do. Upon further reflection, the rest of her cousin's remarkably delicate features were unusual, but acceptably human. Most humans, after all, were not very observant. As long as they could hide her ears, which Chloe had just noticed were almost as pointed as a rabbit's.

Chloe glanced to her sister. "What about her hair?" she asked her. "What would Her Majesty think if her daughter was returned to her shorn?"

"It must have taken hundreds of years to grow," Daphne agreed.

Tanaquill pushed a long tress behind her. "I'm not sure but that if you cut my hair, my wings will pop out," she informed them.

"We'll have to do something about the ears as well," Chloe added, studying their new guest with a mixture of admiration and concern.

"My ears?" Tanaquill touched their tips and looked to the sisters' ears, which appeared to be shaped like smooth shells.

The sisters glanced to one another. It appeared that there were certain essentials of being a fairy that could not be altered.

"Don't worry about a thing," Chloe replied with an easy wave, dismissing the concerns that had clearly begun to grip the three of them. They really didn't have much time to fix all these details before Lady Teversall's ball. And although it was just a social event, it was *the* event of the season, and the sisters dearly hoped to take the princess. They wanted to do all they could for her before she was to go back. They were sure that they could manage it. "Perhaps I can work them into the hair."

"Of course it's not a problem," Daphne agreed reassuringly. She came up to Tanaquill and drew the young woman's hair forward. "We'll put them under your hair."

"And a human lady wears a hat while out of doors," said Chloe encouragingly.

"Exactly," Daphne agreed.

"Absolutely," Chloe assured her.

Tanaquill looked concerned. "I am sorry for putting you to all this trouble over me."

"Trouble?" Chloe exclaimed, for it was, in fact, the silliest notion in the world. The sisters grinned at one another knowingly, then threw their arms around the princess, overwhelming her with their delight that she was with them. The princess laughed, surprised, for she had not been

hugged with such warmth since she was but a girl, and she squeezed gently back, getting used to her human arms.

Relief fell across Tanaquill's heart, whether from the strain of her journey, the transformation, or from the anticipation of both. She was finally away from court, and she was eager to know everything about London and her dear cousins. She drew away. "Let me try, now that I see how your hair is fashioned." She closed her eyes, holding her arms slightly out from her sides, and after a moment the long tresses lifted as if blown, and twisted like living vines into fashionable ringlets that hid her pointy ears.

Unnoticed, the ornate little carriage turned to smoke, slipped out the window, and vanished without a trace.

CHAPTER 2

"Do you like it?" Chloe asked hopefully.

The dressing room was draped by thick peach-colored curtains that reached the carpeted floor, emitting dusky light as the moon glowed over London. Candles flickered on the dressing table where Daphne sat on a low-back chair, her lady's maid standing behind her, weaving a ribbon into her dark hair while they watched the scene behind them in a second looking glass.

Standing on a low podium, Tanaquill pondered herself in the full length glass. Light blue silk fell around her in cloudy layers, a satin ribbon hugged under her bosom and trimmed the short ballon sleeves. She ran her hands down the fabric, admiring every delicate stitch.

"Remarkable. The workmanship is exquisite. This is far superior to the muslin I changed into." She lifted her gloved hand to her face and peered at it, as if examining an appendage no longer her own, but transformed by the tight silk. Her eyes began to swirl as she pondered her fingers.

Chloe slid on her other glove. "You'll have to be careful about that when you arrive at the ball," she said.

"Hmm?" Tanaquill turned her gaze to Chloe.

Chloe gestured to the glass. "Your eyes. You'll see many exciting things."

Tanaquill turned back to the glass and saw her reflection. "Yes, I must be careful," she said, and as she spoke her eyes turned a solid blue.

Humans wore elaborate and not exactly comfortable garments. It puzzled her that Englishwomen hid themselves even in warm weather. They hid themselves beautifully, though.

She lifted the skirt, revealing her ankles, and let it fall again. It seemed so long. And she would have to dance tonight. “I do hope I don’t stumble over the hem.”

“You’ll do wonderfully,” said Chloe, taking her shawl from the back of a chair and draping it around her shoulders.

Tanaquill touched a corkscrew curl with a gloved hand, pulling gently, and felt it spring back in its place.

Daphne gathered the contents of her reticule. “Do you remember the curtsy? I hope it’s not distasteful for a princess.”

Tanaquill smiled warmly. “Not in the least,” she replied. She artfully extended her gloved hands and, dipping her head in a single graceful movement, she bowed, greeting her cousin. “Will this do?”

“Perfect, my dear,” Chloe replied. Tanaquill had already begun to pick up the manners and vocabulary of an Englishwoman by watching the sisters.

The maid entered. “Your carriage has arrived, my ladies.”

Tanaquill felt a quick thrill up her spine. She would finally be among humans in their element, the humans that she had heard so many tales about. Not all of those stories were pleasant, but others showed the humans to be brave and kind.

Having met her cousins, she already knew which were true.



The sisters’ fashionable black equipage hurried through the nighttime streets. Tanaquill clutched her small reticule in her lap, worrying it idly as she looked out at the human commotion, nerves nipping at her.

She had always wished to visit the human realm, but she had scarcely been allowed out of the castle. She’d never even met the humans who boated on the lake. Her brothers and sisters had been free to encounter whomever they wished, but not her. Older, they came and went from the kingdom at will, while she stayed at home and grew to know every nook of the castle’s winding, luminous corridors for, more than her brothers and sisters, she belonged to her family’s castle as much as it belonged to her. She stilled her nervous hands, pressing them over her abdomen, a quiet, building excitement in her breast.

Only now, with her marriage looming, had her mother and father allowed her to leave the castle and visit her cousins. They knew that if she were to marry the prince under the hill and rule at his side, she must have experienced the human realm.

On her tour, she would visit numerous realms, but the human one was especially important. The friendship forged long ago between fairies and humans still mattered to the fairies—even if most humans had forgotten. Theirs, she knew, and understood better all the time, was the heaviest of worlds, with the most struggle, and the most difficult in which to travel.

Her cousins had been kind enough to accept her into their home, a home with a warmth Tanaquill had learned to cherish. Knowing her cousins now, it had become even more important to her to make a good impression for their sake. For although the sisters assured her they had taken magical precautions against becoming an item of interest, Tanaquill knew by the sisters' attention to her look and manner, getting it as human as possible, that she must be careful. *I must appear like a perfect English Lady*, she thought to herself, exhaling slowly and silently. It was an effort, at times, to narrow her attention in the human manner when everything from the horses drawing the carriage to the moon in the sky was speaking to her in their own fashion. In fact, it was hard for her not to feel the horses as part of the group going to the party. She could sense the house fairies of London looking out of windows, coming out of doors and walls as the carriage passed, keeping a respectful distance but striving for a glimpse of her. She felt some of them pacing the carriage, running alongside it, trailing behind it in the street. Kitchen fairies, house plant and tree fairies, fairies that lived in street lamps, popping out, peeking—all living lives very different from hers but sensing her presence as she passed, and they watched her, as humans would a sovereign, passing in a royal procession.

“We’re here,” Daphne said as the horses began walking and the carriage slowed.

They turned down an elegantly appointed road and the carriage drew to a halt. Tanaquill peered out the window, looking for the house, only to find a sea of carriages waiting, all headed for a house glowing with lamps. “Are we going in there?” she asked, surprised. “With all these people?” She wasn’t sure she was ready to be in the midst of so many humans. She was used to royal functions attended by thousands of fay, but humans seemed so, well, rather large—how could so many fit into a single house? She couldn’t imagine they could do so easily.

Daphne put a comforting hand on her knee. “It will be all right. You look just like a human woman.”

Chloe leaned forward and pushed Tanaquill’s curls decidedly over the tips of her ears. “No one will have the slightest idea who you really are.” She paused. “My goodness, but you look lovely.”

Feeling curiously pleased at the idea that she looked well as a human woman, Tanaquill smiled to herself and took in the scene outside the carriage window. Accustomed to the false flattery of the court, which meant nothing to her, she trusted her cousin’s kindness in a way that was new to her—with the refreshing simplicity of believing in another’s good intentions.

As the guests streamed past on their way to the house, she imagined herself as one of them. Tonight she would be in a large crowd who would never know that a fairy princess had been among them, enjoying their party. It was a wonderful thought, but she reminded herself that she must be careful. Being exposed as other than human would put not only herself but her cousins at more than merely social risk.

Nothing must go wrong, she told herself as she stepped down from the carriage to merge with the arriving crowd.

Like a honeycomb lit through with candles the elegant three-story house glowed with promise. Guests obscured the doorway, overflowed the entryway, and blocked Tanaquill's view of the interior, but the large windows on each floor exposed the rise of a beautiful spiral staircase bursting with more guests.

Once inside, at the sisters' direction, Tanaquill began her ascent on the crowded staircase. She looked up at the candles flickering in the hanging chandeliers, down at the marble floor crowded with well shod feet, felt the curve of the elegant railing beneath her hand as she began her climb, the railing's form as subtle as the bend in a river, well suited for her human hand. Human workmanship was deeply personal yet ambitious, she thought to herself, shaping materials to fit ideas. Becoming a part of the crowd, she took in every moment with a sense of wonder, the crush of the warm human bodies alive and solid, each in a bubble world of their own concerns. The hum of voices played around her; a gentleman's bold laughter answered by a coquettish laugh, lifting like fireworks above the general hum of eager guests. The snapping open of a fan sounded like a flock of startled birds lifting into the air. There were beautiful faces and vivacious, kind and aloof, eager and jaded, tipsy and wise, the round human scent accented by floral distillations. It was wonderful and strange and she felt a chill of delight to be in the midst of such a wondrous human world.



Gavin growled under his breath and climbed a fraction higher on the crowded stairway. The woman in front of him banged her elbow into his chest—*again*, but this time she turned sharply, as if about to blame him for getting in her elbow's way. Dark-haired and curvaceous, the surprising scar through her brow marred her beauty, making her more interesting than she might have been otherwise. She held no interest for Gavin however, who had been standing behind her for at least ten minutes now, in the smothering din, and the sternly drawn words forming on her lips died when she caught the mood in his eyes. Her own eyes lit with caution and she quickly turned back around and began speaking pleasantries to her friend.

Gavin could sense the tension riding up her spine. So much so he wished to place his hand there and feel it.

"Oh! Get off! Do look where you put your foot!" came an indignant cry further off; a young woman had nearly toppled forward into the gentleman in front of her. Gavin watched as the flushed young woman, her brown curls, the height of fashion, already growing limp, turned sharply to glare behind her, and tugged the hem of her gown out from beneath a bewildered older gentleman's shoe. The older gentleman, after a moment's confusion, snapped something rude in return as the crowd resumed their droning conversation.

Gavin looked away, wishing to escape. The sights, sounds and smells assaulting him were close to overwhelming, but the worst had to be the perfume worn by the woman with the scar in front of him. She would have to have been dipped in a vat of powders, perfumes, floral scented waters, soaps and unusual herbs to create the indistinguishable miasma that had him reeling—he even thought he smelled henbane. Trapped behind her like this, it would have been enough to make him stumble off the stairs if there'd been room.

He exhaled deeply, looking away from her as if he could wish her away. Like so many wealthy humans she was driven to hide herself in an avalanche of scents, when he had never come across any scent more alluring than that of an unadorned woman.

I should never have come here, chasing after shadows, he thought. The violent hum of conversation around him was loud enough to pain his sensitive hearing.

“This is a wonderful home, a beautiful gathering, it is all so lovely.” A sweet, distant voice drifted through the din, as out of place as a dove in easy flight through a storm. His body awakened like a bowstring being pulled tighter. He caught sight of her, a profile near the top of the stairs.

His mind grew keen. The sounds and smells around him faded. Although she obviously attempted to blend in, he unmasked her with his eyes as easily as if she had been naked before him.

For what he saw, what he *knew*, built in his chest and came out in his voice. “That can’t be her,” he spoke aloud, causing the perfumed woman in front of him to turn around in surprise.

Ignoring her, Gavin watched in disbelief as, near the top of the stairs, a young, seemingly human woman in a sky blue dress, draped in silk and satin, her gloved hand holding a fan, her actions as mundane as the men and women around her, ascended another step. Yet where those around her looked bedraggled, she looked beatific, her expression as exalted as if she were bowing to the King of England when she was merely here, at the usual ball, amid the usual throng, in the heat, and noise, and confusion. She leaned over a fraction to speak to the woman beside her. Her face was under blond curls that gleamed unwilted in the heat of the crowd, shining almost too perfectly like a corona of sunlight. Her arms milky white, her shoulders curved in a way he suddenly wished very much to explore. She possessed almost sharp features that would have appeared peculiar if not for their beauty. She was stunning to him, the very image of a game an inhuman would play if the world could hold such frivolities, especially as she tilted her head to listen, and her lips curved into a curious smile. It could not be right. It could not finally be true.

He had found her.

The simple truth was like a blow that struck the breath from his lungs and stung his eyes. He was sure of it: *She is not human. And she is in a place like this. Among them, with them...* This

was what another inhuman looked like.

He could not make sense of it that this night, after hundreds of years of imagining what she would be like, where they would meet, that it would be here, among all these *people*. But there was something else. Something about her that was wrong, deeply wrong. For one thing, he should have known long before now that she was here. Her scent should have drawn him. But there was more. Her manner should not have been as it was. Apparently, she wasn't bothered by the chaotic hum of humanity around her. In fact, she appeared to be positively enjoying it. She approached the last of the stairs as if infinitely patient or—new? As if she had never been to a social event and had not yet learned to loathe the miserable cram and heat of them.

All these jumbled thoughts passed in a moment, as she advanced up the stair, and the thought of losing sight of her awoke him, an urgency to get closer strained every muscle. He watched in an agony born of hope as, deep in concentration, she slowly ascended the final step to reach the top of the stairs, and vanished around a corner. If, at the last moment, her face had not turned away and disappeared beneath a head of blond curls, he might not have been able to stop himself from calling out for her to wait for him.

Gavin suddenly found it difficult to breathe. He'd had enough. With gruff apologies he pushed past the sharp elbowed brunette and the rest, nearly lifting others aside to get them out of his way. Finally, he reached the top of the stairs, only to find she had vanished, as the crowd dissolved into a number of smaller rooms.

"Are you looking for someone?" said a refined male voice.

"Hmm?" Gavin glanced over and his mind registered. "Oh, hello Fairbain." A single glance at Lord Fairbain sufficed to reveal the sort of man he was. A decent sort, but a fop, who did nothing but gamble, gossip and amuse himself. And yet for some reason from almost the first day of Gavin's arrival in London Lord Fairbain had clung to him. Fairbain had apparently developed a fondness for him which Gavin couldn't shake no matter how rudely he tried.

But he hadn't, in fact, tried very hard. Gavin had to admit he had developed a begrudging fondness for the light-hearted fellow. He wouldn't call him friend—he wouldn't call any human friend—but somehow Lord Fairbain, in the short time he'd known him, had come close. Normally he would have disliked a man with so little depth, but he was different somehow, in a way he couldn't quite figure, and spent no time trying to. "Listen, what do they dance these days? Is it the quadrille?"

"The quadrille?" Lord Fairbain exclaimed dryly. "My somber friend, the quadrille is for Paris. I should love to see you quadrille, as I can't picture it. For tonight, it is rather our very own English country dance." Tonight Lord Fairbain looked the perfect dandy in his black tailcoat and crisp cravat. A romantic dip of blond hair on his forehead brought out the blueness of his eyes. "There are those who would waltz, but it's rather *scandaleuse* and they won't be doing any of

that here. Mother would never allow it. I hope that doesn't disappoint."

"No, it doesn't," Gavin replied absently, walking the corridors seeking her, catching the faces of the passing crowd. A string quartet, starting up, struck the air and melded into the hum of voices around them. Gavin had always found human music pleasing, especially at a distance, where it felt like a part of the wind. Tonight such music of hope made him impatient, like a taut bow ready to let its arrow fly. He was drawing nearer to his goal than ever before—he had found another like himself, yet the strings of the violin whispered that she was just beyond his reach.

Gavin followed the music along the corridor while his friend strolled beside him in a conversation he scarcely noticed. He caught, not a scent, but a sense of her, magic in the air. To his right an archway suddenly opened onto an elegant room of tables, where a series of card games were in progress. His eyes raked over the faces, hungry to see what he wanted, scanning around the tables, stately women in gowns and men in formalwear, their voices sharp in his ears, the heat rising from their skin. He walked past, the whole scene alien. Humans at play—it had nothing to do with him. Or what he was looking for.

"Now if it's that sort of thing that interests you," Lord Fairbain was saying, "I've just learned from Hescott about a sharp little gaming hell that's opened in Pall Mall..."

Chattering guests streamed quickly by Gavin in the corridors, ignoring him, enlivened by the night's festivities. He followed the string quartet's song until the archway in front of him opened into a beautiful series of interconnected ballrooms with high ceilings, chandeliers and French windows flung open to let in the night air and avail the crowd of balconies. Fairbain was telling him something about an absurd bet he'd placed at White's when Gavin suddenly stopped and closed his eyes. The feel of her, like lightning held fast.

When he opened his eyes he was looking right at her.

Across the room, through an opening in the crowd he saw her gazing out on a balcony. Beside her, in conversation, was her companion, dressed in darker blue.

Gavin stared as if caught. "The woman, standing on the far balcony. Do you know who she is?"

Fairbain caught his line of sight. "Miss Lockwood?" Fairbain replied. "Lovely, isn't she?" he said, and something slipped into his voice that Gavin had not heard before. "But an avowed spinster," he continued lightly, his old self again. "Her sister Daphne can't be far away."

A spinster? Gavin thought. There was nothing spinsterish about the woman he was intent upon. "No, not her, the other one. The one with—Miss Lockwood. Who is she?"

Fairbain paused, studying her from a distance. "Now that you mention it, I don't know who the other woman is, in the azure, you mean." He stopped. "That is surprising; I don't think I've ever seen her before." He paused. "I wonder where she's been hiding?"

Gavin watched her as she leaned over the rail almost girlishly, chatted amicably to the

woman beside her, and, after a moment, simply stared into the night.

“Introduce her to me.”

“By all means,” Fairbain said, clearly noting Gavin’s tone, stepping forward, but Gavin shot out his hand. He neglected to temper himself, seizing Fairbain’s arm with feral speed. Gavin ignored the blatant way the earl’s son looked down with curious eyes at his tight grip.

“In a moment,” said Gavin, letting him go, trying not to show that he knew he’d done anything unusual as his heart pounded against his chest. It hardly mattered to him now.

She would sense him, if she were like he was. She would know if another of her kind were in her presence. Even if he were across a crowded ballroom full of the scent of humans. If she sensed him, she was his and no force on this earth could stop him from making it so. But doubt crept in like a murky tide over his hopes. If she was the one he imagined her to be, seen lurking London’s streets and rooftops, why could he not picture her doing so? She was the winter’s first snowfall or a hotly blooming flower. She was different, but what could she be? She *must* be his kind.

Gavin waited, holding his breath, as the young woman peered over the balcony, apparently unaware of him. Then, as if she felt a heat on her spine her hand went around the back of her neck.

She turned and looked right at him.

CHAPTER 3

Tanaquill quickly looked away again. She stared from the balcony into the garden below. Paper lanterns in the trees swayed pendulously as if against her thoughts, against the sensation of his eyes on her, bright where her thoughts had grown dark. The garden fairies below, in spiky garments of flowers and leaves, began to congregate under the balcony, looking up at her in wonder, lifting from the ground as if to float up to her. She smiled warmly but shook her head, *no*, very slightly, and they settled back down. She turned aside, her brow creased with doubt.

Could it be him? she wondered, her heart beating hard. When she was just an infant, barely able to use her wings, an oracle had been delivered through her. In the banquet hall, in front of the queen, she had spoken to the startled faces in a voice not her own, her small body suddenly charged with purpose. *“The man who is not man will storm the gates of fairy kingdom and I shall want it so.”* Tanaquill had remembered nothing of it, even after it had been told to her. And

with good reason had she wished to forget it.

The man who is not man. What was it that made her suddenly convinced that it was him?

Only a moment ago, she had taken the cool night air to collect herself, when some strange and compelling awareness had made her turn around and look... “Am I the only inhuman at the ball? Could there be others?” Tanaquill asked, not turning around, drawing open her fan as the sisters had taught her.

“Others?” Chloe replied, surprised. “Here? I don’t know...It’s the height of the social season. In principle, anyone who could appear as yourself could be here. They should see you as human.”

“Yes, he should...” said Tanaquill.

“A man is looking at you?” A question rested in Chloe’s eyes for a moment, then softened into understanding. “Oh, I see,” she said quietly. She looked across the balcony, past Tanaquill, and glanced knowingly to her sister.

They were interrupted by a voice.

“How many fashionable gatherings have seen that back turned to them, their gifts despised...” A pleasant voice, deep and friendly, intimately close.

“Aubrey!” Chloe exclaimed, turning with delight. “You snuck up like a cat.” The gentleman, impeccably dressed in the current height of fashion, had a sunny blond glow. Chloe gave his chest a light smack with her closed fan, along with a relieved smile. “You’re late. You were supposed to be waiting for us when we arrived. It is your home after all.”

Lord Fairbain caught the fan’s tip, his blue eyes playful. “It’s my mother’s home, really, and doesn’t that make my very attendance sufficiently extraordinary? To be *à l’heure* as well would be *de trop*. Mother can’t have everything.”

Daphne had turned, taking a sip of champagne through a bemused smile. “Be merciful, Aubrey, and introduce us to your friend.”

Tanaquill’s breath tugged inward sharply and her body went rigid. She closed her fan and readied herself to face him. The gentleman a step behind Lord Fairbain was a starless night.

The stranger’s firm step scuffed across the stone as he crossed onto the balcony. The warm hum of the ballroom was suddenly separated from Tanaquill by his tall, imposing frame, casting his shadow across her. *What could he be? What manner of being?* She was sure he was not fay. For, although extremely strong, the fay male did not have such a powerful build.

His was the lean face of a survivor, his green eyes hungry, intense and questioning under dark brows and soft dark hair; he was *looking* at her, in the same way he had when he was across the room. Only now she could see the secret hidden in the depths of his eyes. *He has a question to ask.*

The stranger looked haunted. His youth perfectly intact, somehow he looked old, aged, as if

he had lived at war, a year in every day. Tanaquill forced her expression to remain remote. Glancing quickly to the other faces, she expected to see alarm, as if a dangerous animal were amongst them, but they had not seemed to notice. It seemed preposterous that this man would be mistaken by anyone for an ordinary gentleman. Beneath the fine clothing there was something ancient and relentless about him. In a room crowded with porcelain figurines he stood like a stone soldier, impenetrable. Inhuman.

Still your mind, she told herself. No one can say what an oracle means or how it comes to be fulfilled. *How could one man...* Her heart quickened as the thought came uninvited to her mind, not for the first time: *Could the curse save me from marrying Prince Rohmier?*

Lord Fairbain began making introductions in a playful fashion. It sounded as if, by the dark haired stranger's title, he was from far away. Tanaquill had no idea where Buda was. The stranger's green eyes held hers, Tanaquill making sure to keep her eyes a clear, hard blue. He bowed to Chloe and to Daphne. His forbidding expression hardly changed but Tanaquill was surprised to see how, despite the sternness of his manner, which gave him a certain stiffness, he moved with a grace that went down to his bones.

As those around him smiled and spoke pleasantly, he was conspicuously untouched by the spirit of levity. He studied Tanaquill as if too deep in thought to notice a distracting voice.

Tanaquill heard her name, giving him her introduction. It seemed she was introduced as being from a small English town, all very human of course, and only her name, Tanaquill, meant anything to her. His name was Gavin. She suspected that was all that mattered. Regaining her composure, meeting his challenging gaze with steady, gleaming blue eyes, Tanaquill said what she had been taught by her cousins, but not in the way she would ever have expected. For there was something lonely about the gentleman before her, and for that she forgave him his rudeness and spoke, unintentionally, from her heart. "How do you do?" she said, and curtsied, her eyes lingering on him. It had the sound, not of a conventional pleasantry, but of a careful and sincere question.

A smile of surprise lifted a corner of his stern mouth. "Better now," he returned easily, without a hint of irony, in a smooth, pleasing voice that seemed to catch everyone off guard. "I might request the honor of a moment alone with your ladyship," he said, his deep voice resonant and unassuming. He looked at her as if something was understood between them. Tanaquill had not expected, however, the effect he had on her cousins.

Chloe's eyes widened in alarm and she looked to Lord Fairbain.

"Oh dear," Daphne said softly, leaning along the balcony behind them.

"Wonderful," Lord Fairbain said into the stunned silence with reckless bravado. "Chloe, you shall not deny me a dance beneath my mother's roof. Daphne can see to them." Daphne folded her arms and gave him a wry nod.

“I think not!” Chloe exclaimed, rather less relaxed.

“Now, Sister,” Daphne said, in the manner of a carefully coded message, “He’s just distracted, not impertinent.”

Chloe shot her an irritated look, and Daphne raised a defiant brow. “Too delicate to discuss?”

Gavin held out his hand to Tanaquill. They all stared at him, but his green eyes were only for her and they knew, one and all, in an instant, that this was going to be a *very* delicate matter. “Take a dance with me, Tanaquill.”

CHAPTER 4

Tanaquill carefully lifted her gaze to his, the dark intensity in his eyes only more unnerving when he intended to hide it. Fearing her eyes would begin to change and reveal her, she willed their compliance. “I accept,” she said and heard Chloe take in a breath. At the hint of his smile, so surprising, like a promise of what could be, she pressed a hand to the front of her gown and did not take his as she walked solemnly past him. He fell silent as a breeze into step beside her, intent on her, drawing her patiently away from those she knew.

He greeted no one as they walked deeper into the ballroom and neither friend nor acquaintance was there to nod cordially in his direction. She could not see him as a friend of Lord Fairbain’s. Not because of Lord Fairbain’s apparent frivolity, but rather because Gavin seemed so remote as to need no one in the world. His deep voice beside her cut easily through the hum of the room. “I’ve been searching for you.”



Chloe watched as Tanaquill and Gavin left the balcony together, Daphne following a discreet distance behind to keep an eye on them. She turned to Lord Fairbain angrily. “Aubrey, what were you thinking?”

Fairbain had leaned along the balcony, careful not to dirty his coat. “My friend was intent on meeting yours and I thought we might as well learn the reason why, straightaway, and in the relative safety of a public place.”

A couple came out onto the balcony to catch the air. Chloe and Lord Fairbain nodded to them and stepped back into the ballroom. “Who is that man?” she asked as they walked through the crowd, her expression serene, as if enjoying herself. Women had a way of turning to stare at

Fairbain and she didn't want anyone to know they had been arguing. "There was something uncanny in his voice."

He glanced over at her as an old friend, but pointedly. "Perhaps I should be asking, who is your cousin?"

Chloe looked away. Aubrey Fairbain was the right sort and a friend of the family. There were some people, Chloe believed, to whom you could tell all your secrets.

Or almost all.

He led her through the crowded ballroom and toward the hall, purposely away from where the dancing was taking place. They walked into the corridor and she stopped, turning to him. She delicately cleared her throat. "There are a few things we haven't discussed about my cousin—" she began. Lord Fairbain lifted a hand to his hair, lest a breeze on the balcony had disordered it.

"Really?" he exclaimed, with a dry surprise that made her wonder if he already knew.

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The wooden floors gleamed under slipped feet and flowing skirts. Silver candelabras lined the walls, a crowd of candles mimicking the crowd of guests who laughed, and chatted, and moved with heavy step along the floor, each flame bright and sharp like an individual face.

Tanaquill caught Gavin glancing to a window in a darkened corner. "Your companions, can you come and go from them as you please?" he asked, his voice remaining polite, but watching her carefully for signs of a truth she might hide.

"I don't know what you mean," Tanaquill said. "I am chaperoned, as any young woman is in London."

"Do they have some hold over you?" he questioned.

She stopped and slowly turned to him, her tone firm. "Let us not speak of my companions. Whatever your intentions are toward me, they do not concern them. Know that I will prevent you from doing anything inappropriate." She paused, her eyes on him with a certain understanding. "I am here of my own free will. And I shall not be leaving." The first chords struck and Tanaquill held out her hand. "When I have only just arrived."

His eyes held hers for a moment longer, then he reached out and took her gloved hand, watching her subtly react as his fingers closed over it. "As you wish," he said, leading her into place on the floor.

Tanaquill curtsied among her row of dancers. As she stepped forward, they slowly wound their way around one another. Perhaps, she thought, they could come to some understanding and find a small piece of happiness for this one night together, whatever the future held.

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Gavin studied the delicate line from the curve of her wrist along her arm. Her skin was smooth and dry as if she did not feel the heat. Her scent was not the usual powder and perfume

of women in such a place, but seemed to drift from her skin, her hair, like apples and spring rain. Where was she from? Hers was not the scent of his kind, but was so clearly other than human he couldn't imagine her being anything else.

He wished to study every line of her, to demands answers to a hundred questions, but he hesitated. Gavin could tell by her expression that she wished only to concentrate on the sound of the human music. Through her, he could see the dark hollows in the finely carved instruments, could fly in his mind upon the graceful wending notes.

"You dance very well," she said, turning back to him from another partner, clearly surprised to find how much she was enjoying herself. "Have you practiced at court?"

"It seems like many years ago," Gavin said, ready to say more if she seemed willing.

She smiled without forethought and her eyes caught his; he could see her mood changing despite herself as he matched her careful steps, the pleasure of the music infecting them both. Then, for an instant, something in her expression changed and she looked away. "I have a question to ask you," she began, "and I hope you will be candid."

"Of course," he replied immediately. She turned with another partner, her moves elegant but practiced, as if she'd learned the steps recently.

She came back to him and he caught up her hand in his. Her presence, cool and sweet, surrounded him. Her eyes, tilted and sharp blue, met his. She spoke softly. "The world I live in is...complicated. I don't often have the opportunity to encounter anyone as an equal." She hesitated, perhaps realizing how that sounded. "I only mean to say that this dance will be fondly remembered." Her smile softened into a questioning look. "*Do you know who I am?*" she asked kindly.

"*Who* you are?" he said as he walked forward, reaching for another woman's hand while she took the gentleman's across from her. He should understand her, but he felt a gulf between them. They took a turn and came back to one another. "No, I do not," he replied.

"Have you met me before?" she asked as they moved in step together.

"Never. I would have remembered."

"Do you know my name?"

"Only the name you gave tonight."

"Good." She seemed to exhale, relieved, and took up his hand as they turned among a group of dancers who parted, dipped, and came together gracefully. "For if not, please see me as what I appear to be, in this ballroom, among these good people, and question me no further on a subject that can be of no importance to us here, in this moment, when we may merely be together, pleasantly, and dance."

Forgetting the dance, Gavin slowed to a stop. "Forgive me." He bowed a fraction. "I cannot pretend that what we do here is just a pleasant diversion." She stopped, then patiently took up his

hand and led him into step again, his arm raised with hers.

Gavin's expression darkened. "I wish to speak openly with you, and I will not be dissuaded." His voice lowered and he pulled her a fraction closer than the dance would allow.

Her eyes widened a fraction.

"If it is not your companions, could it be that another like ourselves has done something to make you wary of my intentions?"

"Another like ourselves?" she replied, turning with him in time to the chamber music. "Sir, I have never met another like you."

"And I have never met another like you," he said, bowing as required. The ladies curtsied. His voice surprised him for how it tightened in his throat. He went on quickly. "I understand your caution but we don't have to hide from one another the truth of our being, our...ancestry. I promise you that I would never—"

"Our ancestry?" she said, clearly surprised. "Whoever you are, I doubt we are kin. For some reason you feel I am in need of your aid, but I can only ask, do you know your own fate? For despite what you wish, you may, in truth, be responsible for events that we both would come to regret. And so allow me to assist *you*, by helping you to forget yourself and simply dance. Do you understand? Whatever fate may bring us. If only for a moment?"

He was taken aback at her urgency and her confusing words. "You think us fated? An evil destiny? Clearly, you have me mistaken—"

"—Do I? For clearly you have me mistaken. Am I the one you claim to have awaited?"

"Yes."

She hesitated, her voice softening. "And I believe the same of you."

He stopped, lightly stunned. She was turned away, reaching for another hand. He had an urge to snatch her back again, but felt himself take the hand of his next partner and perform the required steps.

He watched her step in, extend her hand as the other dancers did and turn with them, her hand touching theirs as she smiled at them. He could not understand anything about this.

Who is she? he found himself *really* wondering for the first time, feeling surprised with himself that he had not wondered it before. Not *what*, but *who*? She had an almost regal quality; there was nothing of the outcast about her. She looked extremely well cared for. But that seemed impossible. How could her life have been so different from his? Those people she was with, did they think she was human? She came back to him and he felt her presence building a tension within him. "You have an accent," he said, trying something new.

"Do I?" she asked, calmer now, but wary for his question as she returned her full attention to him, gazing up into his darkly handsome countenance.

"I can't quite place it." He paused as he led her through the country dance. "Perhaps

you've spent time abroad?" he asked.

"I've never been abroad."

"Haven't you?"

"No."

He wondered as he met the coldness of her blue eyes. His senses warred with him. There was something of flowers and insects in her. And a moment's happy surprise. At the thought of it, suddenly feeling like she could vanish, a mere daydream, he gripped her hand more firmly as they performed the graceful movements.

"Then where—"

"England," she said quickly. "In the country."

"Have you never left," he said. "Crossed an ocean?"

"On a boat?" she asked, as if the notion were foreign to her. "I do not believe so."

"Are you not sure?" he said, surprised.

"Why should it matter?" she said softly, looking up into his countenance. "I do not believe I have." She studied him carefully. She had answered his questions as best she could. Tanaquill stayed in the palace, but that did not mean that the palace stayed where it was. It did not mean that she hadn't been to China, or the Moon, or the bottom of the sea. But she had been there while staying inside the palace when the palace went to them, or when they came to the palace. The distinction, so basic to the human realm, was utterly foreign to her.

Gavin had a fleeting worry that she would break away from him. "I find it difficult to settle in one place for long."

"Really?" Tanaquill asked curiously, her beautiful face, with its rare, sharp features, giving away nothing. "How strange," she said, thoughtfully.

"I could never remain in England."

"Oh?" she said, and sounded a bit insulted. "There is perhaps more to the English countryside than you know." She curtsied and took the hand of another man, her steps leading her away from him again.

Gavin felt himself frown and quickly stopped himself. A new partner took hold of him, and looked up into his face expectantly. He grimaced politely down at her.

The smell of beeswax was warm and heavy in the air, along with bodies and perfumes, the hum of the crowd was a steady oceanic sound vying with the music. Gavin grasped her hand again, seeing her breath rise and fall under her gown. "Those women you were with," he began.

"You mean my cousins."

"Cousins?" he returned, surprised.

"Yes, cousins," Tanaquill returned.

"Really." That was clearly a lie. Those women were human. It was impossible.

She smiled quickly at him but lingered too long and let her gaze touch his mouth. At the sight desire licked through him.

“I see no resemblance—”

“We are distant cousins.”

Why lie to me? he thought, frustration mounting. She lied to him; but then he’d often wanted to lie to himself about having no one. The thought sobered him. “It can be difficult, to be around people; London can be overwhelming, and people can be cruel.”

He caught the concern in her eyes but continued, vulnerable and yet hopeful in a way he had not been in a very long time. “It’s especially difficult without family. Perhaps if one had parents, brothers and sisters, it would be easier—”

“Brothers and sisters?” She looked at him with curiosity, the tilt of her blue eyes a question. “But I do have.”

He was taken aback, so much he could hardly think for a moment. “Then you have a family —”

She looked concerned in a way he hated, and stopped dancing as the people kept dancing around them. Her arms came down at her sides, distracted, as she studied him. “Of course I do. Don’t you?”

He took up her hand again and pulled her back into the crowd of dancers who had begun to slow and stare. Fast, unthinking, he moved around the bodies, felt his civilizing veneer grow thin. “You have an adoptive family. Miss Lockwood, she is—”

“—An adoptive family?” Tanaquill pulled her hand from his. “Chloe and Daphne *are* my cousins,” she insisted, “and I have a real mother and father, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. If you mean to imply that my lineage is false—”

“Your lineage?” *Cousins? Uncles?* “That can’t be possible.” Gavin’s mind had begun to swim.

His mother and father had made it clear that they were the last. They had been adamant, yet he had never thought to ask how they could be sure. He had assumed any group of his kind would have been destroyed by now, leaving loners, if any, for whom he searched fruitlessly, a self-imposed cruelty. Only a single inhuman creature living in absolute secret could exist.

It had been hundreds of years—how could they have survived?

She’s not his kind. It was impossible. But to think that she was something inhuman and yet allowed family, friends, even *human* companionship as she had with her ‘cousins’—it stung him. That she was so unlike him, somehow accepted when he was not—*I don’t know what she is but she’s not my kind.* Gavin studied her delicate features, the settled look of her eyes, a deep almost dreamlike blue, their ends tilted gently upward. How could she not be his?

She must be. His frustrations warred within him. As they turned, he pulled her near again

with a subtle gesture of his hand. The smooth contour of her arm, the tilt of her neck, graceful, subtle as the notes of the music, her beauty like pain to him.

He felt himself spiraling out of control, growing incautious. “I don’t understand you, what I sense in you. You seem to be two things at once. Your eyes, I can’t quite tell if they’re blue or gray.” Her mouth fell open and he thought he saw something in her *change*, something around the eyes. No, *in* the eyes.

She hardened her gaze. “They are blue, or so I’ve believed them to be since I last saw them in a looking glass.” But before he could say a word she continued. *Her voice*. It sounded like the opening of flowers in May; he could see them, lush petals reaching for the sun, and had no idea why. “Take care,” she said, and he suddenly believed it. For what she was went into how she said it.

Whatever she was—she had defenses if provoked. He felt his heartbeat pick up, the sounds around him painfully loud, as if a toxin were rising in his blood.

She studied him in the ballroom’s candlelight. As the night progressed the atmosphere was growing lax. Flirtations rose, talk grew bolder among men who had drunk too much wine. The sheen of decorum, ever present, grew thin as searching hands were slapped away from gowns. Corners had grown dark and some of the candles had been deliberately snuffed out for more intimate conversation. The mood, warm and lively, took hold.

She took a step forward as around them, the dance slowed. “I had wondered about *your* accent,” she said, a whisper of *something* sliding past her tongue. The scent of woodland flowers growing out of her hair enrapt him in a hazy fog of willingness. “Where do you come from?” she asked pointedly, her gaze intent. “To trouble my cousins so...” They drew forward and apart, gracefully, to the step of the dance, the music warm and sonorous, nearly ending.

Gavin tried to think clearly, which was growing difficult. He saw himself walking through the sunlight, growing warm and comfortable in its building glow.

Her beautiful eyes watched him carefully, she grew brighter, like the sun rising over the horizon, even as she grew distant, waiting, her dance slowing in anticipation. She was affecting him somehow—a natural defense mechanism, obscuring herself, perhaps if she sensed trouble...She spoke softly, her voice a distant comfort. “Why won’t you tell me who you are and where you come from. Where do *you* belong?”

“I—I don’t belong anywhere,” he heard himself reply honestly, shaken by his own candor.

“Why do you pry so about me?” she asked, her mouth serious, the color of it reminding him of strawberries. He found it very hard to think. “Who are you?” she asked quietly, her eyes, shaped like cut gems and with equal blue gleam, willing him to answer.

Gavin’s mind flared with anger. He felt as if she were probing him. “You know who I am,” he growled out and she looked surprised by the swift change in him.

He needed to understand her. He had waited so long. He pulled her forward, more forcefully than the dance allowed, drawing her to a darkened corner. He felt her breath catch as they reached the tall window that stood slightly open, a cool breeze like a stream trickling into the room. The ballroom beyond was laughter and glitter, chatter and light, a folly that meant nothing to either of them compared to what lay between them.

“I’ve waited for *hundreds* of years,” he growled out, his voice deep and low, only for her. His green eyes raked across her face, his gaze fevered with curiosity and longing. “What are you?” It was a demand, asked through the fog she had put him in. He grabbed her by the arms. “We both know you’re not human.” His words already sounded full of bitter regret in his ears. “I will tell you that I am not, I promise you, as I seem, I am not.” He pulled her against him with a forceful hand around her waist. Her surprise was like lightning as she froze before, with a pleasing eagerness, melting against him. He felt a rush of emotion, desire and relief as she drew her arms around his neck and, as he kissed her, willingly kissed him back. She opened her mouth, as eager as he, filled with the same, strange longing—he could smell it on her, all over her. To fulfill something in herself through him. His tongue darted between her teeth, his hand slid up the silk of her dress and he felt her intake of breath under his mouth, her body curving against his as she pulled him tighter.



Tanaquill wove a pixie enchantment through her thoughts that would obscure them from the peering eyes of the other guests in the ballroom, to make them look away as she kissed him in the dark recess. He was warm and strong, and she was falling into something, someone, that was unlike what she had ever known. Powerful, made of claws and wings and hooves, a thousand beasts—she took in a breath as he pulled her closer. A force akin to nothing she had encountered and felt like she would never recognize. To feel such strength directed at her made her ache and...and...*What am I doing? I must stop...*

But he didn’t know who she was—he didn’t know that she thought of the prince, of the long, lonely future she would have at his side, as queen, and that part of her cried out to forget who she was, if just for a moment forget the oracle too, and just kiss him. Give him what he wanted. More. For she had felt the longing in him, and in that they had a kinship. For she understood that he would never find what he looked for when he searched her face. What neither of them would ever find, a true companion. A gentle moan escaped her as his lips and tongue, his gentle nipping teeth, glided down her neck, when suddenly he stopped and she felt surprise stiffen his body.

His hand, in her hair, traced the tip of her pointed ear.

He drew away from her with a look that alarmed her. His green eyes flashed with joy. Whatever he had wanted of her, what he had wished her to be, he thought he had found. His deep

voice was like a call to her. “Little fox, you *are* my kind.”

She pushed him away and he let her go as if too stunned to do otherwise. Her beautiful face was marred with surprise, and concern darkened her eyes.

Gavin watched, startled, as her eyes swam with shifting intensity, the color in them transmuting into storm charged darkness. He sensed a power rise in her. Confused, not understanding what he saw but knowing he was losing her he reacted with inhuman speed and grasped her hands in his.

“Stop it,” she said, her voice cool alarm, averting her eyes.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said softly.

“*Frightened?*” she said, nearly laughing at how little he understood her.

His hands tightened over hers. “Let’s leave, now, together.” He held her fast. “It’s what we both want—don’t lie to me anymore.”

But with a surprising ease that did not feel exactly like physical strength she removed her hands from his and walked quickly out of the room.

For a moment, Gavin was too surprised to move. Coming to his senses, determined to go after her, he took a step forward when he felt his arm grabbed, and nearly turned to attack. He spun around, pulling his arm away, only to see his friend Aubrey Fairbain, his gravity completely at odds with his usual jovial persona. “What did you do to her Gavin? The Lockwood sisters are friends.”

Gavin turned sharply upon *his* ‘friend’, looming. The man held his gaze, surprising Gavin for his steadfastness. Suddenly a look passed between them that gave Gavin the unsettling suspicion that his friend knew what he was. That he had known all along and that it was why he had befriended him.

The notion startled him.

Angered him. He glared. “I would never hurt an innocent woman,” Gavin growled. “If you don’t know that by now, then you don’t know me, *friend*.” He walked away, leaving Lord Fairbain staring after him. A cool sweat had sprung up against his back and his skin prickled, alive with the desire to flee. He had been found out. All this while Fairbain had secretly known. He had been deceived. But he put it out of his mind. Because he had to find Tanaquill again, and because the thought of having placed himself in a situation so untenable filled him with an irrational terror and rage.

Tanaquill hardly heard the music as she walked swiftly away. She knew her eyes were reacting to her emotions, constantly changing color, but she could not calm them and so she tried to keep her head down as she searched for her cousins. The ball was over for her. Her first soiree among humans had been a disaster and it was time to leave.

The feel of Gavin dragging her against him, his powerful hands gripping her, flashed through her mind as if it were happening again, and seemed to bring her human body back to that moment, causing a hollow, nervous excitement in her stomach at the memory of his mouth coming down on hers.

Why did I let him do that? she thought, feeling a growing desperation pounding in her heart. If her spell had wavered for even a moment, if anyone had seen—she bumped into someone clumsily and looked up unthinkingly. Dark haired with green eyes, beautiful, her full mouth turned down in a voluptuous pout, the woman's haughty stare caught hers. Their eyes met and a single dark brow shot up with curious surprise, sharpening the outline of a jagged scar that nearly ran into her hair.

Tanaquill quickly dropped her head, apologized and hurried onward, hoping that the woman would believe what she saw to be a trick of the candlelight, but feeling her stare like a brand on her back as she retreated. *I will have to tell my cousins...* She hurried into the corridor, past the other guests, feeling suffocated in her gown, silk and lace and undergarments between her legs, heavy, cumbersome, the tightness of her bodice constricting her breath. *This is what a woman's body feels like when it is upset. How do I calm it?*

Impulsively she had woven a pixie confusion around Gavin to try to learn more about him, if he was a danger, if he was the one of whom the oracle had spoken. But then something altogether different had happened. How could she have done such a thing?

Her hand on the railing, Tanaquill hurried as best she could down the huge central staircase, excusing herself through the thinning but still dense crowd, the voices, the orchestra starting up again above her, everything seeming too loud to her, as chaotic as her thoughts, her racing heart. A moment more and she would have glowed pink and enveloped Gavin in the scent of the lilacs of forgetfulness, whisking him to her bed. *"Oh,"* she said softly. Without thought, needing air, she stepped outside behind the house and...stopped, relieved.

Finally, gratefully, she found her cousins in the garden.

A cool breeze caressed the warm, damp skin on Tanaquill's neck and face. The paper lanterns that she had looked down upon from the balcony were now above her, like stars caught in the trees. She heard her cousin Daphne's voice and the surprising relief that swept through her nearly calmed her.

“...Come look, Chloe. How does she get a lady-slipper to grow in her garden? The dew gathered from this would make an excellent binding spell. Perhaps I’ll call on Lady Teversall at an unfashionable hour tomorrow.” Among the cluster of trees and lanterns, beyond the winding gravel path that glowed like old bone in the moonlight, Daphne was crouched over a flower, examining it with magical intent. Deep red spiky petals jutted out over what looked like a delicate miniature of a woman’s yellow slipper. Daphne peered down at the flower and it almost appeared to look up at her. “She’s not one of us, is she?”

“Lady Teversall? I should think not,” Chloe said, coming to look down at the flower. “Nor do I think she would welcome a visit at an unfashionable hour, unless it were from a fashionable admirer. Anyhow, you could grow one of these too if you put your mind to it.”

“I’d never thought to...” They were in their own world, far away from what had happened to Tanaquill in the darkened corner of the ballroom. *They are no part of this*, Tanaquill thought with a sense of relief as her slippers crunched on the narrow gravel path, wishing dearly to keep it that way.

Chloe noticed her approach and straightened. “Tanaquill?” she said, concerned. “Dear, what happened?”

Tanaquill had tried not to appear upset, but it seemed she had not managed it. She took in a breath, steadied herself. She wanted to be truthful, but did not want to alarm them. “It would be best if we took our leave, for the gentleman—”

Daphne stood quickly. “Goodness, what is it?”

Tanaquill quickly glanced about her. “I will explain everything once we return home.” She would admit it all once they were home, safe. She did not know what Gavin wanted, or to what lengths he would go to get it. They must leave quickly.

Chloe studied her for an instant, then, seeming to have decided, said, “I’ll skewer Aubrey for this!”

Daphne calmly gathered the shawl she had lain on the stone bench and threw it about Tanaquill’s shoulders. “Don’t worry about anything,” Daphne said kindly. “Let’s get you home and we can fix everything afterwards.”

Chloe clutched her reticule. “And wasn’t somebody supposed to be keeping an eye on them? Or am I mistaken, sister?” Tanaquill felt the warmth rise to her cheeks.

Daphne caught Tanaquill’s eye and Tanaquill knew that she had probably seen her vanish into a corner of the ballroom with Gavin. “Such a fussbudget!” Daphne declared. “I hope we shall see that nice young gentleman again,” she added.

Tanaquill didn’t even want to think about it, although it was kind of Daphne to say so. Readied, Tanaquill turned to leave, took a step, and was overcome—something from the fairyworld had arrived.

Her skin prickled with a powerful intent her body wanted to melt into and vanish. *This feeling...*

Something about it very familiar, but something else completely alien. She could not guess what the strange magic was, only that it was lovely, yet queerly tainted, and that someone was using something in it that was of fairy...

Tanaquill's gaze was drawn downward, to the spring flowers and green shrubbery, their colors growing deeper, richer against the shadows of the looming house. The fairies wandering the garden in the dark began to gather, looking up at her in concern. "Princess..." She put a finger to her lips to still them. They were not to be endangered because of her. "*It is dangerous for you here,*" she said softly and they bowed and backed away. "Beware," they whispered.

She looked up sharply. *Chloe, Daphne, we are in danger...*

A witch's magic. That was what she felt.

It pushed right through her, and out to her cousins.

"Tanaquill—?" Daphne's head turned sharply.

Chloe went rigid as a stone. The lamps' glow was stark against the night, making the sisters' curled hair shine against their bare necks, their richly colored gowns made more vivid by the deep shadows among the fabric's folds. "Great Minerva," Chloe said softly, her arms stiff at her sides, her fingers strangely extended. Something was wrong.

"Chloe?" Tanaquill said.

Daphne looked from one to the other, then sharply around her, but it was happening too quickly. "What is it?"

"Oh dear," Chloe said, frowning as she began to shrink.

Shocked at what was happening to her cousin, Tanaquill covered her mouth with her hands just as, above the three women, a deep growl caught her sensitive ears, sending a frisson of surprise down her spine that nearly made her step back involuntarily.

Instead she looked up to see Gavin's shadowed form, entirely human, and yet crouched on the balcony's ledge as agile as a leopard in a tree. The light of the ballroom, stark behind him, lit his outline, which loomed over her for an instant just as the silver moon hovered over the fine house; an eerie, distant warning. Tanaquill opened her mouth to speak, to tell him to leave her alone, but she was not quick enough and the words did not come.

Gavin leapt at her. The human transformed into a sleek, sinuous wolf which landed in an agile crouch in front of her, then back into a man, his formalwear sleek and somehow looking newer, as if a shimmer rippled across it as he sprang and shoved her to the ground with a careful force that she guessed to be only a fraction of his strength. Even so, the force of the impact took the breath out of her and she fell hard with him pinning her.

A whistling sound as of an insect, speeding through the wind, sharp and clear to her

sensitive hearing, caught her attention just before his subtle reaction, a twitch at the dull impact of something upon Gavin's skin, sliding into his taut muscle.

He stayed locked on top of her, covering her protectively even as, teeth clenched, he let out a deep growl of pain, his eyes flashing golden, the muscle in his jaw clenching, beasts glimmering through him like an angry shadow he barely controlled, before vanishing into him again as if called back.

Tanaquill opened her mouth in wonder. But the wonder she felt became numb alarm, disbelief, as everything she had felt about Gavin tonight suddenly fell into place. *The thousand beasts within.* She held back a scream. *His kind are gone, she told herself, They must be.*

She wished to flee with her cousins. But she had felt the dart sink into him. *He has been poisoned.* Tanaquill's heart beat hard in her chest, her breath rose and fell sharply.

The oracle, she thought, terrified.

He saved me.

Its meaning was finally becoming clear.

I do not want him to die.



Whatever it was that had pricked him had released a poison that felt as though it spread rapidly under Gavin's skin, a stinging cloud riding him like a horse. It didn't feel like any venom or sting he knew on land or sea and the effect was unlike physical pain, more like an intolerable cacophony of voices, some battering him with the belief that he was going to die, others like high pitched screams trying to erase him, make him disappear.

Another wave came over him and he bit down against it, eyes closed, clenching with her underneath him. He growled and pushed the sensation back as if to the surface of his skin. But he felt it on him like a robe of needles fighting to get in and Gavin knew that as soon as his tense muscles relaxed, whatever this was would swarm back into him and probably kill him. *Not until I am sure she is safe,* he thought and held Tanaquill down firmly, blocking her.

Tanaquill looked up at him with angry reproach in her eyes, as if knowing what he had done and that it was too late to stop him. She did not try to release herself, but remained perfectly still as if afraid to hurt him further.

Her eyes, he thought for a moment, forgetting to fight, her eyes were beautiful and strange.

"You do not even know me," she whispered, angry, "but you would die for me." There was fear in her voice. He felt her hands slip under his coat, just below his rib cage to support him. Then he was on the ground and she was leaning over him, looking strangely like she had been thrown away with her pretty dress dirtied like that, but her expression was keen, tense and resolute, unlike any he'd ever seen on a debutante. "You have been poisoned," she said, her voice steady.

He looked at the dart that was lodged in his arm. Long, thin, exquisitely wrought of a strangely engraved metal, the dart exuded shimmering tendrils of viscous, golden smoke. It looked quite deadly, he thought in an impassive, distant way.

“An assassin’s dart,” she said quickly, her expression unreadable. “Fight it as you are doing. Hold back the poison—” her tone was a warning bell at sea, sharp and clear in the distance, but fading. “...a rare weapon...”

Her eyes looked somehow large. Words came with difficulty, through a thickness in his throat. He saw something in her eyes that he regretted. “Don’t be afraid of me,” he said, his voice rough but familiar to his ears, and he caught her surprise before she hid it.

“Do not use your strength to speak, please.” She seemed calmer now, her breathing steady and deep as she looked down at him with resolve.



He was fighting the assassin’s dart, a blade made of lake water that yearns for the sea, and one of the rarest weapons in fairyworld. A fairy dart was difficult to construct and dangerous for a fairy to even hold before it had spent its poison in its victim. Tanaquill knew of such a weapon having been used only twice before in history, both times against royal fairies who had died instantly.

But Gavin had not, and Tanaquill studied him, her chest tight with wonder. Somehow, because of what he was, he had been able to hold back the poison long enough to try to ensure her safety. *I will try to save him*, she thought, determined. *He is still alive, I can do it*. She would not think of the consequences of her actions. She would do what the oracle intended, accepting her fate willingly, with the fear she had always felt for it spurring her on. She reached her arm back to cast a pixie spell—a glamour that would conceal them so that she could begin the dangerous healing. But then she stopped. Her feelings recoiling in her, she felt hope plummeting inside her chest as she looked down at him.

The poison is winning... She could almost see through his skin and watch it flood him. It was happening too quickly. *He is going to die*. Gavin winced and she threw the glamour around them, pushing back a welling up in her human chest, something stabbing her that made her eyes burn, made her want to fall onto him and cry, apologize to him, but she remained perfectly still. She had been ready to go against everything she had prepared herself to be, and even now she wished she had been able to do so, without having to stop and think of the consequences, for then it was too hard. It was not right of her to feel this way, she thought quickly, confused tears blurring her vision, because she did not wish him to go, when perhaps it would be best.

Tanaquill owed to her kind more than she felt capable of being. Ever since the oracle she had known that she could grow up to bring ruin to them, so she had lived her life to prove it wrong. And she’d come to the human realm and everything had gone wrong and she’d

wanted...just for one moment—

He is not going to be there, she thought, sadly, angrily. Gavin would die, and she would return to her kingdom and become the leader she had been born and trained to be. No one else could understand that. Or this. Her life would continue as planned, only she would remember—she would remember and be alone.

I do not want him to die, she thought, and she couldn't believe that she was going to cry because the oracle had been wrong. She dug her fingers into her palms and took in a tight breath, refusing to allow any of what she was thinking to show on her face when it might trouble him to see her upset because he seemed to care for her, for his own unknown reasons.

Tanaquill heard firm footsteps on the gravel path, a quick, sure stride, but hardly took notice. The glamour shimmered like a bubble around her, and hid the two of them. While she could see and hear the outside, any who looked would see a reflection of the rest of the garden on her glamour's silvery, curved surface.

“What the devil is going on?” Fairbain had appeared in the garden. He looked about, then turned to Daphne who stood with a look of stricken agitation. “What's happening here?” he turned in place. “Where's Chloe?” he said, his tone growing sharply worried.

“You never told us he was a shapeshifter!” Chloe squeaked.

Hearing how strange her cousin's voice sounded, a pang of fear struck Tanaquill and she turned her head sharply to see a tiny figure on the stone bench, the size of a mouse, but dressed in a gown that had had the sense to shrink along with her. It upset her, but at the same time something in her hardened.

She quietly smoothed Gavin's damp hair. “—I will not leave your side.” He seemed to watch her. Although he had fought against it, he had not been able to hold the poison back for long. His body had grown rigid, as if he were stiffening like the limb of a tree. His expression, too, grew stiff, his mouth opening a fraction, giving in. He seemed very alone. He'd perhaps had to face many difficulties and would be able to accept what would come. Tanaquill did not want to tell him, but he would want and deserve honesty. “*An assassin's dart is always deadly*,” she said softly. “I am sorry.” To prove it, impulsively, in gratitude, she lowered her head, her hand pressed into the cool grass, and gently kissed his lips.

CHAPTER 6

Gavin's lips were firm and warm. At the touch of her mouth Tanaquill felt him move a fraction and her breath caught in surprise. She did not move as, almost imperceptibly, his head tilted up to tuck her mouth more comfortably against his. His mouth opened, she felt the whisper of his breath. Startled, she let him kiss her until she felt him weaken and then carefully pulled away.

Gavin's head fell to the side, and he slipped, not into death, but into some kind of sleep.

Stunned and breathless, Tanaquill stared down at him, awakened by surprise and with a glimmer of trust that somehow, miraculously, he actually might live.

Kneeling by him, she quickly pulled out the dart and held it in her palm. *Be gone*, she thought, as it turned back into water and slipped through her fingers.

She dissolved the glamour thoughtlessly in a sweep of her arm and she and Gavin reappeared to the surprised faces of her cousins and Lord Fairbain.

The dart was intended for me, she thought angrily. For the first time the significance fell on her. Her mind slipped back to her kingdom, the court and the intrigues she must face every day. She knew herself to be naïve about much of the world, especially the human realm, but courtly matters she grasped innately.

She did not understand what had happened to her cousin, not entirely. But she understood the dart. And although she could never have anticipated it, she knew immediately who had done this. *The prince has tried to assassinate me*, she thought, stunned, but somehow not surprised. Her future husband, whom she had known since they were children.

Apparently he did not want to marry her either.

Standing, she calmly studied the shadows, able to see into the darkness where the hedges had been disturbed by someone crouching among them. The way the branches groaned back together, the soil packed down by the weight of someone's feet, disturbed leaves. Whoever it was had not been foolish enough to linger and learn what a fairy princess could do to them.

Daphne was at her side as Tanaquill stared into the darkness. She felt hands brush the dirt from her gown. "Tanaquill, we must leave," Daphne said finally, softly.

Tanaquill nodded. "May we house him?"

"Certainly," Daphne agreed. Tanaquill finally looked at her cousin and at her kind, steady gaze she felt her breathing even out a bit.

The slightly altered group moved to flee. Daphne turned and, with a surprising facility, as if she had done so for years, scooped up her shrunken sister and placed her into her reticule. Chloe gripped Daphne's thumb for purchase and, with a stoic expression, disappeared inside the glossy silk pouch. Taking care that the drawstrings of her reticule weren't pulled so tightly that her sister was denied air, and with a quick touch to her hair to ensure she looked composed, Daphne led Tanaquill from the garden as Lord Fairbain called for a footman to help him with Gavin.

At the front of the house, carriages waited in line, linkboys ran back and forth and guests prepared to take their leave. Daphne melted into a cluster of guests. When someone mentioned there was a gentleman asleep in the garden Tanaquill stiffened. She felt extraordinarily self-conscious when she thought of her stained dress, as dirty as if she'd wrestled an elf. In the dimness, though, no one seemed to notice.

Lord Fairbain and a stout footman appeared, carrying Gavin around the corner of the house. Tanaquill found it hard to take her eyes off Gavin. Fairbain and the footman made a wide circle around the guests, taking Gavin around the edge of the street, trying not to draw attention. But men in elegant attire began ambling pointedly in that direction, women took hesitant steps, the crowd converging on the curious spectacle as Fairbain and the footman carried Gavin to a carriage up ahead. She heard Fairbain say something about drunkenness and fighting, and there was answering laughter. Tanaquill forced herself to look away and hurried home with her cousins.

CHAPTER 7

The two carriages eased to a halt. Tanaquill looked out at the Lockwoods' house. She slipped out of the carriage and hurried up the stone steps after her cousins. Looking back for an instant, she caught Lord Fairbain lifting Gavin onto his shoulders with ease, while the footman stood by holding his coat. It struck her as curious that whereas he'd struggled before, Lord Fairbain seemed to require little effort to carry Gavin now. Had that been for show? *Strange*, she thought to herself.

Inside, Daphne carried Chloe into the drawing room, placed her on a table and hurried off, returning with a thimble small enough for her to drink water from. Chloe grasped the silver thimble in both hands.

Tanaquill anxiously watched her gulp the water down. "Is she going to be all right?"

Chloe waved a tiny arm at her. "I'll be fine, dear!" she squeaked. "It's just this spell has left me terribly thirsty." She tilted the thimble, drained the last of its contents, and held it out for more. "Don't you worry," she said cheerily.

Daphne took the thimble. "She's right. This is witchcraft, and I have an idea what sort; we may need you on that account later, but for now there's very little for you to do." She handed the thimble off to the maid who had arrived with a pitcher and a worried expression.

While the maid struggled to pour a single drop, Daphne was pulling an attractive leather bound book from the mantle. “In the meantime you should see about our guest. From what I gathered in the garden, that was a magic you were familiar with.”

Chloe, taking the thimble again from the maid, nodded in sympathy before drinking the entire thimbleful down in one go.

Tanaquill watched her ravenous thirst with concern. “Unfortunately I am familiar with the weapon. A fairy dart crafted at great cost.”

Chloe nearly gasped for air at the end of her long gulp. “How terrible. Well, you’re not in danger in *this* house.”

“She’s right, you know, we’ll discuss everything about that later.” Daphne hurried out of the room and down into the basement where she stored a number of her most exotic magical powders. “I’ll take care of Chloe!” she called out. “You take care of Gavin!”

Tanaquill looked back at her tiny cousin, not wanting to leave her in this vulnerable state. From the foyer, she heard the sounds of Lord Fairbain and the driver taking Gavin up the stairs.

“She’s right,” Chloe squeaked when the sound had receded. She wagged her tiny finger. “You must handle the shapeshifter. Leave Daphne to get on with the spells, and I—I will sit on this table edge and scream for help if an ant attacks.” She sat with a clearly dissatisfied plunk and glumly cupped her chin in her hand. “Go on now, I’ll be fine. It’s probably from the coven we’re fighting with.”

“Fighting with?” Tanaquill exclaimed, surprised.

“Yes, yes, go on now, the gentleman needs you.”

Chloe was right in that. There was nothing Tanaquill could do for her cousin but worry and feel guilty over what had happened. With a quick but carefully executed curtsy and a sigil traced in the air with her hand, Tanaquill showed her cousin her deepest admiration. The parting gesture reserved for the Fay courts expressed her gratitude for her cousins’ kindness and fortitude. Chloe’s tiny face showed surprise, knowing the honor she had been accorded, and she smiled, almost blushing. Tanaquill turned and raced up the stairs.

Once upstairs, Tanaquill followed the voices she heard down the corridor. A door connecting one wing of the house to the next had been left open. Down the next corridor she found them, their voices coming from the room—“I’ve got it, get his shoes...” She hurried forward, tense, and peered inside in time to watch from the doorway as the footman adjusted Gavin’s legs on the bed. She felt unable to bring herself to enter the room while the two other gentlemen were still there.

They had taken Gavin to a large bedroom, composed of darker woods and in a heavier, more somber style than the rest of the house. An ornately patterned coverlet of thick red and black embroidery draped a four-poster bed on a raised dais. Did Gavin’s sleep seem to her even

deeper than it did in the carriage?

Lord Fairbain, who had quickly turned away when she'd arrived and begun busying himself fixing his cravat and tucking in his cuffs, glanced back to her. "Is there anything you need?" he asked as if everyone but her had fully accepted that she would be caring for Gavin exclusively.

She shook her head. "Not at the moment."

The carriage driver set down Gavin's shoes and left to wait for Lord Fairbain at the end of the corridor.

Fairbain came over to the doorway and stopped beside her. "The house is something of a labyrinth," he said apologetically. "This is their uncle's wing—and this guest room is for his close friends. Most of the furniture came directly from the Lockwoods' ancestral home in the country. No one will come here."

He knew far more about her cousins and their family than she did. He quickly glanced down the corridor and Tanaquill realized he must be impatient to be with Chloe. He gestured to Gavin. "Can you take care of him?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you for your assistance."

With a nod, he hurried off.

For a moment Tanaquill remained standing at the bedroom door. By the bed the candle glowed softly, illuminating shadow more than casting light, Gavin's peacefully sleeping profile caught in its glow like a cameo.

He may have wanted to kiss her while awake, but she was sure that he would have preferred to know when such a thing was occurring, let alone that he was about to experience an intimate fairy working. Tanaquill would have to do things she had never done with anyone before.

If Gavin died now, unaided, Tanaquill would not have put her kingdom in jeopardy.

But if she helped him to awaken. If he lived...Tanaquill felt a heat flush her cheeks, a tightening in her abdomen. She could not hide the truth from herself.

Healing magic was love magic, and if Gavin died after she had performed the full rite Tanaquill would end as too many fairy healers had, who had risked performing the rare, dangerous, rite. Her love would be lost with Gavin and she would never be able to love anyone again, friend, husband or family. Her heart would grow cold and dulled and she would change into an unrecognizable being, with hard, empty eyes, their color bone white for eternity. It was an ugly fate, the risk of which was why fairy healers were a separate caste—and why no princess of the Fay should ever perform the healing rite. But more than that it was the oracle. The reason she should simply close her eyes and let him go.

In the quiet of the bedroom, Tanaquill stood beside Gavin's deeply slumbering form. She

let her fingers glide down the sleeve of crisp, off-white linen along the inside of his arm. She drew her thumb across the soft open skin along his wrist, and, feeling she shouldn't, slipped her hand into his.

His hand felt large and warm in hers, and for a moment she could pretend that he understood they were in this together. They made very unlikely companions, she supposed. "*We will have protected one another,*" she said softly, as if he could hear her and respond.

She steadied her gaze, her eyes resting on his face. Such a rare being. Powerful, like the rest of his kind must have been. *Or perhaps this one has a great will to live.* She wondered if he'd ever know just how powerful *she* was. Her eyes lingered over his firm lips, the angle of his broad shoulders, remembering the insistence of his hands pulling her closer amid the music and the press of humans that surrounded them. But now his need was forgotten, his breathing steady and even as he dreamed, fading like sunlight passing over the water. She leaned over him, looming.

Of what does he dream? she wondered. *What does he fear?*

~~~~~  
Scotland, 1271  
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Gavin raced across the land his father had once called home. Another man owned the land and the castle along the cliffs above their tiny servant's cottage, but knowing that had never bothered him. Gavin had never begrudged Sir Guillemot anything, even before he had come to trust him. Quite the contrary. Gavin had grown to admire Sir Guillemot de Perseigne, for he was the sort any young man would admire. He had appreciated Sir Guillemot for giving his father work, and letting Gavin's family live in the small cottage. Eventually, when there were no better guests, Gavin had been allowed to sit beside Sir Guillemot at table. At those suppers, Gavin paid little attention to his mother and father as he watched Sir Guillemot, his broad, confident gestures, booming voice, robust smile and confident laugh. Afterward Gavin would catch himself imitating Sir Guillemot without intending to. Sometimes Gavin even believed that his family had finally found a place in the world. *Maybe,* he had told himself as he looked upon this man larger than life, *I can trust a human.*

How could he have been so mistaken?

A howl caught on the wind, the mournful call compelling him forward despite the pain of the arrowhead embedded in his thigh. His claws gripped the icy ground, pounding over leaves, earth and stone. His muscles ached as he took long leonine strides, covering ground quickly, but not quickly enough, Gavin thought desperately. Icy mist dampened his tawny fur, a strange color in this land, as he raced, panting, bleeding, the sound of his ragged breath loud and lonely in his ears.

His mother's cry tore into him and he tried to run faster but Gavin had been far away, caged for the sport of Sir Guillemot's brother. It was no longer the cry of a wolf, but of an elderly woman. *Why would she change back?* he thought, near frantic. Gavin was nearing the cliffside, nowhere left to run. *Mother, Father, I'm coming.*

Searing pain gripped him as he leapt over the cliff and shifted. If he had not been wounded the shift would have occurred faster than the human eye could see; wounded as he was, it was slower. As he fell through the air, the golden fur on his back wove together into sharp quills that opened like strange flowers. He spread his wings and with a hawk's cry soared up over the vast expanse, leaving a trail of blood along the ground.

He surveyed the terrain below. The foam-crested sea gleamed in the sun, sharp and cold. Gavin's heart leapt into his throat; at the battered entrance to the sea gate was a sickening sight. A wolf, ragged and bleeding, his father, circled his mother protectively. In front of them was Sir Guillemot.

Sir Guillemot was clad in his rusty Crusader's armor. Beside him was his son, a youth in breeches and doe skin boots, with an arrow in his bow, which was stretched taut. In an instant the boy had shot Gavin's father a second time. Gavin's mother screamed as the wolf crumpled to the ground. Gavin dove.

Shifting in the air from a bird to a human, Gavin landed in a crouch behind the knight and stood in the clothes he'd put on that morning, which returned to him like a second skin. Rage battled his wound-weakness and he had transformed seamlessly, silently. He wanted the last words Sir Guillemot heard to be spoken from his mouth—he wanted only that from him now.

The youth was unaware of the danger behind him and leveled his next arrow at Gavin's mother. Kneeling by her husband, she had refused to flee and instead had shifted into human form, probably to try to plead with them. But she was just crying now. Gavin's father, too wounded to shift out of his wolf form, was breathing hard and clearly dying.

"Turn around." Gavin didn't recognize his own voice.

The boy turned swiftly and let loose his arrow, which whistled past Gavin's ear as he sprang.

Sir Guillemot, whose face had once seemed strong and handsome to Gavin, looked ugly as it contorted in angry surprise. "Abomination!" he spat, sword swinging.

Human hands, wolf clawed, ripped off the Norman's helmet and slashed the knight's head as Gavin's jaws grew wolfen and sought flesh. *You are nothing*, he thought as the sword dropped from Sir Guillemot's hand. *Human.*

The boy fumbled for his next arrow as Gavin's jaws crushed the knight's throat. Gavin pushed Sir Guillemot's limp body away in disgust, spitting bloody gristle from his mouth, and turned toward the sound of arrows clattering from their scabbard. He growled as the boy

scrambled to make the steep steps along the cliffside. Gavin wiped the blood from his mouth, smoothly completing the transformation back into a man. He made to go after the boy.

“No. Let him go.” His mother cradled his father as she watched the boy escape. Her voice shook. “They don’t understand,” she said, as if that would help *him* understand. She looked down to where his father lay. “They are weak,” she said softly, as she smoothed her husband’s hair.

Forgetting the boy, Gavin dropped to his knees beside his father. He had always felt that his father was trying to befriend the humans for his sake. His mother and father had each other, but his father had been willing to risk everything because he knew that one day his son would be alone. He should never have tried. They had paid the price for his belief that the humans could be trusted.

“Honor your father’s wishes and never hate the humans,” his mother’s voice broke into his thoughts, marshaling all her strength. She gently closed his father’s eyes. “We are the last of our kind. One day I will go with your father and you will be alone. You must find a way to live among the humans. Don’t stoke the hatred within you. Learn to trust again. Don’t destroy yourself—”

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London 1802  
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Gavin awoke with a start. Drenched in sweat, he sat up, the noises of Bond Street in his ears, feeling weak, as if from dragging the weight of time behind him that he could not gather up. Weary, he rose from his bed and pushed his hands through his hair as he walked naked to the looking glass. Dunking his hands into the basin of water he splashed his face and peered at his reflection. The water ran off his chin in rivulets, dripping back into the basin. The man who looked back at him was worn out, his green eyes guarded, besieged.

He ran a hand over his rough cheek and down along the broad angled plane of his jaw, feeling the stubble he would need to shave off to look presentable. Walking to the window, he looked down at the busy human world below him. “I’ve tried,” he said to himself, his voice breaking the silence in the room. But he’d never belong in the human world—and there was no other world left.

Hundreds of years had passed since the brutal deaths of his parents, years spent barely living among humans, never letting anyone close enough to learn what he was. Maybe it was better there was no one else like him if there was nothing more for them than this. And search as he might, he’d never found a trace of anything otherworldly in this world, nothing more than human to be tormented for being different.

Over the years he’d seen witch hunts, inquisitions and mass hysteria, seen women all too

human die for being too good at healing the sick. He knew what humans did to each other when they came up against what they merely imagined to be beyond their ken.

Alone in the world, Gavin had never been able to abide by his parents' wish that he find happiness among humans. His mother and father had been kind, caring toward every human they met and forgiving, even at the unforgivable. They had always taught him that the human world was the only world he would ever have. But he couldn't forgive the humans for what they did, and he would certainly never trust them. Quite the opposite. Instead of what his parents had wished for him, his most fervent wish was to see the rise of a new age of shapeshifters, that some day would dominate humans.

After his mother died, Gavin had lived alone in remote parts of Europe, putting down roots only to rip them up, if for no other reason than simply by virtue of his long lifespan. Traveling from place to place, he would hear stories about devils and witches in the woods and waste lands. Sometimes they spoke of witches who could change into animals. After his mother's death, Gavin had begun to pursue such stories.

He traveled to the forests of Russia and the desolate Moroccan highlands, hundreds of years, searching, and he never found anyone. Never caught the scent of another shapeshifter on the wind. Never found anything but peasants eager to sell him blue-eyed charms and pouches of herbs for protection. But one morning, after having lived in Buda for a time and feeling a strong urge to leave, while traveling west with no particular destination, Gavin had picked up a London newspaper left in a tavern. It wasn't very old and, sitting with his back against the wall, in a dark corner, he'd scanned the grimy paper while waiting for his dinner. What he came across made his heartbeat pick up in spite of himself. He read it over again, and then again. It was about strange occurrences in the city. It would turn out to be nothing, he'd told himself. But that such rumors were occurring in London—a modern city—was unusual. Only one time before had he come across such rumors in such a place; it had led him to Paris and Versailles. This newspaper told of an elegant woman seen changing into a cat or a bird. Those who witnessed the strange event guessed by her manner and expensive if somewhat old-fashioned dress that she was of the gentry.

Gavin had a distaste for cities, and for London more than most. He struggled with himself against going. He'd known it would come to nothing, but in the end he'd been unable to stay away. Because if there was the slightest chance...

A female of his kind... He'd bedded humans. But he'd held back. He'd held back what he was for something that meant more to him than anything, that he tried to think very little about; he saved the part of him that mattered most, the part that in the most intimate act would reveal not only what he was, but would in his mind, in his very being, join them in a bond that was the one thing he held sacred in the world. He had taken the brief instant of peace the human women

offered without giving himself, something that would only have terrified them, but without which the act held no meaning for him.

Gavin wanted what was his birthright. A true union, an equal partner, a companion in his essence. And she probably didn't even exist.

Gavin was very near giving up and leaving London when, three days ago, a man who'd befriended him soon after his arrival in town had invited him to his mother's 'little soirée', which he had learned was actually to be a lavish ball in Mayfair and one of the most prestigious events of the season. It would be his last evening among the capital's insufferable aristocrats.

The images from his dream, still strong, so much more vivid than the twilight world in which he had been moving, overcame him and his jaw tightened. That night they had burned his father on a funeral pyre. His mother, who had already lived over a thousand years, lived less than a century more.

If it hadn't been for his mother's understanding of the humans, he could never have tolerated being among them at all, nor could he likely have passed for one of them. For the sake of his parents he had long ago tried to forgive humans—and failed. He couldn't hide from himself the raw need to search out his own kind, if there were any left.

And find one living soul he could trust.

He wiped his brow, looked down at the drenched cloth—he was still sweating. *What's going on?* There, in the darkening window, she floated, blond, the strangest eyes, and big, huge insect wings...She was reaching out to him. He was falling back. Blood thundered in his ears. *Am I truly awake?* he thought, the soft bed beneath him, her hands cool against his abdomen.

CHAPTER 8

Gavin tried to push her away in his sleep, but in a lost, soft way.

Tanaquill slid her hands under his shirt and dragged, tore the garments down as if tearing flimsy paper. She reached back and began removing the gown she wore. Her human gown had suddenly become cumbersome, stiff and coarse against her, and she tore the silk without a thought and broke the stays with hands that in her current, agitated state could have torn iron.

She looked down at her exposed body with foggy impatience, at what remained of her gown, and ripped the sleeves which still clung awkwardly to her, the sound of their tearing suddenly painfully loud in her ears, interrupted only by the sound of his breathing, which she no

longer heard as different from her own.

She would become vulnerable with him. If, during the healing, he sought to defend himself against her and became dangerous—she had seen how quickly he could change—would he become something other than this form she saw before her while they—while she...*If he grew claws, fangs...* She hesitated for only an instant before her hands slid down the lean muscles of his abdomen, and her fingers began to quietly tear away his breeches.

As princess a piece of every fairy tribe's strengths were within her. From them she possessed the strength that enabled her line to rule. And in some small part, their every hope and fear was within her too. Over the thousands of years her kind had lived in the lakes and meadows of England, in the orchards and fields, in the cottages of the humans, it had been that way.

What I do, now, changes everything.

The human things surrounding her felt far away. The subtle glow of the candle beside the bed a distant beacon. She could no longer turn away from the man on the bed. Dancing with Gavin tonight had made Tanaquill realize she longed for someone with whom she could share eternity with. A partner in life with whom all the little moments could be fondly remembered. She pined for it acutely, realizing she would marry a different sort of man.

She ran her hand down the firm contours of his chest. He didn't stir at her touch, but she knew it would not remain that way for long.

"Fly," she whispered, and lifted into the air. She caught her breath as the sensation of the fairy world coursed through her. She felt the ancient power more than she felt herself as she floated over Gavin's body, looking down at him, accepting her desire for the man beneath her.

As she floated above him, her hair, grown long and thick, snaked around in the air as if caught in a stream's current. Her blue glow illuminated the room and lit his skin as she descended, nearly touching him, and began marking his body with her secret name. The sigil grew, swirling tendrils of colored starlight coiling and spreading from her fingers like glowing ribbons. This was no witches' spell, no subtle incantation of a mage. It was a fairy working, coming out of her directly, from an ancient race, brought forth in patterns, sigils she had been born with, emblazoned on her for all eternity.

The winding colors shimmered, hummed, escaped her fingers eagerly and grew in the room, forming a winding, vine-like pattern that rose to the ceiling in an arc larger than the bed, a vast, intricate design. She tugged the threads connected to her fingers, heavy like wool in water, pulling the huge sigil that moved above them like a giant, glowing jellyfish. The sigil descended upon them, hitting her with mortal force, blanketing them, rippling.

At the sigil's first impact she felt it returning into her and merging with the sleeping man, entwining them in its glowing snare, its light pulsing into their bodies and through them, the shapeshifter's power drawing up through her.

In its wake she saw for a moment the room turn a frightening bone white, as if looking at her own future, the price for handing Gavin her heart. A future waiting outside of her like a predatory beast eager to pounce. She could feel no fear, however, for she felt completely other than herself, taking in a sudden breath of surprise as the power of the sigil beat in her; a buzzing in her mind, louder than thought, a metal taste in her mouth, her hair floating about her like a plaything.

She descended on him, covering him entirely, like a bee to an open flower. Her breasts met his chest, her lips met his, her thighs rested against his. He moaned softly and the sound of it, the feel of his breath, slid through her like warm honey, into every part of her down to her toes. The first taste of him settled inside her for a blissful moment before giving her away. She struggled and her anger rose when she felt him eagerly steal from her heart. What she gave went to him hungrily, like a little golden fish hurriedly swimming off. She gasped and pulled away as far as the sigil that now embraced them would allow.

Tanaquill would never forget this night and Gavin might not remember it in the slightest. In the years to come, she would pray to see him in her crowd of guests, so much she might even see his face for an instant in another's. His being would be imprinted in her mind and soul forever. As she studied Gavin's face, a face she would never feel satisfied she had seen clearly enough, Tanaquill accepted the change her actions tonight would inevitably bring. The hollow longing for him which could never be filled.

The sigil had an inanimate kindness in it, like a storm threatening, warning one before it comes. It was a final asking; there was no healer to perform the rite, only her, alone.

With the bright glow of the sigil wound within them both, linking them as Tanaquill had never linked with anyone, with gentle fingers, she tilted Gavin's chin upward to kiss him deeper.

Gavin's eyes flew open and he gripped her upper arms, pulling her down onto him. For an instant she thought he had awoken, but his eyes were unseeing, his strength fierce and unaware. For a moment Tanaquill was even frightened; he didn't know where he was, what was occurring, and she felt Gavin's mind calling out to her as if drowning, pulling at her spirit even as his lean muscles shivered with strength and the souls of beasts roamed over his skin like shadows on a wall. She felt them crawl up under her own skin in a way they should not. She was a fairy and did not change her shape to the beast, yet Gavin must have felt that he was mating with one of his own kind, that there was a shapeshifter in his arms. He brought her under him, his full strength pressing down on her.

Gavin penetrated her and thrust deeply. A rushing sound filled Tanaquill's ears, and she felt their connection break for a startling instant. Darkness filled the room and surprise, of a very plain and lovely nature, caught her when Gavin lifted his head and looked at her. His eyes roamed her features as if to remember them before kissing her deeply. In the moment when the

sigil seemed gone, when she felt the spell had somehow failed and broken, that was when she fell in love with him. Tanaquill's wings slid out beneath her, huge, gliding out of her back and along the bed.

The sigil glowed brightly as if in answer and the healing began in earnest. She let herself go, the pulsing light between them flowing like winding streams in and out of them, the light from her heart glowing brighter as it fed the streams, her hands exploring as she kissed him back, tongue delving, her skin alive with his, feeling him change but not caring beyond the pleasure of feeling it. His form, always human, yet always shifting a thousand different ways. Who she was seeped into him and flowed between them, power and desire mingling together. Gavin's eyes glowed golden with the thousands of animals, and the essence of the shapeshifter in him was hers, mixing with her own royal fairy blood like a drink shared hungrily between them even while she knew they drank too deep. Tanaquill's heart glowed brightly inside her, lighting them both, and then the light began to fade.

Danger flared in her mind as it seemed Gavin would take too much, more than even a healer gave, and leave her with nothing when he was finished with her. But her skin tingled with the desire to delve deeper into what was happening between them. Gavin dragged her arms above her head and she drew tighter against him.

With the fading, healing light of her heart pulsing through her and into him, there was little she could do to protect herself. She refused to use her strength against him when what she needed to do was merge with him and heal him. She wound her legs around him. Half awake, half asleep, she did not know, he looked into her face as he came into her and she spoke an incantation in pixie language she had learned as a girl. Incantations were like toys to the Fay, but this simple one would complete the healing.

A fiery green light bathed her skin and his erection grew strong again even as he pulled out of her and he entered her again. The pain she felt upon his entry into her this time was the little spell that would quickly abate. She kissed him hungrily, knowing it would soon be over, clung to him, moving with the rhythm of his hips. His hands clasped her cheeks as he came into her the second time.

What have I done?

She moaned as she came, needing more even as she did so, and felt the healing's final energy flood into Gavin, like a tide rushing away from her, the last of her heart going dark. Her skin shivered at tasting the strange power of loving no one, ever. *Perhaps this would be better*, she thought coldly, before a spasm dispelled the whiteness from before her eyes and the colors returned.

A tiny piece of her heart had remained with her, Tanaquill realized gratefully, before she fully understood that in this way the sigil they had shared was now like a hook beneath her skin,

leaving her limp and full of his absence even as she rested beside him.

He would think nothing of her but she would love him.

If he finds true love with another, I could be set free. But with her heart pounding in *his* chest, her skin glistening with their mingled essence, Tanaquill refused to even want that. She couldn't help herself—she refused to give him to another. It was the influence of the healing rite, and she refused to fight it.

Tanaquill realized then, with growing alarm, that despite the release she felt she still desired Gavin as fully as before. An unfulfilled longing even as he lay beside her, because they were no longer of the same mind. He did not love her—he could not love her. He had thought he lay with a shapeshifter, not a fairy.

Tanaquill turned on her side, naked in the bed. It was more than she could take, to contemplate such a thing. *How could he not love me?* she thought, her wings curling back into her. She turned to see him sleeping peacefully. The healing had worked, she could tell—it wasn't the deep sleep of the poison she had sensed in him before, it was the relaxed sleep after sex. This is what she adored? This shapeshifting creature, far too large for a fairy's taste? She nearly groaned in dismay now that it was fully upon her and she was helplessly trapped. He was near her but it was not enough, never enough.

Maeve help me.

Gavin flipped onto his back and began lightly snoring, contented.

Tanaquill looked at him with a frown, disheveled, unsettled, her hair a mess. Her hand twitched to remove the healing spell that seeped over him like a sweet aromatic. Take it back to heal herself from this feeling. Wondering why she felt so frustrated even while she knew the reason.

Love was the worst thing she'd ever felt.

Tanaquill gathered her torn garments. Too tired for even the smallest spell, she pulled up her torn gown around her, holding it in place as best she could. Her dress pressed against her, she snuck into the hallway and hurried to her room.

There, she closed the door and, craving him like something lost, tumbled onto her bed, asleep.

CHAPTER 9

Underneath a grassy hill, in a castle whose walls were stuccoed by the gray shadows of wasps, in a room of high, arched doorways, their lintels veined with gold, Prince Rohmier frowned in his sleep, gripping the petal coverlet on his opulent bed. Wave after wave of lust trembled through him until he released.

And then it began again.

He moaned and twisted in bedding softer than silk, and awoke suddenly, with an angry start, sitting upright, his wings fully sprouted on his back, flapping the steady, solid rhythm of another fairy's passion. His breath came fast and shallow as the surge peaked again. He gripped his tiny bedding and his desire released uncontrollably.

The fairy sleeping peacefully beside him gasped and twitched, kicking out with her leg. She sat bolt upright. "My Prince," she said sleepily. "What has occurred?"

Down the palace's winding corridors, behind bedroom doors murmurs like those of disturbed bees rose in the ancient hive.

Prince Rohmier looked down at the naked servant girl who had been available tonight when the one he really wanted was busy attending a ball with her *humans*. Prince Rohmier turned away, leaving her behind. "Tanaquill, what have you done?"

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Melanie gazed at her reflection and brushed the powdered herbs into her dark hair. The herbs and a sharp smelling soap for her skin were part of her daily regimen for the time being. A strong, complicated perfume, the third ingredient, rested on her dresser in an elegant vial, courtesy of the coven of Eris witches. The coven had been most accommodating to her since her arrival in London.

Her large green eyes narrowed with worry as she gazed at her reflection, lingering absently over the long, familiar scar over her brow without really seeing it anymore, the price she had paid for a foolish youthful indulgence.

It was hardly dawn and yet she was restless again, as she was every night lately. Yet tonight her restlessness came not from her own dilemma, but from thoughts of the man she had encountered on the stairs at Lady Teversall's ball.

Melanie put down her brush, stood and went to the window, drawing it open. The unusual woman who had hurried into her, on whom she had smelled him, his desire smoldering upon her, who was she? In human guise, yet there was something so unhuman about her, and her eyes had changed their color in a most startling fashion. Melanie had never seen their like. The encounter had left Melanie troubled. It was more than the strange way the young woman had looked—Melanie wondered if, somehow, the young woman was in similar trouble as herself.

The scent of dawn was in the air. London was just about to awaken and she wished to experience it alone. Just as Melanie leapt from the window she felt something uncanny. She

began to fall, even as she transformed into a dove, wings fluttering helplessly as the distant bonding seized her, spinning her like a top as she tumbled through the air, a ribbon of union winding together worlds that had remained separate for millennia.

As quickly as the feeling overtook her it ended. Melanie angled sharply, wings spread. As she regained control and soared upward over the rooftops, she felt a change that every one of her kind must have felt. A bonding had occurred. An unbreakable pact between two very different creatures. She landed on a rooftop, transforming smoothly from a bird into a black cat and sat, curling her tail around her and staring with golden eyes into the waning night.

## CHAPTER 10

Gavin looked up at the ceiling and smiled to himself. He pushed his hand into his hair, resting his arm above him as he lay in the unfamiliar bed. *My bed? It must be*, he mused to himself and stretched his legs along it in ownership. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, feeling wonderful. He couldn't remember a thing about himself and it was a thoroughly pleasant feeling. *I don't know who I am*, Gavin thought, nearly laughing. He didn't care. He didn't know why it didn't trouble him, only that it felt as though he'd been annihilated and put back together with something wonderful and peaceful added to him inside, something that made him feel grateful to the bed, the room, the world and the lovely everything and nothing. And yet there was that faint uneasy feeling that this was *not* his bed, not his room and, somehow, not his world.

But Gavin was in too good a mood to believe it.

Eager to keep who he was a mystery to himself, forcing away the notion that he could remember exactly who he was if he merely concentrated, Gavin tossed the coverlet aside and sat up, lightly wondering why he was naked.

He rubbed the long stubble on his chin. He must've been asleep for some time, he thought. He smelled the scent of humans who had passed through the room, men, women and someone else, only she did not have a human scent. *How would I know a thing like that?* he thought, bemused.

Feeling like he could eat a stag, Gavin stood up and swore under his breath as his legs collapsed under him. The room swam and his head throbbed so violently he had to force his breathing to steady in order to keep himself from blacking out.

Trying simply to breathe, Gavin's mood plummeted with dizzying speed. He rested his

elbows on his bare knees and pushed his hands deep into his hair, then swore silently, his left arm in searing pain. Sweat sprang up on the back of his neck. Breathing between clenched teeth, staring down at his vulnerable nakedness on the floor, Gavin felt his heartbeat pounding in his ears and against his bare chest. Fear came like the snap of a dry branch broken by a footstep behind him—he'd been wounded in that arm. Wounded, caught, stripped naked—dragged unconscious to this human hole. *Humans. Escape.* Despite his weakened state, his eyesight suddenly grew keen and the room brightened sharply. Gavin stood. Strength pulsed through the pain and forced the weakness back. As if in reply to his body unlocking a last reserve of strength, his mind flooded with memories, and he was ashamed that he could have awoken happy to believe he was human. More important, however, was the realization that he couldn't leave. He wanted something here.

*Where is she?* Gavin thought, *the shapeshifter I have lain with. These humans...* Confusion of purpose weakening his mind and body, he felt himself slipping back into fever. He found a trunk that was his, someone must have brought it, and shoved on black trousers, a shirt. *Where the hell are my boots?* he thought in a fog. He had to go after her or leave, but couldn't decide.

The door opened suddenly and a beautiful vision floated before his eyes. A candle in one hand, the other hand reaching out and steadying him before pushing him with surprising ease back onto the bed.

Gavin looked up at her, pleasantly surprised. She was the one. Her firm touch had been a kind of lifeline. She crossed the room in a plain but pretty yellow dress, and opened a window to let in the fresh night air. "You must remain here to rest," she said. "You are well when you are asleep and your mind is at rest, but are not strong enough to remain awake for long. I will see you well, Shapeshifter."

His brows rose thoughtfully. "You know what I am," he said carefully, wary.

"Yes," she replied, her cool tone unreadable. He watched how her dress clung to her hip as she reached to tie the curtain back from the window.

"Come here," he said.

She turned to look at him for a moment in the dim light. "You can trust me with your secret."

"I know, come here."

She paused, but after a moment came around to the bed.

Watching her, he took her wrists, jerking her forward. She inhaled softly in surprise, leaning over him, her arms tense, keeping herself from falling onto the bed. Somehow guessing what he'd find, he released a wrist and pushed her blond ringlets back to expose a pointed ear.

"*Tell me what you are.*" His voice hardened. "*What are you?*"

From her look, the tone of his question was like a physical blow. "I am not a 'what,'" she



said calmly, “and neither are you.” She gazed at him steadily. “I am glad you are well,” she finished and, gently but firmly removing her wrist from his grasp, she turned away. “A bath will be drawn for you, and you shall have food, as I am sure you are hungry,” she said, then, from the door, “Your clothing has been brought, as I see you’ve found.”

“*Tanaquill*,” he said remembering her name and she turned back, her hand along the rim of the doorway. Had he been dreaming still? “I can’t remember who I am,” he said honestly.

She came back and sat down on the edge of the bed, placed a hand on his shoulder. “Stay calm, it will not be for much longer.”

He shook his head, struggling for words, staring up at the ceiling. “I’m not myself. But what I feel for you now is what is true and right. I know it. If I’m different when I’m well don’t believe it.” His eyes looked fevered once again. “I have to leave this house, there are humans in it who know what I am. But I can’t leave without you. Do you understand?”

A blush tinted her cheeks. “You cannot leave yet,” Tanaquill said softly. “The humans here will bring you no harm, nor me.” Then, after a moment, “Do you trust me?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“I am not one of your kind. That is what you hoped when you saw me at the ball, did you not?” She paused. “Do you remember? You will in time. You wish to find another like yourself, and I would like to help, but you are the first I have encountered, and so I believe what you are seeking is rare—” She stopped when she saw the pain in his expression.

Gavin pushed his hand into his hair, frustrated, and stared up at the ceiling. “Something happened between us while I was unconscious in this room,” he said. He looked to her then. “What did you do to me?” He couldn’t *remember*, not the details. But the sensation of intimacy—for it was a sensation more than a memory—left him empty, hollow. It was something unwelcome to him, what had occurred. How intimacy had been treated. “You shifted your form—didn’t you. You changed. But—you are not...”

“No,” she said. “I could help you remember.” Her mouth was tense. She didn’t look as if she wanted him to remember. Something monumental had occurred between them.

“I did what I needed to,” she said carefully. “I am sorry if it was not what you would have wished.”

“You say you’re different, but I don’t know *what* that means,” he said, his voice hard, as clear as he could make it, just the way a human would ask it, and he hated the way it sounded. *What are you? You’re different, you’re not human, you’re a monster.*

She looked distant, but not provoked, as he would have been. “When you are well and will remember, I will show you, so I do not have to twice. But for now it may help to steady your mind if you were to remember,” she said, a little reluctant. Without waiting for his answer she lifted his shirt, and his skin twitched as her hand went under, cool against his hot skin as it settled

over his heart. “Don’t be startled, they are only memories.”

“Of us,” he asked, “Of what we’ve done.”

She didn’t answer. Instead Gavin felt something from her reaching out and meeting him. It was as if her touch loosened memories inside his chest—once she allowed them out. Living images of their naked bodies entwined rose forcefully into his mind until a quick, involuntary erotic shudder broke their contact.

The fog in Gavin’s mind was gone. The first thing he realized was that she was utterly different from him. But it wasn’t just what she was that shocked him, dismayed him, it was what they had done. “We came together. Like strange creatures, cold, without love—” Gavin was furious and had to stop speaking. He stared up in shock, unseeing, at the ceiling as the memories overwhelmed him again.

He could not stop the anger that came with the memories. His first encounter with another inhuman and it had been this strange coupling—this creature, beautiful, glowing like blue glass, who floated above him, indifferent, caught in her own world. He had been helplessly drawn to this disturbing, lovely thing, needing her in a way he had not felt in hundreds of years. He remembered looking into her face, taking her to him as one of his own.

His regret was something he would live with for the rest of his life, something she could never understand.

The cold reality descended on him that his search for a female shapeshifter had always been far more hopeful, far more foolish, than he had ever let himself believe. All those times he had pretended that he no longer believed or cared he had lied to himself. The truth was he had never given up, not for an instant.

He knew this because he gave up now.

Finding a female shapeshifter had been the one thing, he realized, that had mattered to him. If Gavin had known what was happening between himself and Tanaquill, he would never have allowed it. Whatever she was she wasn’t shapeshifter, and that meant he had given himself wrongly.

His true nature had been drawn from him by the force of whatever took hold of them, what she had used upon them. An intimacy that Gavin had never allowed—would never have allowed had he been able to prevent it. He felt shame. The regret that he had mated with her as he would with another of his kind simply would not leave him.

But he had to accept it—it had been a shapeshifter mating between himself and something other. Tanaquill, whatever she was, had mated with him in a genuine way. And now the part of himself that he had saved for his *true* mate had been taken from him forever.

What he wanted most right now, was to escape how she looked at him. “You...What floated above me while I slept. That is your true form.”

“In part,” she said.

“It was wrong. We should have never—not with you.” He didn’t want the anger that was building in his voice. “What we did; that should have only happened with a mate.”

Stricken, confused, her brow furrowed before she calmed herself, hands clasped tightly. “I am sorry if I have taken from you something which you cherish.” She hesitated. “You have taken something from me as well.”

*From you?* Gavin watched her, wary, curiosity awakened. “What did you...”

The maid knocked and they quickly separated, Tanaquill taking a step back, turning away, Gavin sitting up. The door opened and a bathing basin was brought in for him by a pair of footmen. The maid came in after with a tray.

“I’ve brought him something to eat,” she said, looking quickly to Tanaquill.

“Thank you,” Gavin answered, his voice steady and even, as deep and healthy as it was on the night of the ball.

The maid left. Gavin rubbed the back of his neck and exhaled, sitting on the edge of the bed. He dropped his hand. “Where am I?”

Tanaquill stood by the door. “At my cousins’ house.”

“How long have I been unconscious?”

“Four days,” she said. Then, “Are you going to leave?” she asked, her tone rising slightly.

“That depends,” he said. When his eyes met hers his tone softened. “Tell me who tried to kill you.”

The question clearly surprised her. But she hesitated only a moment. “I am to marry,” she said calmly. “My guess is that he is behind it.” She looked downward, smoothing her gown; a common enough gesture, as if she had not said something so very strange.

Gavin studied her. “You said you had parents. Do they approve the marriage?”

“Of course,” Tanaquill said, crossing her arms over her chest. “They were responsible for it, and it made sense enough.” She inhaled a steady breath. “As for what we did, what I did, I did not do it for the pleasure of consorting with your kind but in order to save your life.” She hesitated, then turned away. “I will be going out for the night, and therefore I will not see you again. I wish you good fortune and happiness. Apparently, you could leave the house by this exit, so I will not keep you. You may be in better humor after a bath, however, and you should have something to eat. My cousins will be disappointed they could not show you their hospitality. But I will make apologies for you if you wish. Thank you, for saving my life,” she said simply and left. Gavin stared at the closed door.



Tanaquill closed the door behind her, heart pounding as she calmly took up the candelabra left on a small table in the corridor. She slowly began snuffing each flame between her fingers. It

was selfish, she thought to herself, but after what she had done for Gavin, and how she felt about him now, she was angered that he would treat her in such an ungrateful manner. For the cost to her. That was something he would never understand.

She took a breath to calm her anger and told herself she should be glad he was growing well. Remarkably well with the way the news of what they'd done had sobered him. Perhaps his anger had burned off the fever. She did not understand his kind's way of healing. She understood him hardly at all, in fact, she thought, sharply snuffing a flame. Neither in mind nor body, despite how intimate they had been...momentarily. And it was a mere moment, she reminded herself, that they had lain together, when she took into account the hundreds of years of living between them. But how he had spoken to her, how he had treated her.

She felt a tightening in her throat and dismissed it. She steeled herself and walked calmly downstairs. She would forget this ungrateful gentleman, the first man she had ever given herself to. Given not only her body but her heart. She did not love him before the healing magic, she told herself. What she felt for him before the healing's influence had merely been desire. She would forget him if it killed her, or help him find his *mate*, she thought angrily. Her jealousy uncontrollable toward a woman who might well not even exist. Jealous of a phantom.

She walked through the house, avoiding everyone, and out into the garden. If only he would hurry and find this shapeshifter female whom he so desired. Whom he assumed would be so much better than her. That would be her only true freedom—for it was the only way to break the bond the healing had forged between them and let her heart come back to her. She walked along, a gravel path crunching beneath her, flowers at her feet, the smell of spring forgotten.

And he would be gone.

She frowned and looked around her at the walls surrounding the garden. There'd always been fairies in the garden. This time they weren't there. They hid from her, and she tried not to let that frighten her. She sensed the realm of fairy was still intact, no shapeshifter horde had arrived. No, they were afraid of her, of what she'd done. Now there were just the flowers, unafraid, planted so carefully in their beds, their faces smiling up at her, children of the earth and rain. His kind had been like myth to hers. A myth she'd proven all too real. She exhaled, deep and slow and looked about the garden, wondering about what lay beyond in the world she'd not yet seen.

If there even were another of his kind, and female, could she be in this strange human city?  
Another shapeshifter in Londinium?

## CHAPTER 11

A little while later, Tanaquill arrived in the candle-lit drawing room, where her cousins and Lord Fairbain were deep in conversation, giving her the feeling that they had had such conversations for years.

They welcomed her with a pleasing lack of ceremony as she slipped quietly onto the sofa. At this very moment Gavin was most likely out the window and away. She tried to focus on the matters at hand. Her cousin needed her help. It was disturbing, this difficulty concentrating when she was away from Gavin, and it only seemed to grow worse.

*I feel so unlike myself*, she thought, dismay welling in her breast when she realized she was staring at the window across the room, peering into the night for an animal of some kind. But it was too late now. He was gone and she was needed here.

“...there you are, feeling better?” Daphne said in the direction of the doorway. “I’m afraid we’ve little time for niceties; do you remember any of what you saw the night of the ball? How did you know to block Tanaquill from the dart?”

“I saw a gleam.” At Gavin’s voice Tanaquill nearly jumped. He was leaning against the entryway in light trousers and a black waistcoat, his white shirt open and loosely tucked in as an afterthought. His dark, wavy hair looked tousled and damp, its glossiness bringing out the green in his eyes.

The regret she had moments before became a nervous flutter in her stomach. He hadn’t left.

“Who knew Tanaquill was going to be there?” Gavin asked.

Tanaquill spoke up through a dryness in her throat. “No one should have known, neither humans nor others. It was not...” she hesitated, “a scheduled event for me.”

Chloe paced on the low tea table that had been positioned prominently in the room for her benefit. She waved a tiny arm. “You might as well come in, Shapeshifter, we have many things to discuss,” she squeaked.

Gavin didn’t look like he was about to, but then lifted himself from the doorway and stepped in, leaning against a far wall. Lord Fairbain showed no distress, but never took his eyes off him.

Tanaquill stiffened, feeling Gavin’s steady gaze on her. Then he pointedly looked away. The conversation picked up again but she couldn’t focus, now because he *was* here. Even across the room, she couldn’t help noticing his hands, his neck, how he leaned against the wall, and his dark mood. She caught the end of something Daphne said and realized that, without disclosing the kind of being she was, her cousins were wondering if any of the other guests besides Gavin had found her out.

“Wait a moment,” Tanaquill leaned forward. “I had forgotten. There may have been a woman who saw my eyes. I bumped into her as I was leaving the ballroom and I believe she might have seen how they change. She was startled.”

“What did she look like?” asked Chloe seating herself on the edge of the table, tiny legs dangling.

“Beautiful,” Tanaquill replied. “She was unusual somehow. I was too upset to notice much about her, but she had a scar—”

“A scar?” Gavin said, making her look up.

“Yes,” Tanaquill returned, surprised. She touched her brow. “Here.”

Gavin’s eyes held hers for a moment too long. He turned to the others. “I saw her as well. She was ahead of me on the stairs.” He paused. “She wore a strong perfume, unusual.”

“Was she a witch?” Tanaquill asked her cousins.

“She could be,” Daphne said. “It sounds like she was wearing something purposeful.”

Chloe shrugged. “Aubrey, do you know anything about her?”

“Not a thing,” Fairbain replied. “Shall I find out?”

Daphne was tapping a nail delicately on the arm of her chair. “There’s no time, if she’s to go tonight.”

Gavin watched Tanaquill sit at her ease among the cozy group; Gavin didn’t know who such a being could be, sitting so casually with her unreal, graceful air on the sofa, let alone what she, or anyone for that matter, could have to do with outlandish things such as witchcraft, something of which he’d seen no positive evidence in his long life. But in this ordinary English drawing room a human had called him ‘*Shapeshifter*’, as matter-of-factly as if she had called him ‘*Lord*’ or ‘*your Grace*’. And he tried not to stare at Chloe Lockwood, a woman who had been shrunk to the size of a mouse. She was definitely human, he could smell it, but she looked like a porcelain figurine come to life. He just couldn’t believe what he saw was real. Who *were* these people? And what did they have to do with Tanaquill, who obviously trusted them too much.

Nonetheless, he should leave, because these humans knew what he was, and the only thing he knew with certainty was that Tanaquill wasn’t what he’d wanted her to be, he thought with regret. But he couldn’t leave, not when she was the only other inhuman he’d ever found. And he had a hunch what Tanaquill’s ‘I will be going out for the night’ meant. He was sure these humans intended for Tanaquill to go somewhere dangerous tonight, to do what they obviously couldn’t or wouldn’t dare. “Where are you sending her?” he asked.

“What were you doing there, Gavin?” Fairbain asked, surprising him. “At the ball. Who were you looking for? For that matter, what brought you to London?”

Gavin glared at him with unconcealed animosity. “It’s no concern of yours. Now tell me where you’re sending her, and why.”

After a pause, Daphne answered. “My sister is under a spell of sympathy. And with these sorts of spells only the magical item with which it was performed can break it, because the item retains an essence of, in this case, Tanaquill and Chloe.” She looked to Tanaquill. “And since you were the catalyst, Tanaquill, the spell of reversal must be performed in your presence. We’ve no idea what sort of item was used, but since the magic drew upon your *nature*,” she said vaguely, indicating Tanaquill, “we think you’ll be able to find it, and in any case Chloe needs to stay here while she’s this size.”

Tanaquill nodded gravely.

Gavin turned to Daphne. “How did this happen?”

“Someone discovered Tanaquill was visiting us and that she would be attending Lady Teversall’s ball,” Daphne explained. “This individual—and we have a pretty fair idea who it was—either had what was needed to perform the spell against Chloe on the premises, or found time to retrieve it and return. You see, a spell of diminution must be done within the proximity of a —” she paused, looking over at Tanaquill, “within her proximity to work.” She continued. “And the affected witch shrinks down to the size of the—to her size.”

Gavin looked at Tanaquill, confused.

“Not as I am at the moment,” Tanaquill added quietly.

“No, of course not, but...essentially,” said Daphne.

Gavin frowned to himself. Tanaquill looked away uncomfortably, feeling exposed.

Fairbain turned to Gavin. “We know the general location of the amulet—the magical item they used—but Tanaquill will need to enter the house and retrieve it. Now Gavin, if you would —”

“I’ll go with her,” Gavin said. They all looked to him in mild surprise and perhaps relief.

Tanaquill looked uncomfortable. “I am quite capable of—”

Daphne spoke up. “It’s a smart idea.” She looked hopefully to her sister.

“I don’t like either of them going,” Chloe said.

Daphne hurried on. “We’ve got far too much trouble at the moment not to accept this gentleman’s kind offer of help. You are less than a hand tall, the witches have found out about our houseguest, who, for good measure, has an assassin after her, and now we have a shapeshifter...about the house. And that is quite unusual.”

Gavin frowned. “Which part?”

“Why you of course,” Daphne replied.

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A few minutes later, Lord Fairbain had laid on the table a diagram of Gore House, an historic manor on extensive grounds some miles from London and the home of Lady Merecaston, Evelina, *arché* of the coven of Eris. “It’s a rudimentary map, but it may be of some

use. Take a look at it will you, you two,” Fairbain said while going over to bring Chloe from the tea table.

Gavin stayed where he was, so Tanaquill got up and stood beside Lord Fairbain, who was in the process of placing extra paper weights at the four corners of the map lest it roll up and envelope an incautious Chloe who paced, looking down at it. “You’re to enter here,” he began, and Tanaquill nodded. Only she didn’t see what he meant. “Daphne’s coven will weaken their defenses to let you slip in. I would suggest heading straight for her bedroom,” he said, tapping with a finger. “My guess is Evelina would keep the amulet there. It may not be in plain view, but if it’s in the room I’m guessing you will sense it. In fact, you may sense where it is as soon as you’re inside.” He paused. “Be careful. Gore House has felt very active for the past week. Once you’re inside there’s not much we can do to help.”

“Take your time,” said Daphne from where she sat, “be cautious. They’re not likely to want a confrontation so long as you remain together. You’re too strong together.”

“But separated—” Fairbain began.

Chloe agreed. “Yes. Never let them separate you.”

“I will remember,” Tanaquill answered, watching Chloe pace in the middle of the table, walking across the map, her gown a carefully sewn scrap from the milliner’s shop, her tiny coiffure of thick, reddish-brown curls held in place by purple threads. Tanaquill wore a pale blue evening dress, her hair in the ringlets she wore when seeming to be human, which left her neck cold, and she missed the weight of long hair down her back. She appeared to be listening calmly, but her heart was quietly pounding, not for what they would do, but for whom she would be with. She tried to focus on the task.

Chloe shook her head. “You’re both very strong but you can’t understand the dangers involved. If only there was a way to undermine what they’ve done without actually obtaining the amulet.”

“That’s impossible, Chloe, you know that,” said Daphne.

Chloe looked at the vague lines of the map; not much was filled in. “It just isn’t right,” she said. She looked up at Tanaquill looming over the table. “I’m worried for you—” she looked over at Gavin, “for you too, Shapeshifter.”

Gavin leaned against the far wall, arms crossed over his chest. His dark mood seemed to draw the nighttime street in from the window beside him. “If she’s determined to go through with this, then we’ll get what you want.”

Tanaquill stared down at the map, unseeing. There was something in her that yearned to hear his voice, something she wasn’t aware of until he spoke and it fluttered in response. She wanted to introduce him to her family, she thought suddenly, absurdly, and felt her face grow warm. She wondered if she should send a message to her family in case something happened to

her. When her cousins had first spoken of her retrieving the amulet, they had suggested it, but she had carefully turned them from the idea, fearing that they would be asking for her family's permission. But now she wondered if it would not have been wise, for what if it was their last contact for a great while? She would have liked to have explained, on her cousins' behalf, why she had gone. And why she had done the things she had.

But it was too late now, and in any event the palace could be difficult to contact. It might be away.

She spoke up. "Cousins, you needn't worry for my welfare, there are few traps that cannot be escaped." *Eventually*. The palace was such a trap she'd only just escaped. But it was unfair to think of the place where her family was in that way. She knew of humans who had trapped a fairy and handed her down for generations like a firefly in a jar—but a human who understood fairies well enough to be able to do that was rare indeed. "I am unfamiliar with human homes," Tanaquill continued, "but I am quite familiar with the wood and stone used to build them. I will be able to find the amulet within because the walls will tell me, I am sure of it."

Gavin spoke up from across the room, addressing Fairban and her cousins. "If you just mean to convince us to be careful by telling us how dangerous this is going to be, don't bother, we'll leave now," he said. His voice pulled at Tanaquill without any effort on his part. *Stop it*, she thought to herself, refusing to turn to him as she wanted to. The healing rite had changed her, left parts of her beyond her control. But if they were going to help Chloe, they would have to come to some sort of peace. After a moment she looked over at the shapeshifter, her eyes a cool blue that matched her dress. "You should study this map."

He frowned. Still, he lifted himself from the wall and walked over, standing behind her. She stiffened.

"I've made maps to many of their homes, the Eris coven," Fairbain explained to Tanaquill. "The ones we know about," he added.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Gavin said. "That you keep maps of other people's houses."

Fairbain cast him an indignant look, but it was bemused. "It isn't just any house," he said, "It's a space consecrated by this coven of witches to Eris, Goddess of Strife."

"Witches are not all alike, covens vary in their methods," Daphne added. "We don't know everything they're capable of."

"And they've surprised us enough thus far!" Chloe squeaked. She absently rubbed her throat. At her present size, projecting her voice sufficiently took some effort. "Aubrey, perhaps some tea."

"Of course." Fairbain dutifully held out his hand for her to climb into.

When she stood in his palm and securely grabbed his thumb with one hand, he lifted her

and placed her on the long table by the window beside a lavish three-story dollhouse. One of the tiny chairs had been taken from its drawing room and placed next to a tiny table arrayed for tea. Chloe sat down with a frown of concentration. The cook had cut tiny scones from a larger one, perfectly mimicking its shape, and arrayed them on a doll plate. Chloe took one in her hand, then put it thoughtfully down. She picked up her tea instead and drank deep.

Daphne poured a cup for herself and continued. “That’s not to say they don’t make mistakes. They do think highly of themselves—that’s Evelina’s doing.”

“It’s not easy to find out what goes on in that house,” Chloe remarked.

Fairbain spoke up. “Unfortunately, Gore House is one of the busiest points of chaotic magical activity in all of England.”

“The house itself is anything but mundane,” Chloe squeaked. “It’s a sort of masterwork, not to say that I approve, you understand.”

“Naturally,” Fairbain agreed politely. He gestured to the map from across the room where he sat by Chloe. “Where I could, I’ve highlighted secret rooms,” he said, “as well as possible hidden doorways. But there are too many rooms I’ve missed. It’s very hard to get a clear understanding of the floor plan.”

Gavin leaned over Tanaquill and she held her breath as his arm brushed hers—for the briefest instant she thought that he was going to put his arms around her in front of everyone, but he merely loomed beside her studying the map. She steeled herself and, leaning closer to him, stared down at the map with equal intent. For the past ten minutes she had been trying to understand what she saw, but to her dismay, she could not quite envision what was on the paper. The way in which humans perceived the space in which they dwelled confused her. For one thing, they thought the shape of a ‘room’ was the same for everybody. Human buildings were to her eyes the intersecting habits and purposes of the people who frequented them. It was hard for her to imagine rooms as though it did not matter who lived in them. A trail traced once on the water, in the forest or the open country was known to her forever, and nothing that meandered would ever get her lost. But these lines on dull human parchment made little sense to her.

Daphne continued. “Gore House is some hours from London. We’ve a carriage prepared that should afford some protection from any magic they may attempt while you travel.”

“Then they know we’re coming,” Gavin said, picking up the map, studying it.

“Yes,” Fairbain admitted. “They may have expected it sooner, but they will be prepared.”

Daphne put down her cup. “It’s difficult for us to help you because we see the results of their magic but we don’t know their means, just as they don’t know ours, not really. By the way, you should know that last night I attended a gathering of covens. Word had spread about what happened to my sister, but there was not a whisper about you, Tanaquill, or Gavin. My guess is that whatever the Eris coven knows, they are keeping it to themselves.”

Tanaquill nodded, then stared sidelong at the plans. "I don't understand these pictures," she whispered to herself.

"It's not as strange as it looks," Gavin said, surprising her with a response. He placed the map on the table again and smoothed it with his hand. "Here, have a look."

She reluctantly came forward and leaned over the table with him.

"These are the different levels," he said, showing her. "These are windows, and here, doors."

"What if they saw Gavin change into a wolf?" Chloe said suddenly and Gavin looked sharply over at her. Tanaquill sensed the tension rising in him.

"We must assume they know," said Fairbain, settled in an armchair.

"A shapeshifter would be a great prize," Daphne ventured reluctantly. "If they could control him."

"Yes, if," said Chloe.

"How could they control him?" Tanaquill asked in surprise, as she felt her throat go a little tight.

Gavin looked at her with curiosity. Her interest had been a little too evident.

Chloe gestured to him, and Fairbain picked her up and carried her back to the table, putting her down. Chloe walked across the table toward Gavin. "Gavin. The witches in this coven might be preparing to try to take you, control you, use you in ways you cannot fathom, ways only other witches understand. You have a right to know that this is more than merely human peril, of which I assume you have known enough in your lifetime." She paused. "Your involvement would be warranted to protect Tanaquill, but you may be walking right into a cage. We are going to do everything in our power to make sure that doesn't happen. We're not without our own resources. But for the moment, what matters is that you remember you are there for a reason—the most important one." Chloe's frustration was mounting. "Tanaquill is going to be in danger, on my behalf, the moment she steps off of these grounds. Whoever tried to assassinate her may think they have no choice but to try again." Chloe pressed her tiny fist into her palm. "We are at war with this coven now, and knowing about Tanaquill and very likely about you too, Gavin, I cannot help but think they shall attempt to cause terrible harm. And all we can do is send you to them, just what they should want, I imagine. I simply cannot believe the predicament we are in."

"Unfortunately, the moon is waning now," said Fairbain, "and that's when they like to work."

"That means the house might be full," Daphne agreed. "It could be a party of sorts."

"A witches' party?" Tanaquill questioned.

"Yes," Daphne replied. "It won't be your usual London *soiree* full of bucks and maidens."

"Quite the contrary," Chloe squeaked. "They'll have business to attend."

Gavin pulled Tanaquill over to him again. “Let me show you the best escape routes from the house.”

“But you know them and you’ll be with me.”

“If anything happens to me,” he said, looking down, not at her. He went through a careful description of what she was looking at, explaining while the conversation hummed around them.

“Don’t worry, I know what I have to do,” she said quietly, sensing a concern he kept hidden behind his eyes.

“And I know what I have to.”

She nodded and looked away again. There was nothing she could do about the way the healing rite made her feel about him. But now she must trust him.

And that made it a little difficult to breathe.

CHAPTER 12

Tanaquill, hidden in a velvet cloak, pulled the hood tighter against her cheek and stepped into the carriage. The Lockwood house cast a warm glow into the night, Chloe waving in the window like a tiny doll. But Tanaquill did not need the sight of what was at risk to feel any greater determination. She would not leave her cousin in jeopardy a moment longer.

Lord Fairbain stepped up beside the coach. “Here, take this.” He passed a small box through the window. Tanaquill took the box in her gloved hand. It felt solid, yet not quite heavy. Made of white porcelain slightly larger than her palm, it resembled a snuff box. But what intrigued her most was the decorative image painted on the lid. The painting, somewhat inexpertly done, yet appealing, was of a squirrel on its hind legs holding out an acorn.

“What is it?” Tanaquill asked, running her thumb along the gold border, noting the clasp.

“In case you get into a bind, open it—but only if you get into a bind.”

She looked up at Lord Fairbain. He did not say more. “Very well.” With a nod, she slipped it into the pocket of her cloak.

Gavin watched the transaction with unconcealed displeasure. “You’d better know what you’re giving her, Fairbain.” His deep voice held its threat without anger, a simple, cool fact. “Or you’ll regret it.” He pushed by, giving him a subtle shove as he passed and climbed into the coach opposite Tanaquill. Lord Fairbain ignored it, his patient expression, a careful smile, turning a hint wry, as if he knew the man was testing him.

Gavin, dominating the space, settled into the recess of the carriage, his scent of soap and maleness, the memory of lightly tanned skin, suddenly making the carriage seem too small. Tanaquill steeled herself for their long journey alone.

Gavin glanced Fairbain's way. "Don't look so worried," he said coldly. "We'll get what you need."

"We will not fail," Tanaquill agreed, smiling kindly down at him, sensing Gavin's attention on her now as she reached down and gave him her hand. "I give you my word, not just for Chloe's sake, but because I would like to consider you as a dear friend to me."

Lord Fairbain nodded, grateful. "Thank you."

Tanaquill settled back into the confines of the carriage with Gavin now clearly watching her, and not happily, his stare like a baking heat climbing through her.

Lord Fairbain's hand came down on the open window. The horses stirred at his touch, whinnying and rocking the carriage. His grip tightened. "Thank you both, for helping us," he said, his eyes settled on Gavin. "A man needs his friends."

Gavin's expression darkened, his body tense. "Driver, be off," he said, impatience in his tone. His command had not been loud but it had its own effect on the horses who swiftly set into motion.

"Good luck," Fairbain called out, letting go, disappointment shadowing his eyes. The driver atop the carriage tipped his hat at him with an enigmatic smile as the carriage beat a rhythm down the street.

Gavin and Tanaquill were silent.

"You shouldn't trust that man as you do," he said after a moment.

"Why not?" Tanaquill asked.

Gavin looked over at her with mild surprise.

"Because of your experience with him?" she said in response to his look.

Gavin studied her for a moment and she felt her stomach tighten. "You haven't seen it," he said. "Just don't ever be alone with him."

That surprised her. "What a strange thing to say. My cousins trust him implicitly—"

"—They don't know what they trust," he said, and looked away.

They were silent. "Perhaps you don't know whom to trust," Tanaquill said after a moment.

The dark gloom of the carriage interior did little to obscure Gavin from her as he turned to look at her, his green eyes sharp under dark brows, a lock of dark hair fallen over his brow. "I trust you."

Surprise tightened her throat, and she was glad the hood of the cloak might hide her open expression. What he'd said reached to her bones. What they had done together, their coupling, had been a betrayal to him. And yet their intimacy had made him trust her. "And I trust you,

Gavin,” she said calmly, almost as if she spoke to herself. “Together we cannot fail.”

“We will get what you need to save your cousin,” he agreed. *And I will protect you from harm*, he thought. “You have my word.”

They were silent for a moment. The carriage jostled over the London roads. Gavin looked out of the window as if he refused to speak on it further.

Tanaquill felt a sudden loneliness as she gazed out her window, watching the night climb by on black wings as the carriage made its way past the tollgate, picking up speed on their way out of London.

The sound of the wheels turning, the feel of her slippers against the solid floor with the earth hurrying by beneath them, was a sensation of the human world she had cherished her first time in her cousins’ carriage. But now her thoughts were darkened by concern and the subtle yet ravenous longing she felt for him. While in the silence of the carriage, the two of them alone, she wondered what he thought of her.

She looked out at the sky. The waning moon was hardly able to fight thick, obscuring clouds. She felt an urge to fly into that sky and disappear into the darkness.

“I wanted to thank you for saving my life,” Gavin’s voice cut through the silence.

She heard his words and turned to look at him. The sound of the carriage, the horses’ hooves, the smell of the night, cooler than it should have been even in spring, was not as lovely as his voice, nor as hoped for.

He was forgiving her.

Even as a small part of her guessed she should perhaps be angry with him for the hurtful things he had said, and that she needed no forgiveness for saving his life, the effects of the healing rite upon her were such that she could do little but forgive him in turn on a warm tide of elation.

The hood she wore, supple and warm against her skin, was meant to obscure her face from the curious who might glimpse into the carriage. Now it obscured her face from him. She pulled it back a touch. “And thank you for saving mine.”

Gavin gave her a nod and gazed out the window again as if he’d done his duty, his profile stark in the dim moonlight, his jaw sternly set. As if he had *not* actually forgiven her, she realized, the surprise bringing with it a sharp tinge of anger and embarrassment. The strong planes of his face gave her the sense that they would never change their inflexible expression. He felt badly for how he had treated her, that much was clear, but not *wrong* in his assessment that he had coupled with the wrong creature.

He regrets ever having met me.

The night grew deeper as they entered the countryside. As the horses’ hooves sounded a steady trot, as their pacing evened into the long, easy strides of the silent road ahead, the

rhythmic sound lulled her anger into the melancholy which she was beginning to associate with Gavin's presence. She was thoughtful as she studied the countryside, its comforting sameness, and the chill of the night seeped through her cloak; she wondered why she hadn't always felt the cold, as it had always been there.

"You're unhappy," Gavin said after a time. "When I spoke of what happened between us," he stated, "I spoke in anger—It wasn't right of me, as it in no way concerns you—"

"—Please, do not continue," Tanaquill said. "You meant everything you said. It is how you feel." She paused. "And I understand," she finished, knowing she sounded guarded rather than understanding.

Tanaquill placed an elbow on the rim of the window and closed her eyes heavily, no longer caring what he saw. Her head swam as if she'd lost all perspective. She could hardly think of the dangers of the night ahead for being near him. Beyond a simple determination to accomplish her task, she could hardly care. "It hardly matters to either of us," she couldn't help saying. "I am not for you, you are not for me."

She felt how he looked at her. Then Gavin continued, his tone begrudging, yet apparently feeling he must speak. "You said I've taken something from you, something precious—" His deep voice was careful, as if he wished to be sure he could persuade her on something if need be. "If you've done something that is going to affect your future," he said. "If you cannot marry now —"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "—I can marry," she finished quickly, carefully cutting off what he intended to propose. If he had made an offer of marriage, she might not have found it within herself to refuse.

"To a man who tried to kill you? If there is any way I could help you in return—"

Her voice was a little sharp. "Do not trouble yourself. It does not concern you."

"Perhaps not, but I don't see why you must marry a man who—"

"—Because it is right." She stopped, chest tight. "I do not wish to speak on it further."

His handsome brow furrowed. His jaw hardened, she saw the muscle move in his cheek. But he looked away, respecting her request.

Tanaquill looked away as well. How could this be happening to her? Everything about Gavin tugged at her like the moon draws forth the tide, which made seeing her circumstance through his eyes that much more painful. She wished they could return to when he wanted her, when he looked upon her with a need she had never before felt, a longing that she met.

She looked over at him before intending to. His lean, muscular body, elegant in human attire, the black, clean lines fitting him more finely than he even noticed or cared. Gavin had that sort of male form that could wear anything and make it look good for being against his skin. And his strength exuded so strongly from him even now, as he sat relaxed across from her waiting for

what they must do. He was always at ease and yet never relaxed, always ready to act.

In legend the shapeshifter was the most dangerous of all beings to court in alliance, for how difficult they were to control, how quickly their alliances shifted for arcane reasons only they could fathom. When they had been many, they had been nearly impossible to defeat. She imagined thousands like him, when it seemed so unimaginable, and so difficult, that there was even one.

She wished she could control him. But only because he was now so precious to her, because she ached constantly for him, deep in her bones and at the surface of her skin. She longed for his hands, her hands wanted to grab his and put them on her most intimate places. It was frustrating, embarrassing, confusing. She took a deep breath to calm herself, but it felt tight and it only made her feel as if she would cry. If only she could look past the healing rite's effects and see him more clearly, *more coolly*.

And in that moment of sheer frustration she allowed herself to feel something she had never intended to again since that one, frightening moment when she had thought the healing rite had gone too far. But she wanted it now, desperately, and so she did let the ice in, *just a little bit*; it eagerly climbed over the surface of her heart like frost on a windowpane—and she let it happen, *just a little bit*—while she knew her eyes remained a solid blue. She was not so foolish as to let her eyes turn white—not ever, not even for a moment. But perhaps she was foolish enough to toy with the pleasure of feeling nothing. *Blissful nothing*. To turn off what she felt for him—for *anyone*—it was a little trick which, ever since the healing rite, she had known she was capable of.

It felt wonderful. What a relief. She looked at him through a calm blue gaze. If her stare was a bit forceful, it was at least at peace, and her hands were steady, placed lightly on her lap. *His eyes are so very green*, she found herself thinking. She recalled their first meeting at Lady Teversall's ball. How handsome he had been then, the most remarkable man in the room. And later, when she had thought for an instant that he had died—the feeling had been similar to the one she felt now, emptiness. Only this time it did not hurt. No one she'd known had ever died and it had been a curious feeling, loss, she thought, as she looked upon the man she could not have. *The man I want*, she thought as the need for him spread inside her.

She did not know how long she could tolerate these sensations while near him, she thought distantly. And she had to be near him. *If only he had not promised to accompany me. I don't see why he wished to.*

“You have a right to know,” Tanaquill began and those eyes turned on her, “that what I did, our having lain together, will not affect my future in any way,” she said, the ice creeping into her voice, strengthening it, evening the emotion out of it, while hollowing it.

Gavin seemed to notice the way she was looking at him. When he said nothing, she

continued. “What you lost, like the chastity which humans prize among their females—is not our way. Most of my kind satisfy numerous partners before they fall in love and bond. I have not, for I—” She stopped, her voice faltered. She was a princess who could create kingdoms as well as children—this was what he had disparaged. She felt the ice creep a little further. “I occupy a different position,” she continued calmly. “But that I have done so now...will be of no import.”

The mouth she often thought of kissing had become a firm line. He suddenly watched her in a way she had not intended.

Had he seen the change in her? But how? Especially when she had allowed so little of the ice into her heart.

“Are you well?”

“Of course,” she returned, guarded. The coldness she had accepted into her heart was making it difficult for her to decide how she should react.

With that, she was suddenly frightened at what she had done. But she was reluctant to let the feelings return. It had been only four days since they had lain together and she was already weary of the pangs of love. She hadn’t known how love would feel. She disliked it immensely. But she had to hold on to who she was. Looking away, freed from the challenge of dealing with her feelings while meeting his gaze, she could bear to feel again and let the ice melt.



As the carriage rode onward, Gavin forced himself not to dwell on the disquieting sudden change in Tanaquill’s manner. It bothered him, for he knew he was somehow responsible. He’d spoken out of frustration, but saw now how cruel he had been to her. Their union had meant more to her than he had realized. Did she care for him? That seemed impossible, when all she spoke of was returning to her kind.

But there was more to it than that. As Tanaquill sat there, across from Gavin in the carriage, *it was as if for a moment she had become someone else*; even her scent had subtly altered, everything about her had slid out of place, before suddenly sliding back. It had hurt Gavin to see it, like a flower whose long stem he had carelessly broken. He had changed her, who she was, in her very being. Gavin had never known such a thing could happen to someone.

He hadn’t realized how much he could hurt her.

The being across from him, in profile as she watched the countryside go by, was still unbelievable to him. Beautiful, compelling—he had found another inhuman, when it had seemed nearly impossible. And he had tarnished it when she could be the closest to a mate that he would ever find. Gavin desired her, he could not deny that. And Tanaquill cared for him, for whatever reason, that had suddenly become clear—if only because he had the power to hurt her. He might have the power to convince her to give up a poisoned marriage and stay with him. But instead he waited for what might not exist.

Gavin couldn't let such thoughts interfere with how they worked together tonight. Despite their combined abilities—and he really had little idea what she was capable of—their task tonight loomed large. They were going into a den of hostile humans—something which never ended well. Tanaquill could not understand that as he did. How dangerous the weak were when they were many. Despite being an inhuman like him, Tanaquill had human friends and could not feel as wary as she should. And these humans acted almost—inhuman. It disturbed him to think humans could do more than he'd thought all these years.

Tanaquill was strong. Gavin had never encountered a creature who exuded such quiet power, as if she were a sleeping volcano. But there was a vulnerability in that which was strong and counted on its strength. And if anything happened to him she would be alone among witches, with an assassin hunting her.

He looked out at the swiftly passing countryside, his eyes flashing golden with his determination. He was there to protect her, and he would. *I will not leave you*, he thought.

No matter how human she appeared, he could not put from his mind the vision of what might lay concealed within her at that very moment; he could neither recognize nor understand the strange and lovely creature with whom he had mated so intimately. Tonight Tanaquill was to all appearances the human woman he had first met, with just a glimmer of her inhuman nature calling to him. Tonight she wore a human gown, under which he would find a human body with human skin—the woman he had kissed in the dark recess of the ballroom. Not the blue, utter strangeness that, wings spread and only half human, had taken him.

She said she had given something precious of herself by their mating. And it was clear that whatever it was, giving it had hurt. Knowing that stung him. It had been the first time he'd mated as one of his kind and he would have at least wished it had pleased her.

He forced it from his mind. He would find a female shapeshifter, and he would continue his line. He would remember the pride his parents took in being what they were. The freedom of what they were, which the humans had turned into suffering. What human could fly? What human could run with the leopard's speed? And yet the humans had made him despise what he was.

Someday, he thought with a greater vehemence than he had in decades—if he ever found another of his kind, a female to mate with, they would make a new start, they would populate the earth. They would have a history where now there was none. It was perhaps a dream, but a fervent one, that burned in his heart stronger than any love. If only there was some way he could make Tanaquill understand that to be what he was, was stronger than any bond he could forge with a non-shapeshifter. And that he was thankful for all she had done—but that he couldn't help feeling regret.

"It would be difficult to explain why it matters to me. Why even though I have lain with

human women before, what we did was different.”

“—Try.” She looked out the window, not at him.

He stopped. “It’s part of who I am,” he said finally. “What I am. To have shown you, intimately, I can only feel that I gave you a part of myself. Without knowing, I responded to you as I would have another shapeshifter, and I believe you felt it.” *You accepted what you did not understand, what was not yours, what you could not reciprocate.* “If it had been with another of my kind—you cannot know what the bond between two of my kind can become. The mere scent of a female, a possible companion, I have dreamed of it for centuries.” He stopped himself.

She sensed a change in his voice, as if even the thought had made his eyes glow. She placed her chin in her hand, her elbow against the window’s edge.

“I care for you and wish we could begin again,” he continued, his deep voice gliding over her skin, seeping inside her, unwanted. She closed her eyes against it. This was not only painful, it was embarrassing. “My troubles are my own, and you should know it does not mean there is anything wrong with you—”

She glanced over at him, one brow arched.

He pushed a hand through his dark hair, laughed ruefully to himself. “I’m not making this any better.”

“No,” she said, not able to help sounding surly.

“It’s not anything you could have helped—I should not have visited my disappointment on you. You had no way of knowing.”

“You still haven’t explained,” she began, turning to him. “Why it matters so much to you. Why *does* it matter so much? To save yourself for another of your kind? For if you find this mate you may still bear children together. You may still be mated. If you find someone else of your kind you may begin a family. You may still love. That should be what matters. Not the desire to preserve some arcane sense of purity for her. The purity of a single act.”

“You don’t understand—”

“—Enlighten me.”

“I’ll always remember it was you,” he said with finality. He looked away, his jaw muscle clenched.

She hadn’t expected that. Or how it would hurt.

“If our mate dies we do not take another,” Gavin continued. “I’ll never have a marriage bed, a true bonding with a companion that together, as husband and wife, we remember only between ourselves.”

“I—I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. It’s not your concern.”

“No, I understand.” *He will remember I was the one.* Tanaquill couldn’t help feeling a

torrent of mixed feelings, regret, elation. Their coupling had been like a trap and she had caught something precious—the memory of his first mating would always be with her. Their mating, even their very meeting, had been a disaster for both of them. “Really, I am very sorry,” she said. She felt sorry to have forced it from him, stung by the way in which he apologized for his misery. And she had asked to hear it.

Gavin sat back in the darkness, exhaling a breath. “I’m not good at any of this. It’s been hundreds of years since I’ve needed to explain anything so intimate with anyone.”

“That is rather obvious, I’m afraid,” she couldn’t help saying. Her face was placid, cool, yet she looked down and began picking at her dress like a human, for her eyes could not hide the indignity she felt.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know what happened between us was hard on you as well.”

“It is of no consequence,” she said. Her countenance was an unreadable mask. He wished, for just one instant, to remove all their secrets and mistakes. Everything that came between them. For it felt now as if she despised him. And she had every right.

Tanaquill frowned to herself. He had managed to make her more unhappy. And yet the worst part of it was that she was glad, miserably glad that it was her and not someone else who had mated with him first. *As it should be*, she thought unbidden. Was there any kindness left in her? she realized with dismay, and with that, felt an effusion of regret. “I am sorry. But I have saved you for the experience you crave with another of your kind, which you may still have one day. The female shapeshifter you seek, the one you believed you mated with while you were with me,” she stopped. They would have the truth between them. “The woman who brought you to London. You might still find her.” *If I had known how truly hard this would be—*

“I might,” he said carefully, knowing there was no point in hiding from her what she had found out, somehow, probably during their mating. And yet for some reason he trusted her to keep this to herself. He didn’t feel the need to ask her to conceal it from the others.

In his presence, as it always did, her desire hurt, an ache more difficult to bear for what had just passed between them and for how, despite that, she wished to stay near him. “Rather than mate with a different—” She stopped herself. “Would you truly have preferred to die?”

His eyes met hers, their dark green settling on her with resignation and the expression of his mouth softening almost imperceptibly.

“You said you wanted to know who I am,” she said before he could answer.

“I do.”

“What I am.”

What you mated with. It hung in the air between them.

“Draw the curtains and I will show you,” she said.

“Here?” His brow rose in surprise.

“Why not?” she said recklessly.

CHAPTER 13

Tanaquill had said it lightly, surprising Gavin, but with resignation in her eyes, as though her natural openness, strained by recent experience, was giving way to something else. She had lost something precious, perhaps her naïveté, or a cherished hope, and he wished to get it back for her but had no idea how. What they had done together had changed her, Gavin realized.

But then she surprised him by her smile, natural and frank. “You will see what you wish,” she said. “It will be a relief, in a way, to leave this human skin for a moment.”

“If it’s dangerous then you should not attempt it,” Gavin said, not wishing her to do anything that could expose her to harm. “If you put yourself in peril by showing me here, out in the open—”

“—No,” she cut him off, lying. It might be dangerous, despite their bewitched carriage, but she didn’t care. Right now, after everything they had said, she couldn’t care. If he wished to see her, let him see now. She had pledged to retrieve the amulet her cousin required, and she would, but she had made no pledge to safeguard herself.

She drew down her hood completely, opened her cloak and let it fall off her shoulders and pool around her waist. Her skin was lovely, human and soft, and Gavin’s gaze lingered over her until it glowed as if in a candlelight that was not there. Her hair, like spun gold, took on a subtle inner light even as it remained modestly in place, held up by sturdy pins. Her lips, tinted a soft, human pink against the night, tilted into the tiniest smile, a hint of satisfaction, as one who dips their toes into a warm bath, or sheds their gown before a starry night.

The horses nickered and the driver smiled to himself as golden light seeped from the seams of the carriage. Suddenly bright light shot out from it which could have been seen for miles if there had been any around to see on the quiet country road.

The driver clicked his tongue to his horses with a quiet pride as they drove onward, his equipage haloed like the flame of a softly burning candle. They drove along the country road, while far away a fairy prince smiled meanly to himself. *It’s as if you call my name*, he thought and flew faster.

Gavin could not take his eyes off of her as he felt his loins stiffen; in that moment, between being human and what she truly was, there was something irresistible about her. And the man in

him wished to give himself away utterly. No wonder he had taken her to him—he had been helpless before her.

“I will show you everything.” She reached up, her supple arms glowing golden and pretty, not turning to glass as he recalled, but remaining opaque despite her skin’s glow. She was peach colored and almost human, yet somehow all the more wonderful for that, for how she glittered. Her human dress remained on her but seemed ill-fitted to such a creature and tore in places as if paper, as if it did not dare remain against her.

Carefully, she pulled the pins from her hair and her hair grew, opened and unfurled, gliding down her back, elegantly unwinding. Gavin wished to run his hand through the silky tendrils, thick and living, as one would slip their hand into a waterfall in amazement.

Her eyes changed. Their blue fell away as if into a hollow, stolen by deep, molten browns and blacks until they glowed red and hurt to look at, bright like bonfires at midnight. Her wings, huge and strong, slid out from her back, tearing her gown with a sound like iron blades and spreading out, beating steady as breaths as she crossed her arms over her chest. Her pointed ears peeking out, her eyes tilted and now molten red against her high cheekbones, everything about her was strange and lovely.

And as she gazed back at him, no stranger sight could he imagine, full of wonder, for what she was had a name, unmistakably.

“You’re a fairy,” he said in a state of shock, hardly believing his own words.

“I am Tanaquill, Crown Princess of the Fay, daughter of Britomartis of the white rod and Oberon the Cleopolite. I greet you, Shapeshifter, as one who saved my life and to whom I and my realm are indebted. Ask of me what you will and I shall grant it.”

“Ask what I will? You mean a wish?” he returned, startled. Perhaps there was such a thing as wishes granted if there were truly fairies.

His mind went blank. Then Gavin thought of the shapeshifter female he had come to London to find. The need that had driven him for hundreds of years. He needed to know where the other shapeshifter was. If she existed and where. *Where is another of my kind, a female*, the question formed in his mind. But looking at Tanaquill just then, he understood that he had forced her to give her word that she would someday show him who she was, and that having revealed herself to him she was obliged to perform certain customs like a *djinn* in an Arab tale. He had some kind of hold on her at this moment, he realized.

In the silence of the coach, to the sound of the horses’ hooves and the turning wheels, he said nothing. “I thought fairies were tiny,” he said after a moment. “Isn’t that why Chloe Lockwood’s tiny now?”

Tanaquill looked a bit unhappy at that and Gavin wondered if he had insulted her. “We are,” she answered somewhat primly. “In this world. But while visiting my cousins I am under

the influence of a riddle which grants me human dimensions.”

“Yes, your cousins, the witches. Are they fairies too?”

“No, they’re—witches, just witches.”

“Their scent is human while yours is not,” Gavin said, clutching at the notion that he could still trust his nose amidst all this. “So witches exist. And fairies.” *And Fairbain*—he thought quickly.

“And shapeshifters,” she replied. “Before you, I had thought they were no more than legend.”

He laughed to himself.

“You’re smiling,” she said. “You don’t do that very often. What are you smiling at?” she asked, making him realize that he was actually smiling. It *was* a rarity for him. He wanted to say a lot of things about why he was smiling. About the new world that had opened before him, about how simply pleasing it was to be in her company, but he couldn’t find the words. “Your wish,” she said finally, her smile faltering. “You have seen me in my true form. Make one.”

He was sure there was much he could ask of her if he chose, but the idea troubled him. *Captured*. That was how she seemed. He didn’t want to force a gift from her when he had wronged her already. “I ask nothing in return, Princess,” he said, and disappointment laced his voice. “Only that whatever binds you to me, be undone.”

Hurt lit her eyes. “That cannot be,” she said quickly.

Was that regret he saw in her that such a wish could not be granted? She had stopped herself, as if managing her temper.

“I appreciate your intention,” she said finally, her voice cold. She looked down and he suddenly wished for a way to distract her from her thoughts. He gestured to her. “I’d still like to see you as you really are, your natural size.”

Her eyebrows lifted, high and blond on her brow, and as she blinked it was as if a fire was momentarily snuffed. “I...I do not wish to become small.” Tanaquill thought of the prospect—she had purposely remained human sized in his presence. Especially after what they had done together. It seemed unequal for her to become so small when he was so large. “Why should I be small when you are so large?”

“Are you frightened?”

“No,” she returned, peeved before she realized he was goading her and a corner of her mouth lifted wryly. “Merely, it would be an inequity.”

“If you wish for me to do the same—”

She smiled at that. “You cannot become a fairy—” Her eyes widened.

It was as if the man vanished, and she heard a harsh call. She looked down to see dark eyes gleaming up at her and she laughed; it was the first time she had felt herself laugh freely in what

seemed like an eternity. “You make a fetching bird, and a kestrel suits you as they can be such a nuisance,” she said lightly, placing her hand palm up on the seat for him to hop on.

He hopped, and she wondered at his feet and claws clinging. Lifting him, she smoothed his glossy feathers, dark, shimmering with gold flecks. He was somehow recognizable to her despite the change and she thought with dismay that he looked handsome—even as a kestrel. He was vulnerable before her, this way. She appreciated that. “Well then, little bird, you will see what I am,” and as she spoke she changed, her dress falling into a heap as she slid from it, the kestrel taking wing at his sudden lack of support. She took a ribbon from her hair and wrapped it about her breasts and hips as a makeshift gown—rather comfortable, she noted, compared to what she had been wearing.

“That is not fair!” she exclaimed, for as she had grown small the kestrel had become the man once again.

Fully dressed as he had been when he stepped into the carriage, and more imposing for it, as she’d had to shed her own clothes, he looked on her with simple wonder, his green eyes lit by her glow. His eyes flashed golden as if to sense her completely and he opened his large hand, huge to her eyes now, his fingers together. “Come here,” he said thoughtfully and she hesitated at first, but then, hardly able to stop herself, flew forward. She sat in his palm, tentatively, wrapped in her ribbon, her legs folded under her, her wings beating slow and steady as a heartbeat, like a dragonfly at rest on a reed. How lovely it felt to have him around her, even as he drew her near his great, handsome face. His eyes returned to an emerald hue as he examined her.

“Well, you don’t have to be rude,” she said, pleased. Her voice, unlike Chloe when she’d shrunk, was the same as it had been before, its tone unaltered. “I look the same as I did when I was large.”

“Such lovely ears you have,” he mused. “I believe I’m getting used to this.”

“Yes, I see you are,” she said with a begrudgingly satisfied air.

“And so you are a fairy princess. Where do you live?”

“In a lake.”

“I see...” Very little could surprise him at the moment. To look at her made him feel utterly unlike himself. He had never before changed his form in front of anyone who had not been either family or astonished onlookers who could not fathom what they saw. “And I had not believed in magic.”

He looks lovely when he’s not angry, or sad, she thought. She flew up from his palm and hovered. “How do you think you transform into a wolf and turn back into a man with your clothing in perfect order? If not by magic?”

His dark brows rose in genuine surprise. “I’d not thought of it that way.”

She laughed then, a warm laugh which included them both. “It is a wonder you had not,

Gavin. You are as magical a being as I.”

His expression had grown serious. “I suppose I am. I know so little about myself.”

“Perhaps there is something to be said for not knowing a past that no longer matters. Whose weight we need not bear. Never let anyone claim they have the truth about you.”

Gavin paused, clearly intrigued by her words, which hinted at things she might know and he might wish to learn. But he wouldn’t ask her now and risk disquieting her when for the first time that night she seemed genuinely happy. A corner of his mouth lifted in a way which was pleasing to her. “I cannot believe I have never wondered about that before. To leave my clothes behind. I would have had to remain a wild, naked creature, it would hardly be practical.” And then he surprised her when he laughed at himself, a genuine, low rumble that echoed in her, a happy shiver. “How would I ever enter polite society?” He shook his head as if it were a marvel to him and laughed once more.

Tanaquill darted across her seat in the carriage, and pressed her tiny fingers to the window. His eyes followed her with a comfortable curiosity in them now, no longer so stunned by what they saw. The train of the blue satin ribbon she wore rose and dipped as she hovered. “This is the first time since my arrival in London that I’ve seen the night through fairy eyes, unclouded by human vision.” She sighed contentedly. “It is lovely to see the meadows once again.” She turned back to him. “I must ask you a riddle and you must answer. And if you cannot I shall stay small.”

Gavin frowned. “I wish you had told me that before. Does it have to be that way?”

She thought for a moment. “No, other fairies have their customs, but in my kingdom we believe in riddles as the truest speech, as clarity arises from paradox. A truth even the composer of the riddle may not fully see. It is a way we teach ourselves. And we simply wish it so.” She flew fast, to hover above her seat, and began to speak.

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A gift on threads I gave to you, and yet you cannot see.  
What is plain before your eyes, you claim can never be.  
But we have no such choices as you think are yours to make,  
For only gods can slip these threads, and loose what you would break.

~

Tell me,  
What aches with hunger when it is most full  
and dies to itself to live?  
The key you draw  
from sealed lips to give  
transforms this riddle’s captive.

~~~

He studied her. "I don't understand," he said evenly.

Her expression grew solemn. "What is it that can be lost, torn from you, and yet never gone?"

Gavin's eyes held hers. "Your heart."

She nodded in a motion that was almost a graceful bow, and as she did so closed her eyes and dove into her dress, which assumed the contours of a human body in a burst of golden light and sat before him, human.

"You gave me your heart," he said, his solemn expression unchanged at her transformation, his eyes never leaving her. His deep voice sounded almost cold for the surprise hidden in it.

"You're in love with me," he said calmly.

"Yes." She pulled her velvet cloak around her and replaced the hood over her hair.

Gavin knew her dress, at the back, must be torn where the wings had unfolded out of her, and he imagined the long gashes in the garment which she now concealed under her cloak, and the skin so soft underneath.

"I performed a healing rite." She paused as if her next words would be difficult. "The effect of such a working among our kind—" She tensed. "Our healers are trained for hundreds of years. They have long practice in this art and still it remains dangerous for them. But I felt I had to try."

"The magic—"

"—The sigil. Makes me love you. In a manner I can barely contain. I have little heart left for anything else." She pulled at the torn fabric behind her back as if it were now uncomfortable.

"If your dress is torn—"

"I will fix it in a moment, but now I am tired."

Gavin nodded and looked away, leaving her to her troubled thoughts for a moment, while he studied his own. It made a disturbing kind of sense. How she had been acting toward him ever since they had been in the same bed. She had helped him survive his mortal injury by making herself fall in love with him.

He looked out on the night hurrying by. The quiet rustling in the fields looked like fairies to him now, shadowed forms over the land. It astounded him to think how much she cared for him. That she might stay with him forever, willingly, *eagerly*. Because she could not bring herself to do otherwise. He could have her. *Forever*. A companion who knew what he really was.

It was too tempting; to think that they could stay together, at least for a time, and take pleasure in being together. It would be so easy to accomplish. *Simply ask her to stay*.

A companion, finally, while he waited for a true mate. The thought was inconceivably cruel. But such thoughts matched a life that had often seemed futile, as the human faces in a crowd glanced his way with a curiosity they could never understand.

She loved him; remaining together would make it easier on both of them. She would even

agree to it knowing he waited for another. He could be completely honest and he knew she would agree. *She will do anything I ask of her as long as she can remain with me.* Because he had caught her. And she had willingly let her heart be trapped to save his life.

After tonight he would leave. Never see her again. “Is there any way to change this?” he asked, watching a strange darkness in the field, like a giant, benevolent hand brushing across the tops of the grasses. Such strangeness as he’d never seen before, but faint, and at the corners of his mind, as if thoughts that did not wish to come fully to mind.

She studied him for a moment, her eyes careful. “No,” she lied. Not wishing to tell him. “Yes,” she admitted. “Find true love. Find the female shapeshifter and set me free.”

CHAPTER 14

“That might never happen,” Gavin said quietly. “Trying to find another shapeshifter could be a fool’s errand.”

Tanaquill nodded, her eyes intent on him. “What do you know of shapeshifters in the past?” she ventured, suspecting he knew little. A silent conflict warred in her over whether to tell him more, and if so, what.

“Barely anything. My parents didn’t want me to dwell in the past. All they would tell me was of the end of my clan.”

“And nothing about others who might still live?” Tanaquill asked.

Gavin paused for a moment. “They told me there were no others as far as they knew. They’re both dead now.” The carriage hurried them toward their destination. The night was cold and clear and the smell of rich fields hung in the air as they nestled inside the carriage’s black lacquered shell.

Tanaquill felt acutely the burden of hiding what she knew of the history of the shapeshifters. She could not bring herself to tell him that it was not only humans who had condemned his kind but inhumans too. But whereas humans, in these days at least, would only condemn him out of ignorance, inhumans would because they understood what he was, and remembered the deeds of his kind in the world a very long time ago. “What was the story they told you?” Tanaquill asked tentatively.

When Gavin said nothing she thought she had intruded, but finally he spoke. “My mother and father belonged to the last colony of shapeshifters in these isles, or anywhere that I know of.

About thirty of them lived together in the Scottish Highlands. My aunts, uncles, grandparents, until the MacAlpins—”

Tanaquill was confused. “The human MacAlpins?”

Gavin gave her a wry look. “Yes. Is there another sort?”

“The MacAlpins were kings not long ago. In what age—”

“—One thousand years ago, three hundred years before I was born.”

An entire colony of shapeshifters alive so recently? She hid her surprise. *The last of the rage of storms*, she thought, sitting across from her. Shapeshifters—as a child she’d opened volumes full of their gruesome deeds, bound in something akin to a human book, but with great moving dreams within their pages. They were stories of a time long past, however, the books themselves having written their last pages concerning the shapeshifters long ago. The stories were full of visions of battles in a time older than the history humans knew, in which vast armies, swarms of flying, running, swimming beings almost too fantastical to believe for their strength and numbers, launched themselves against the human realm as well as the fairy kingdoms themselves. Those tales were like myth to her kind, hard for even the oldest fairies to believe, for they understood their own strength, and to see something stronger—and with a violent drive for conquest—seemed incredible. It was easier to think the stories distorted the truth to cover up some folly the fairies had brought down on themselves. Some of the wise among the Fay thought such stories were not history at all, but symbols of hidden truths impossible to express in any other way. In any case, that chronicle of the ancient beast of two worlds had ended long before the times that Gavin spoke of. By then, no fairy would have assumed any shapeshifters to have existed anymore.

Tanaquill leaned forward with curiosity. “These shapeshifters in the Highlands, did they live among the ones called Picts?”

“Yes,” Gavin said, watching her. She felt the tension immediately rise between them.

Gavin studied her keenly, guarded—perhaps guarding against his hopes. He seemed to tense with his hungry curiosity. “What do you know of it?”

“Very little,” she replied quickly. Why had the Picts hidden these shapeshifters from the fairies? And how? *It is as if the shapeshifters had been veiled from us, and we from them—for our protection?* she thought, wondering what the other fairies would think if they saw her now—with him, a living shapeshifter, and he telling her that shapeshifters had lived among the Picts, a people with many friends among the Fay.

She thought of the oracle. These past few days, she had drawn a certain comfort from assuming that the prophecy she was bringing to pass upon the fairy kingdoms was simply about one shapeshifter, one whom, moreover, she was convinced was essentially good. Not a family of shapeshifters—or an army. “We know much of the Picts, but nothing of shapeshifters among

them,” Tanaquill said thoughtfully. The sight of Gavin across from her was almost new to her, with the surprise she felt.

He shrugged his broad shoulders, absently hugging an arm around himself, a gesture quite human. “My father claimed the shapeshifters lived openly with the Pictish people. I believed him then, as a child, although I find such stories hard to credit now.”

Tanaquill didn’t find it difficult to believe—that the Picts might have welcomed inhumans among them. “You mentioned the MacAlpins…”

“Yes, they were gaining power in Scotland and a shapeshifter called Tyne agreed to go see the king.”

“Tyne.” Tanaquill had never heard of the name. The shapeshifters in the old volumes were given names by the fairies for what they had done. Some were mentioned again and again, but they told of no families among them. “He must have been of importance. Was he a king among them?”

Gavin shook his head. “I don’t know if we had such a thing. I don’t know anything more about him than what he did that night. He was my great uncle.” Gavin paused. “In any event, they sealed a pact granting the shapeshifters their rights under him unconditionally, at first merely to ensure the shapeshifters be left alone, but the agreement went better than expected and became an alliance, or so the shapeshifters thought, and when MacAlpin’s son took the throne the new king invited the shapeshifters to a banquet. They trusted him and they trusted Tyne and thought little of the risks. But when they’d arrived the doors to the great hall were barred and they were slaughtered.”

“*How—?*” Tanaquill asked, bewildered. *How could those humans have destroyed an almost equal number of shapeshifters, with the power to transform in the blink of an eye into all manner of beasts? Was it by magic?* If Gavin’s mother and father weren’t there then they would not have known what happened except by rumor. But something about that story did not seem right, and it disquieted her.

Gavin shook his head. “I don’t know how. My father refused to say. He was never more stubborn. And my mother would tell me even less. They were the only survivors, having stayed away. Upon hearing the news they fled in fear for their lives.”

His eyes met hers. He was silent for a moment. “They never told me anything more about that time, when it was just the two of them, but I was born years later among the Vikings living in the Western Isles.” He stopped then. His voice took on a different tone, more introspective. “I grew up in that little village, among humans and their customs.”

Tanaquill did not hide her surprise. Up to this point, Gavin’s entire manner had implied, defensively she realized now, that he could not and had not ever tolerated living among any single group of humans for long.

Gavin noted her expression. “Yes, for twenty years I lived among the Vikings, in a village encircled by the sea.” He paused, his eyes dark in the carriage light, thoughtful. “Their long wooden ships with dragons’ heads, rocking in the black water.” He wasn’t sure what he intended by telling her this about himself. He just knew he wanted to have someone, for the first time in so long, know something about him. “When I was a boy the men used to have to chase me off those ships, I was so keen to go to sea with them. To be like them, I suppose.” He recalled the past with little effort, remembering the faces of the people he had known in a time that would have seemed ancient to humans alive today. “The big men with their beards would catch me and one of them would carry me under his arm like a sack of flour off the boat. I’d kick and scream all the way to the dock, and then run to the center of the village and sit by the old wooden statue of Thor.” He remembered those times in some ways more clearly than the long gray years he’d known recently. “The statue was plain, hardly carved, and it would stare down at me like the bearded men, only more solemn. The wood in that statue was just like the wood of those boats. Everything made sense in that town.” Gavin stopped. “That wooden idol seemed huge to me then, but would hardly reach my chest now, I suppose.” He didn’t mention that he remembered kneeling in front of it as a boy, offering a bowl of ewe’s milk. Or that at night in his straw bed, he used to pull his woolen blanket around his ears, waiting eagerly for the storm giants so that Thor would awaken in his lightning palace and ride out in his chariot of thunder, striking the giants until they howled.

The countryside hurried by outside the carriage windows, fields tamed by human hands that could remind him of the ocean when the wind roiled the grain in the night. On those storm filled nights as a child, he had imagined the battle in the sky so clearly that he could almost remember having seen Thor’s chariot streak across the blackness, the spokes of its wheels gleaming gold as they raced on rumbling clouds.

He disliked recalling how naïve he had been then, but he guarded the memories nonetheless. Sitting cross-legged at a bonfire on midsummer night, chin cupped in his hands, listening to the tale of the warrior maiden Brunhild, touched by Odin with the thorn of sleep and surrounded by fire to protect her as she waited for a worthy husband. Or Thor’s day at midwinter, when the human brides dressed in red, like roses against the snow. Or coming upon his mother picking flowers from between the rocks, the late spring wind blowing hard against the hem of her dress as she knelt. She had looked up at him, her eyes squinting against the sun as he stood over her, watching him with a keener intensity than he had expected. She had looked at him for a long moment. *‘Here, this is Freya’s hair, child,’* she had said, handing him a small bunch of the short-stemmed yellow flowers before busying herself again.

She called a butterfly Freya’s little hen, he remembered suddenly, for the first time in hundreds of years. Now, thinking back, Gavin couldn’t understand why she would say such

things, playing at believing in the human lore. He didn't remember her ever doing so again after they left the village, although he couldn't be sure. But back then her words had come easily, almost without thought; perhaps they were just fanciful ideas to please a child. But Gavin remembered the sound of her voice in those days, sometimes vividly—at peace. She had never sounded quite that way again after they left the village.

He'd only had twenty years in that town and had thought the rest of the world was like it. He'd known nothing back then. He waved offhandedly. "When the priests came to smash Thor's idol we knew it was time to leave. I realize now that we must have been hiding from the village what we really were anyway—I don't believe that there was ever a time when we didn't. Not with any humans."

Tanaquill tried not to watch him too intently. She was eager to know everything about him.

Gavin's hand absently smoothed down his thigh to his knee, as a resigned expression came over him. "After that we traveled. The world was changing, human towns were beginning to take on a sameness. We found ourselves once again in the Highlands. It was just before the time of King Edward. The land was familiar to my parents at least, if the people weren't." He paused. "I had grown up by then. They'd taught me the things I would need to help me live among the humans."

"And so you returned to the place where your ancestors had lived, though now only the humans lived there."

"Yes, the very same place. Perhaps it was the memories that made my father want to try and settle down in that place again. I don't know that my mother thought it wise. We lived around there for a time, while my father befriended the laird, showing his usefulness. Eventually he became his steward."

"Were you ever happy there? Among those humans?" Tanaquill asked.

"It was a mistake," Gavin replied evenly. "The laird, Sir Guillemot de Perseigne, had long practice in brutality from the Crusades." He stopped, staring into the past for a moment. "He discovered our secret by spying on us. When he summoned me alone, I went without hesitation. He'd always been good to our family. But when I arrived it was his older brother who greeted me, and I was told that my mother and father would be left alone if I cooperated in a hunt. I remember wondering where Sir Guillemot was, believing he would save me. Then it came to me—he was probably hunting my parents, telling them the same lie, that I was safe, and would be left unharmed if they cooperated."

"He wanted to hunt lion—having them on his heraldry, and he'd seen them in the East. The sport of kings, he thought. I knew the lion but had never had cause to take its form—they don't blend in where we'd lived. But lions have great force in their hind legs, wide paws with claws like iron hooks. They thought they knew what to expect, but it frightened them when I changed

and they weren't ready. A couple of the guards got their arrows off, wounding me, but I was able to run." He paused. His mouth felt dry. He'd never spoken of this to anyone. He realized then, for the first time, just as he was about to tell her, how shameful the story of his father's death was to him. But he wanted to tell her, he wanted someone to know.

She nodded silently and waited for him to continue. Gavin's eyes met hers and he told her everything. How he had found his mother and father. What she'd said to him after his father died. It stuck in his throat. But he was surprised by how calmly it came out, for how it felt. "My father had become another in a long line who lost their lives by trusting the humans."

Tanaquill surprised him when she leaned forward and took his hand. Dark purple bloomed in her eyes at their touch. "You are not to blame for what they did to you." She paused. "You weren't more than two hundred years old," she said. "You were just a child." She could not imagine losing her father in such a way, and so young. "How horrible they were," she said. "What a terrible waste."

He nodded, in acceptance of her sympathy, but she saw what was in his eyes, felt how tightly he held her hand. She could not imagine having to live always among the humans as he did; to be at their mercy with nowhere to go. Gavin had no human family he trusted, as she did her cousins, and no inhuman realm to return to. For despite her troubles, the Kingdom of the Lake was still her home. And right now she was grateful for it. And later, when she married the Prince, although the Kingdom under the Hill would be unfamiliar, she would have a place.

Gavin had no place. In any realm. And he'd had to fight and watch those he cared for die because of it. He'd had to kill humans. *Revenge*—over hundreds of years, he must have contemplated it. Revenge on the innocent for the crimes of the guilty.

But from the first moment she had met him, despite his imposing presence, there had been a nobility to his demeanor, a natural strength that came less from being a shapeshifter than from *who* he had become over the years. And when Tanaquill looked into his eyes now she doubted Gavin had ever committed a vengeful act on an innocent human. His parents had, despite great hardship, managed to bring up a child well. In trying to live at peace with the humans, they had given him a greater gift than he appreciated or understood. A strength of character that even now he would deny.

She came and sat beside him.

Gavin glanced over at her, sitting so near, his expression contemplative, but as his eyes met hers, he looked away out the window, but kept his hand in hers. "My father told me that story about Tyne and the MacAlpins," he said thoughtfully, "with a purpose in mind. To make sure that I understood there was nothing left. So that I wouldn't be tempted to look for others of my kind." He looked back at her and spread his hand over hers, watching as their fingers met and matched up together. "So that I would live as though there are no shapeshifters left anywhere.

But I've still searched for them. And I've had no life among humans worthy of the name. So I've done neither of the things he hoped of me."

Tanaquill said nothing. She thought of Gavin and his family—they'd *had* to live among humans, or live alone. And it had apparently destroyed them. Now, if there were only one shapeshifter left in the world—"The world is vast," she spoke up. "You may not be the last of your kind. But if this is what your mother and father believed, then they were right to forgive the humans and live among them. You had nowhere else to turn but this human world."

He said nothing for a moment. "That's true." *Before you*. It hung in the air between them. Without looking at her, he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it, rested it between them again. She ignored the frisson that slid into her fingers where his lips had met them, elation clinging to her like ivy on stone. "It does not have to be me," she said, regretting she had to say it. "Your mother and father found a way to live with humans."

His eyes hardened, but his expression quickly evened, as if he regretted that she'd seen his flash of anger. He reached out and brushed his hand against her cheek and watched as her eyes closed for a moment before she gently drew it away.

"They refused to hate the humans," she said. "And yet you give this up, what was yours—your parents' wish for your happiness—or you allow those whom you hate to guide your destiny." Their eyes met. "What happened to your family does not excuse you from the world." He was not surprised or angry, just listening. "You despise every human you encounter, I can tell." She stopped. "And yet you lived among humans when you were a child. Those humans had been kind to you, had they not?"

He shrugged, relaxing a little beside her. "That doesn't change what they did."

"*They* didn't do anything of the kind," she returned, growing less relaxed as he relaxed beside her. "The humans are not all the same. Those who were guilty you punished—your mother was right to stop you taking it further." His very being was like a pulse beating in her, but she ignored it. "Humans helped to raise you. How can you claim it has no effect on the man you are today?"

Arms crossed, he looked over with a bemused smile, which was perplexing to her.

Tanaquill frowned and picked up the skirt of her dress, pulling it a little away from where it had settled under his thigh. "I cannot think but that it does. Why do you look at me in that manner?"

Gavin reached out and touched a curl of her hair. "Because I'm glad I told you those things." He paused, studying the strand of hair he caught. "You're right."

She felt the smile come over her face, satisfied that he was glad to have told her, and gently removed his hand from her hair.

"But I cannot help how I feel," he added, making her smile fade.

“Having lived among the Vikings for twenty years, you must have grown fond of them.”

He shrugged, “I suppose so.”

“They must have developed a fondness for your family in return, and especially for you, having watched you grow from a baby. Humans like babies,” she added, “for the most part. Even the ones that are not their own. Why, when we try to take them even a stranger walking by the window, if they are gifted with the sight, might try—”

His brow shot up. “Do you really do that?”

Tanaquill looked back at him surprised, forgetting for a moment how little he understood of her. “Of course. We return them before they speak, usually.” She paused. “Many human witches have been taken as children. My cousins, for example. Their time with us gave them what one may call, more than human abilities.” She smiled and waved his concern away. “As I was saying, surely you must have sensed the villagers’ affection for you. If I had to guess, there were humans who grieved when you left, did they not? And did you not grieve as well?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Perhaps if your mother and father had stayed with them a little longer—”

“No, they did the right thing in leaving,” he returned simply, his tone indifferent. “The humans would have changed, eventually.”

“And yet those humans never turned against you.”

“They didn’t know what we were. It was the humans who claimed our lives, one by one, over the centuries.” Gavin spoke quietly, but his deep voice held a sudden, subtle threat without him even appearing to realize it. As if he were admitting he *would* some day get revenge, Tanaquill realized. *If only by breeding more shapeshifters*, she thought, understanding for the first time that there was more to his desire to mate with another of his own kind than he’d even told her.

Tanaquill forced her eyes to turn a solid blue, to stop their storming, and wished not to feel as she did for him. The unremitting ferocity of the shapeshifters in the stories she had read as a child came back to her. A war of all against all that had stormed over the earth. A ruthlessness that, from what she gathered, his mother and father, despite their hardships, had never succumbed to. “Your mother and father took no revenge on the humans.”

Gavin said nothing for a moment. “No, they never did,” he answered calmly.

Tanaquill’s voice was careful. “They never abandoned society to live only as beasts, as they could have.”

“Yes, they could have, for hundreds of years if they’d wished. And I never have either.”

“In the inhuman realm,” Tanaquill said, “we exist beside the humans, not entirely apart from them. We can remain in our realm *while* we live in theirs. Do you understand?”

“No,” Gavin said simply.

“If I were not a princess, and if I so wished, I could live in a farmer’s house, taking advantage of the milk in his pitchers, the fire in his hearth. I could wear threads unraveled from his blankets, content all the while in my own, unseen realm. I could sit at his table with the family for dinner, leaning against a warm bowl, and a better mood would prevail because I was there. As a fairy I may choose to live with humans or entirely apart from them, though as a princess I must live apart.”

“But you could imagine living that way?”

“There are fairies who grow so fond of one human family that they stay with them for generations. They consider themselves part of it.” She felt the carriage enclosing her, separating her from the natural world; how human it felt, how much it reminded her of her cousins. “It is written that there will come a time when the two worlds, human and inhuman, will not be so darkly veiled. Perhaps for you, that time has come.” She refused to let them hide behind the lie that finding a female shapeshifter was the only way to give her back her heart. He might believe it was true, but she knew it was not. Love, she had found, did as it pleased. “If you chose a human wife—” She was stopped by his look of displeasure, perhaps even hurt that she had actually suggested it.

A human family. He had bedded humans, he loved the scent of them, but he would never believe he could make a family with one.

“Your mother and father understood the possibility—” she began.

“—They understood nothing because they had each other,” he cut her off gently, taking up her hand again, knowing the effect it would have on her, feeling her small, inviting shiver. Her reaction to his touch was his guarantee that she would not fly from him. A sense of disbelief still took hold of him that he could have such an effect on her.

Tanaquill was beautiful and sheltered; Gavin had never seen it more clearly than by what she’d said tonight. Her manner, elegant and courtly, told of how carefully she’d been kept. “Don’t ever forget that humans are deadly.” His voice was gentle. “Even the humans you come to care for. My mother never understood that and I lost her. All those years of living and my mother and father couldn’t understand how fundamentally dangerous the humans are.”

Tanaquill had leaned back, pulling gently against his touch but not meaning it. “She died long ago?” she asked.

“Long enough.”

She looked into his eyes. There was candor between them. She knew that he invited the effect he had over her. For her own part, she merely wished to know every detail about him. For him to give to her alone what he’d kept inside him for hundreds of years.

He touched her mouth with his thumb, gently, looked at her sitting beside him. She took away the lurking belief that to be inhuman was a curse. Understanding her curiosity, aware of her

love for him, he did not begrudge her, but told what he remembered of the time leading up to that day over four hundred years past.

CHAPTER 15

The carriage hurried forward on the long dark road. The smell of spring, cool and clean, seeped through its wooden seams and the feeling of movement beneath them carried them forward. “We were in England, the Continent was engulfed in madness,” Gavin began, his voice intimate in the dim interior, “We had been roaming. The Black Death had come and gone, and much of the countryside had become a sort of wasteland.”

“I remember hearing about that,” Tanaquill said. She settled in beside him, the beat of horses’ hooves steady against the rocking of the carriage.

“Yes,” Gavin said. “The Great Mortality.” Outside the carriage, the night hurried by, silent, as if listening and remembering. “The humans watched their friends and family die. During the worst years, we would come upon villages where there was no one left. Horses were abandoned, cows wandered in untilled fields. In London, the rich gave away heaps of gold for crumbs of hope. Then after the plague the humans were killing one another with their greed. Everything stunk of anger and decay. The rich, the fat clergymen, children in their ragged clothes, staring at us as we drove along country roads just like this one.” He paused. “My mother took pity on the humans. Even after what they had done to my father she couldn’t stand seeing what they did to each other.”

Tanaquill imagined Gavin in the human realm over the long years. Human years were weights, the days anchored like ships against the slowly turning earth. It was a marvel to her that he had endured. “When everything was like that, where did you go?”

“We stayed on the outskirts of towns—they didn’t want travelers—but it was as though we couldn’t stand still. And it seemed to grow worse and worse as the years passed.” A silence fell between them.

Tanaquill rested her hand on his.

“Two weeks before she died,” he continued quietly, his voice steady, “I remember sitting by a flooded field, staring out at the emptiness. I didn’t think the humans could last much longer—some great curse was destroying them.” Gavin stopped and she watched the change in his expression, how his eyes hardened. “It pleased me in a way, I won’t lie, to imagine all of them

gone. I didn't like to see the humans suffer any more than my mother did. But I could only see it as justice for their treatment of my father, of us." He paused, the muscle in his jaw tensing, his look suddenly distant as he remembered. He appeared strong, daunting to her. She could imagine what the humans must have felt when they encountered such a man, if his eye had caught theirs.

"You could have used the humans' weakness to your advantage. Did you ever think to?" Tanaquill asked, knowing the answer, that he had not, could not, and only wishing he understood why he hadn't. That there was a reason for it that went beyond anything asked of him by his family.

"No, never," Gavin answered, his expression softening. Glancing at her he seemed to return to the present, the contours of his face subtly different, more approachable but perhaps only for her to approach. "My mother tried to help wherever she could," Gavin said and she felt him relax. "In the poorest parts of London, wretched places emptied by the plague, she would prowl the streets as a wolf to protect the innocent from men who'd become as beasts themselves." A wry smile came on his face. "It didn't matter that the humans she saved ran away from her too. Every innocent she found, she tried to help."

"And you?" Tanaquill asked.

He looked at her, and something passed between them, she saw it in his eyes, felt it as his gaze touched her mouth. He brushed his hand along her hair. "I did what my mother told me," he answered, making her smile for how he said it.

"And she told you to help," she returned.

"Yes," he said, "she told me to help." He stopped. "Humans are the most ruthless predators. The ones who roamed the streets looking for females, or children. *I would follow them,*" he said, his eyes shifting golden for an instant as he spoke, as if he was stalking them again. His voice held the threat he had been to them. The silent hunter, perhaps swift and merciful. He rubbed the stubble on his jaw.

"No, I didn't kill them. But I rarely saw them twice." He said nothing for a moment. "They deserved far worse."

Tanaquill snuggled happily against him. He had done right, not to let human blood taint his throat. It was new to her, to be in perfect comfort, alone, simply speaking intimately with the man she loved. It fought with her need for more of him and strangely, briefly, won. For now, it felt as if they were husband and wife, perfectly mated for life and she let herself imagine it so. It felt like stealing to be this content.

"My mother wasn't killed in London," Gavin said flatly, "which was surprising, considering what she was up to." He paused. "There was a town she was fond of. She had adopted it in her way. She told me that in Roman times her ancestors had been guardians in those parts, and taken a tithe in exchange for protecting it. Perhaps she still felt like their protector.

Even though they had no memory of her ancestors, no trace of our history.” His voice was comforting in the night. “She returned again and again to see the children and grandchildren of the humans she’d known. She looked like a merchant’s widow, well-dressed, but they sensed something different about her.” The night rushed by outside of the window. “She would doctor their livestock and they would take her into their homes and she would doctor them. She had hundreds of years of experience in herbalism to call on. Her sense of what animals needed came from knowing them better than any human could. They thought she was a witch, I’m sure. But she was of great help to them, and they seemed to accept her, if warily.”

His distant gaze was guarded as he remembered. “It was dangerous—she never looked older. Still, she wished to return to this small town and her favorites, who had come to know her over the years, to trust her judgment. In time they thought of her as the daughter of the woman who used to come, then the granddaughter.

“I despised these visits, how the farmers ingratiated themselves to her even though I saw the fear in their eyes. They never trusted her, never accepted her, despite what she did for them. She knew it too, but she overlooked it.

“One year, I chose instead to take advantage of an inn in a nearby town, drinking and taking up with the bar maid. When I returned to meet my mother at the arranged time, she had been hung in wolf’s form from a tree. An acrid herb had been rubbed into her fur. I’d never smelled it before, nor since, with all the places I’ve been. They would have skinned her, I’m sure. The man I caught claimed the wolf hanging like a trophy had been seen lurking around my mother’s lodgings and I should be grateful it was killed, for it had clearly dragged her off. He looked terrified; it made no sense to me.

“I let him go. It was even worse than what they had done to my father because I couldn’t hate them. I couldn’t kill them for it. I just didn’t want anything more to do with humans after that than I had need to, and with my mother gone, I hadn’t much.

“I took her down and buried her, then took my leave of this land for a long time.”

Tanaquill was silent. There was little to say at such horror, and having lived for as long as he, to be left with such bitterness at the hands of humans must have been excruciating. For hundreds of years after that Gavin only had the human realm. Even in the quiet of the wood, it was the humans’ world. Things were different for the Fay. She couldn’t imagine being trapped like that.

“She was honorable for what she tried to do,” Tanaquill said, “helping those who would harm her, who could never understand her, yet she saw what was good in them. It takes a being who understands herself, to accept the flaws of others.”

Gavin said nothing.

“Your mother was a great woman.”

“*Don’t ever say that.* You make her sound like a human. She was a great shapeshifter. She showed me what we could be. That we had an understanding that went beyond the humans. That the humans did not deserve to have the whole earth to themselves—look at what they’ve done. New worlds, new wars, it only gets worse.”

“And *you* deserve the earth, for what you would do to the humans if only you could?”

His expression was stony, his green eyes seemed emptied of emotion. “My mother and father were better than I could ever be. Because they knew their history as shapeshifters. They knew where they came from.”

“Perhaps.” Tanaquill paused. “But perhaps what made them great was not that they were shapeshifters, but a trait found in humans and inhumans alike. They were kind, generous, and they could see beyond the faults of others, see beyond themselves.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know, now would I?” he said with a sudden, wry smile that seemed to let go a bit of the tension, admitting that he was not included in her category of greatness.

She smiled artlessly, knowing he was jesting her. She was glad to see how quickly he could pull himself from his dark mood. For all his brooding he had an easy, gentle manner about him sometimes. Which was well and good, considering how dangerous he was.

Gavin was left silent, looking out at the passing countryside. The edges of the fields glowed as they always did, the brightness of them which his keen eyes conjured he took for granted. But *in* that brightness, he gleaned a shadow moving over the fields, whispers over the fields that he had thought only wind. He saw what in the distance looked like fireflies, playing over the tops of the wheat, and a huge shadow in the sky that could not be there, that looked like a woman’s face, a lulling hand, gently soothing the grain as the fireflies flitted, rustling it into song.

It was almost too much and he closed his eyes against it for a moment. Something *had* changed in him after the healing. He was seeing...*more*. He took a deep, steadying breath and caught a scent on the wind. He stiffened in shock. For an instant he could not have moved if his life depended upon it. He could do nothing but wonder what life had been like only moments before, because he didn’t know. The scent. *A young, female shapeshifter*. It was as simple and clear, as expected as the scent of returning home and he could not imagine how he’d ever believed that Tanaquill had been her.

Tanaquill had leaned forward, her eyes intent upon him. “Gavin—?”

His eyes glowed as he leaned back, feeling his human surroundings acutely as everything in him shifted and shivered, lizards and leopards, birds and wolves gliding over him, slipping under his skin and sliding away deep into him. The beings he kept inside him, hopeful as they awoke to the scent.

The horses whinnied and came to a sharp halt, rising up on their front legs and kicking angrily.

“Gavin,” Tanaquill began, alarmed. “What—” She wished she did not already know.

“She’s...”

“Wait—” Tanaquill exclaimed as he broke the door from its hinges and leapt from the carriage. It took no longer than an instant for her shock to become alarm, a half a breath to know he meant to leave her forever. “—for me,” she said softly, quickly. She climbed out the same side, thinking he’d be gone in an instant, but instead gasped, startled, as a firm hand grabbed hers, pulling her out sharply. Strong and warm, his fingers wrapped around hers, not letting go, as if not wanting to lose her even as he looked away from her, in the direction they would go.

“Come, onto my back. Don’t let go.” He pulled her roughly against him and she grabbed his human neck as he leapt forward and a shiver of magic, warm and alive, slid into her hands, her body forced against his, more intimate than any caress from her arms down to her toes as the skin transformed under her fingers, along her arms and stomach, his body changing with inconceivable grace and speed into a huge, gleaming black horse and landing at a full run.

She clung to him. “I will help you,” she whispered in his ear. Without a care for anything, her fairy wings unfolded out of her back. Beating them strong and steady, she lifted them off the ground and he ran on a trail of golden dust she spilled from her hand as they soared through the air, visible and astonishing to any who might care to see.

CHAPTER 16

Tanaquill gripped Gavin’s neck. The wind whipped back her hair and snuck inside her torn dress, chilling her skin. She glowed brighter as she bathed in it, a pure tincture of spring, full of flowers and grass, and beat her fairy wings in a slow steady rhythm familiar to her ears. The stardust trail shimmered under Gavin’s hoofs. She did not know where they went, but far below them was the same winding road the carriage had been traveling.

“We must get the amulet, *Gavin*, where you are going—”

But then, there it was. Gore House, where the amulet hid, and the female shapeshifter, too. Tanaquill felt surprise and then dread. She knew immediately that they were being drawn into a trap. But did these witches understand what they were trapping? She leaned forward in the wind, determined. There was nothing to do now but face what would come.

Gore House, massive and disharmonious, dominated the lawn upon which it slumbered. Its many wings spread like tentacles along the gently sloping green, breaking off in the warring

styles of several ages of human occupation, with stone walls ending against wooden ones, spires next to archways and flat roofs next to steeply slanting ones. Its many windows were like sleeping eyes hinting at the fitful dreams that had occurred within its walls. A slew of carriages were clustered tightly around the house like a crocodile's children.

But the great brooding manor house remained only long enough for a fleeting impression. In the next moment, it was as if the house, unused to being viewed from above, had finally turned its head up to see them. For an instant later, spreading out before Tanaquill's gaze on the great lawn was a house that pretended to be entirely different, simple, elegant, and almost righteously proper. Warmly lit with hospitality, the sort of place inhabited by upstanding gentlemen and ladies and their guests, members of England's best set, who deserved their station in life and every good to come their way. The contrast was so great, Tanaquill could almost have imagined herself mistaken in her first impression, but she quickly understood that there was no mistake involved.

It had spotted her, she realized. *The house is alive*, she thought with wonder.

Gavin soared downward in a steep drop as they angled for the roof; which house he saw, the crocodile or the pussycat, she did not know. Downward they flew, her thighs clinging tightly, her wingbeats steady, her hand gripping his neck. They landed in a single, smooth motion atop the roof, Tanaquill slipping off Gavin's back as they glided to a stop. The horse left, drifting out from beneath her hand. She gripped a little, unconsciously, as if to keep him from vanishing, and found that she clung to Gavin's shoulder in his dark coat. When her hand came away from him she felt the cool breeze between them and her feet resting on solid stone. Her outstretched hand spilled the last of its fairy dust, which trailed off through her fingers. Without looking at her, Gavin took that hand and the last of the dust mingled between their palms.

He turned on her with golden eyes, looking more lost than he ever had. When he said nothing, Tanaquill began to grow uncomfortable under his stare, which spoke of his compulsion to find the female but also something more.

The rooftop blackness surrounded them, the wind gently lifting Gavin's dark hair as crickets cast a low din in the grass. Despite the witches' jubilee they had been expecting, the house was silent. *They're hiding*, Tanaquill thought as Gavin pulled her closer, *They know we are here*.

"Don't worry," he said. His eyes returned to green as if he was reasserting control over some wandering impulses. He responded to her nervousness. "You're coming with me." *Maybe forever*, his mind brushed faintly against hers, out of his control and unbeknownst to him.

Why? she thought, feeling the thrill of it without wanting to.

He gripped her hand firmly and pulled her forward. "This is the way," he said.

"To what?" she returned as he pulled her along.

She had picked up his thoughts; could shapeshifters do this, Tanaquill wondered, or was her heart making it possible? In either case, Gavin didn't seem aware of what he was doing. With a few steps he led her toward the opposite ledge and, without warning, pulled her off with him. Startled, Tanaquill caught the gasp in her throat as she fell, her wings fluttering as he glided down, a wolf beside her, to land first in a soft whisper of padded feet, then stood as a man and grabbed her from the air above him before her feet came to rest on a tier of roof that looked flat, but to stand on, felt sharply slanted. She realized that he had chosen the wolf in that moment, not simply for its ability to take a fall, but because the wolf was less susceptible to visual deception.

Looking into Gavin's face, she noted that he wasn't himself. He gripped her, as if holding her, and himself, in place, but the look in his eyes was distant and unrecognizing. His warm hands resting on her waist a moment longer than was necessary to steady her, set off a tiny shiver deep within her that would not stop. Mastering herself, Tanaquill sought to hold his eyes. "I promise I will help you, but my cousin, Gavin, I must help her too," she said softly as he studied her.

His eyes closed heavily for a moment as if trying to impose order upon an inner turmoil. "We'll do everything we need to. This way," he said in a tone that sounded firm, resolute, and as if he spoke of something completely different. Something that made her stomach grow warm. He drew his arms from her and led her to the ledge. When Gavin jumped this time she was ready, springing into the sky, her wings catching the air, leaving her free to admire, breathlessly, the sight of his shifting. This was what it was to be in the company of a shapeshifter. To feel suddenly alive, and ready for anything. Using her wings she slowly descended, looking for the roof, but he became human again as he landed and pulled her down out of the air.

She gasped instinctively and then nearly laughed, startled to find that they stood on the invisible rooftop of one of the house's many, discordant wings. Tanaquill could see grass far below their hurrying feet as he pulled her along, grass that, she realized with a rather human sense of vertigo, actually lay some distance off, down the slope past the house, its image transposing itself.

"Gavin—Where are we going—" Tanaquill began quickly. "We should wait for some sign from Daphne's coven. They will break the spell on the house," she said. "If we don't enter this house in the right way, we might alert them." Even as she said it, however, she recognized that the house was protected by something more than a spell to be affecting her fairy vision this way. In two long strides Gavin crossed the invisible expanse, crouched, and slammed his boot through an unseen window. It burst, scattering glass, and gave view to the darkened room that lay within like a painting in midair.

Gavin reached in and grabbed what was left of the windowpane, tearing it loose with the sound of snapping wood and popping glass. He climbed into the room and reached back to pull

her down with him. Tanaquill let him, grasping his arms tightly as she slid through, her wings folding to fit through the window and unfolding again on the other side. She noticed that his hands dripped blood.

“Is she in here?” Tanaquill whispered, forcing herself to ignore the wounds that she imagined would soon heal. She looked into the darkness. The room glowed brightly to her fairy eyes as if awash in strong moonlight. The bedding and the simple drapery gave a quick, singular impression of a modest, feminine bedroom. Tanaquill walked over to the bed and touched the soft, deep yellow coverlet. A simple bedroom of the kind for a lady’s maid. She turned around and gasped, surprised at finding Gavin standing right behind her.

“Shh—” he said, and lightning fast pressed two fingers to her lips. He cocked his head, his darkly gleaming eyes thoughtful, protective. His fingers brushed across the fullest rise of her lips, testing. Tanaquill’s heart pounded. She told herself to stop him as he bent his head down and kissed her, his mouth gently but forcibly opening hers, his tongue sliding between her teeth. His hand curled around her neck, drawing her near as she let out a muffled sigh of pleasure. He responded with a shiver of need as his other arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her into his firmness. His hand in her hair, he finally drew his mouth away, breathlessly, his lips parted, eyes flashing golden, then back. “You’re not her,” he said thoughtfully. She felt his thumb rubbing the back of her neck. “You’re not the one I want.”

Where her dress had torn, her skin pressed against the cool fabric of his shirt. His hand pushed through the tears at her waist to the soft skin beneath and glided downward to the rise of her buttock. Despite what he said, he did not let her go. Tanaquill knew she had to go save her cousin, but what he was doing was making her wings curl. Her thoughts felt thick and drugged by need. “Gavin,” she began softly, carefully, despite everything forcing herself to stop him. “We must find what we came for.”

“Cling to me,” he whispered, his tongue darting out to taste her lips as he eased her down onto the bed behind her.

CHAPTER 17

Tanaquill’s shoulders met the bed, her wings spread beneath her, pressed down on the smooth fabric with her weight and his. Gavin’s powerful arms enclosed her. His eyes glowed intently, entranced, as his tongue darted into her mouth, his soft groan passing through her teeth

as he pulled her hips against his. She told herself to stop him but wound her arms around his neck instead, tasting his mouth against hers.

Her eyes were fogged with emotion when they opened to his searching gaze. His fingers traced gently down her cheek. “It’s always been you,” he said, and then he was kissing her again, along her jaw, the tip of her ear. *Not her*, she thought with a little thrill, wanting him in a way she couldn’t control. He pushed his hand into her hair. “I’ve been looking for you for so long,” he said, his voice low and deep.

She felt a sting of unhappiness, and grew still beneath him. She *meant* to take what was not hers, but it was his phantom he was laying with—she found her voice before realizing it. “Gavin,” she said softly, drawing her arms from his neck to turn his gaze to look at her. To really *see* her. “She’s not here, Gavin. I am not the female shapeshifter you seek.”

“I know who you are...” He nuzzled her neck. “You smell incredible.” Hope leapt in her breast. She felt his lips against her throat, tilted her neck. Behind his shoulders the room began to glow, the unfamiliar surroundings seeming to thrum. But this was wrong. “Gavin, stop—”

His head came up. A hint of anger, impatience slid into his eyes. His mouth already looked swollen from kissing. His glowing eyes lingered over her, shimmering, inhuman as they roamed across her face, down along her mouth, her neck. “Why? You’ve had me before. Now let me,” he said. He bent toward her, his tongue slipped past her lips, glided along her teeth before pulling away a fraction.

It was wrong, in this place, spurred on, she knew, by the scent of the female shapeshifter all around, mixing with her own—but how, a part of her reasoned, would she drive this trance from him? She knew it was an excuse. He wants *me*, she thought as she kissed him, helpless to stop herself, her arms winding tight around him. *Even if he leaves me the instant he sees her. Just this once.* His hand glided up her thigh, lifting it against him as she slipped her other leg out through a long tear in her dress and dragged her ankle along his leg. “Gavin...” she whispered, her voice sounding full of longing and relief and strange to her ears.

At the sound of her voice his eyes met hers and she caught how he watched her, satisfied by her reaction, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth, but something serious in his eyes, smoldering through the drive that fogged his senses. He pushed aside the torn fabric over her breast until her nipple was exposed, hardening against the cool air. He brushed his thumb over it. “You love me,” he said, looking down at her, “but I don’t deserve it. I have your heart and it makes you unhappy.”

His erection between her legs made her ache in longing and sadness as he bent to kiss her again and she closed her eyes and pressed her lips to his, moved under his mouth, inhaled the warm, sweet scent, strong and clean, of soap and linen, human smells and the inhumanness of him.

Tanaquill knew that she should not do this, not here, in this dangerous place, but she pulled him tighter, kissed him with abandon. The witches, if they chose to enter the room while they were like this, would be destroyed, if not by him, then by her, for disturbing them. She must get the amulet, and he his mate. But neither would happen now, and her heart beat harder, eager to be reunited with itself.

She dragged Gavin's shirt up to bare his skin and the heat of it made her glow like a beeswax candle, with the same honeyed scent. He slipped his hand between their stomachs and tore the rest of her dress off, the confining fabric of her blue evening dress and torn undergarments, dragged out from between them, was replaced by the coarse feel of his jacket against the hot, naked skin at her sides and his crisp shirt pressed between them.

She tugged off his jacket, then, with less care, popped the buttons from his shirt and pulled it up over his head, tugging it off his muscular arms. He stood to take off the rest, tugging off his boots, his trousers, impatient to return to her. She sat up to watch him do it. A slight spring breeze drifted in through the broken window and she drank in the cool air over her body as her desire made her dizzy.

He returned to her, gripping her by the waist and dragging her back so that her head rested on the pillow. He kissed her tenderly, and Tanaquill wound her leg around his lower back, hoping he would enter her, but then her breath caught as his teeth sharpened against her mouth and, for an instant, she grew still with surprise. Taking in a ragged breath, a shiver of excitement ran through her as his sharpened teeth gently nipped her lower lip, biting down gently, inviting her and she opened her mouth.

His tongue slipped between her teeth, gliding over them, sensing. After a deep, lingering kiss he pulled his mouth from hers, and kissed her more gently as if to coax her. "What's wrong?" he said, his breathing warm and hungry. "Bring them out." Gavin took hold of her head in his hand and kissed the hollow of her neck, the rise of her breast, teeth scraping. He opened her mouth with a finger, absently slid it in. "I want to feel yours."

When her own teeth did not do the same his mind brushed hers with the thought *Not her, not the one*. Determination flared in its place. *I am the one*, she thought. *Not her*. Tanaquill's wings beat once, heavily, tapping the bed like an idle cat's tail, and she arched against him. If she changed, he could pretend it was not her. "Speak my name," she whispered, insistent.

His mouth on her neck, his hand slid inside her, coaxing. Her mouth opened and her wings began to beat slowly and powerfully, stirring the air around them. "Say it."

"*Tanaquill*," he whispered, distracted, making her skin glow. The sound of it hurt for how much she wanted it. His hand glided up the rise of her stomach, over her breast. He looked down at her with a muted gaze, his voice soft, deep and insistent, rough with his desire. "Tanaquill," he said, tilting her chin upward to him, as if to study and remember it.

“Gavin—” she began but couldn’t continue. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled his naked body to hers. *Just tonight*, she thought. *Then I can let you go, I promise. She can have you then*, she lied to herself.

“Tanaquill, I can’t wait.” Gavin’s voice melted over her, deep and throaty. Tanaquill felt his abdomen lift off hers, his thighs strong and warm. “Yes, now,” she said eagerly. “And everything else, yes.” She tilted her hips upward to meet him and took him in, groaning softly as the healing surfaced from within her like a living thing come to feed. The memory of the sigil, a metallic taste in her mouth, its blue glow a dull ghost in the room, the remnants of something old. She felt her heart. The memory of the healing was letting her touch it, she reached, brushed against it, remembering, her throat full as she brushed over it but could not catch and keep it. *I want it back*, she thought fleetingly, frustrated, before she felt herself pulled away and the desire flooded her and the weight of his hips came down on hers as they began to move together.

Her pulse throbbed against the pressure of him inside her as she clenched his shoulders, quickening, his thrusts urgent, the pressure building. She arched her hips, telling Gavin to go faster, build the friction she needed. He groaned deeply, and with it his mind brushed hers, coaxing. The place where he shifted, she remembered it, and let herself go there.

Gavin moaned, grateful, when Tanaquill’s nails sharpened into claws along his back. As if she had reached a point he could now cross like a bridge, his skin began to ripple and change. His lean muscles shivering with strength, the souls of beasts roamed over his skin. Tanaquill felt them crawl up into her, along her limbs, her stomach. Everywhere Gavin touched her pulsed with animal life. Her mind hummed, every part of her sensitive, trembling with an excitement that restlessly sought an outlet beyond their sex.

A shiver that felt like a surprised laugh trembled up her back and spread up her dragonfly wings, turning them feathery. “Tanaquill,” Gavin whispered and she felt it within her and all around her, “change with me.”

Tanaquill wound her arms tighter around him. He rocked into her, pushing her up the bed and she clung to his back. He could feel her skin awakening. “Gavin,” she whispered, *I love you*. “I can never get enough of you.” Her legs tightened against him. Gavin’s skin seemed to shiver down to the muscle and bone. It was as if his body drifted down inside her like a shadow falling over her. At the sensation her mouth opened but no sound came. He pulsed through her, a heartbeat within his thrust. Wherever her skin touched his she felt a sharp release that never felt like enough. She groaned, feeling herself coming everywhere as his muscles strained, the long, lean line of his body working over her.

She watched the red heat rising off of his sweating skin through her golden eyes. Along his arms, under her fingers, she suddenly felt scales and jolted with surprise to see her hands green and shimmering, with hints of silver, absorbing warmth from his muscled arm. She felt sleek fur

spring up down his chest and abdomen, soft and silky, the spots of a leopard gliding down his chest like an aurora. She could feel all three upon her, human skin, scales and fur, and sense the thousand beasts.

It was the most extraordinary thing she had known in any realm. How could she ever think to want anything but him?

Her own skin shivered and trembled, tickling, an exquisite sensation, as thick fur grew out of her in leopard spots from her sparkling, peach colored skin, absorbing its glow, and scales climbed her neck, forming a silken armor across her cheeks. They raced down her back like hot oil straight to the bottom and wound around her thighs. His body warmed the scales and enlivened the blood underneath. Snake fangs slid out and she tasted venom on her tongue. She was everything at once, transforming with him, his animal essence a power coursing through her that she, another inhuman, could easily take in. Unlike the first time, when she had only tasted of what a shapeshifter was, now she was all that was him, bringing it forth from herself.

Tanaquill curled her feathery wings about them, protecting them as they mated. She felt her climax rising and wished for the release of it but didn't want what they were doing to end. She sensed that he didn't want to stop either, but that the threads of sanity had already begun to weave into his mind, taunting him with what he was doing now that he could not stop. "Tanaquill," he said, his voice strained. Sensing his hesitancy, fighting back her own, she cupped his cheeks in her hands and pulled his mouth to hers, kissing his lips through sharpened teeth as she reached her climax.

Her breath caught in her throat as Gavin groaned, releasing, spending himself inside her. Spilling into her, his breathing hard but his mind suddenly clear. She felt a bitter ache, realizing an instant after she spent herself too that she needed him again, and again. Her blood still pounding, her body covered in scales and fur reluctant to fade, her dragonfly wings in feathers, she lay staring up at the ceiling on the unfamiliar bed. The healing was calling for him again, but he was sated. Gavin rested, his hand slowly riding up her side, her legs, weary from strain, still tangled with his.

CHAPTER 18

Gavin shifted back, smoothly transforming on a deep breath, his muscles warmed and relaxed. Scales retracted in a rippling tide, fur vanished like smoke, all so quickly it was as if it

had been a trick of the looking glass, leaving smooth, lightly tanned skin behind.

He sat up on the edge of the bed facing away from Tanaquill and pushed his hands into his mussed hair, smoothing it slowly back against his bowed head. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice sober, a reprimand to himself. "I won't go after her until we've accomplished what we've come for. You have my word."

He surveyed the room as if for the first time, staring at the shattered glass on the floor by the open window. "They know we're here."

"Yes," Tanaquill said from behind him. "I should think so, Shapeshifter."

Gavin glanced back over his shoulder to see what he'd always dreamed of, lying there, waiting for him. Before, under the almost overpowering influence of the scent of a female shapeshifter in the room, the transformation Tanaquill wrought had simply been what he'd expected from the scent and his instincts. But now, his mind cleared, she was something he'd wondered if he'd ever see.

Tanaquill looked like a female shapeshifter. As alien and familiar to him as a dream remembered. Her eyes golden, animal traits mingled on a body otherwise human in shape. He felt his loins stiffen at the sight. The scent of their sex was still warm on her skin. And everything about her, especially how she looked at him, told him that she wanted him again.

He said nothing, his eyes taking her in, his expression grown remote as the idea came again against his will, even with the smell of a true female shapeshifter all around them: *I could keep her with me. She will do anything I ask.*

He stood to get away from his thoughts, grabbed his trousers, began pulling them on. He didn't want her to see how his eyes had shifted to match hers.

A female shapeshifter was here, in this house somewhere, behind a door he could finally open. He would save his kind—Gavin stopped as the realization stung in his eyes and he exhaled a long breath to release it. He could do that for his parents. He resumed dressing, not looking at Tanaquill. He would save his kind from oblivion. And some day, they would no longer have to bow to the humans, or hide what they were as if it were an abomination. But what about Tanaquill? *Tanaquill.*

He would be leaving her alone, he thought with a pang in his chest. If he loved the female shapeshifter it would set Tanaquill free, return her heart to her, but when it came to the female shapeshifter—love didn't matter. How could he not come to love her, in time, if the chance was theirs to make a new world for the shapeshifters? But in the meantime, he would be leaving Tanaquill—to a marriage she clearly did not want. *Alone*, he thought, his jaw tense. Sensing Tanaquill made no move to ready herself, he spoke to free himself from his thoughts. "The amulet," he said, his voice colder than he intended. "Can you sense it? Is it still—"

"—here, yes, it is below us." Tanaquill watched him in the strange, quaint room, still

aching for him, her need only growing stronger.

Fur striped her breasts, scales wound along her stomach, she could feel how they streaked her face—she couldn't *be* like this when there was so much for them to do. Frustrated, but lucid, her gaze seemingly unable to leave him for an instant, her eyes lingered one last time, her leg sliding along the bedding he'd left warm, before she forced herself to sit up, closed her eyes and thought of the female he would go to instead of her.

She loved the scales most of all, she thought as they rippled away, a tide leaving her body. The ridge of a crocodile along her back, between her wings, sinking down. The fur, the feathers, vanishing, leaving her dissatisfied. His animal essence ebbed, beat through her one last instant, and drifted away. She savored the last morsel of it. Something about the animal force had felt so solid, she realized as her fairy nature reasserted itself, her dragonfly wings beating once, twice. She understood now why his kind had tried to rule the world. For when Tanaquill had been like him, she had felt twice as strong.

She rose and stood before the bed, listening, sensing, naked, hands on hips, her skin shimmering peach, her long, thick hair laying against her back, a little tangled in her wings. The room was silent, nothing in the house stirred. "We gave them time, but they have not bothered to remove the amulet from the house. Either they cannot remove it, or choose not to, for it is a trap." She looked at the heap of fabric by the bed. "My gown," she said to herself and lifted her human dress, her chemise. Her cousins had given her these things. Now they were in tatters.

I hate this love, Tanaquill thought miserably. She wondered how this feeling for him could get any stronger. It was as if in satisfying him, the desire that had been maddening him had intensified her own. It made her feel like she was losing her mind.

"Start dressing," Gavin couldn't help saying. "My mistakes have put you in danger." Gavin pushed his buttonless shirt into his torn slacks. He glanced over to watch her as she concentrated on her dress, not looking at him. He noted the deep scratches on her back beneath her wings. In her true form, her vaguely botanical scent stood apart from the animal musk he'd left on her, his sweat and semen, telling him she wasn't a shapeshifter. She was completely fairy to him again, something new and irresistible, but at the same time the difference between them caught like a thickness in his throat. Because they both sensed it.

If everything went well tonight, their paths would be very different—and that would be his choice, a choice he would have to make, even if she, too, believed it was the right one. He broke the silence. "I was rough. Have I hurt you?"

"*Hurt me?*" she said, looking up, genuinely surprised.

Startled, Gavin took a step toward her. "Tanaquill, your—" *eyes*.

She nearly laughed at how stupid that was. "Perhaps I've been too gentle with you," she said without thinking, with a casual cruelty that she could tell took him aback. Then she caught

how Gavin was suddenly looking at her and realized that the room had been drained of color. Her eyes had turned white. Sudden fright pounded in her heart. She blinked, snuffing it out, and with relief found that the room was as it had been before.

She hadn't meant to do that, let the White Fairy in. She accepted Gavin's curious stare, but covered up her fear because she did not want to speak about it. Because she realized that he actually had hurt her. Not the scratches that burned along her back, which would heal in moments, almost as quickly as his, but because he was leaving her.

They both understood what he had to do. And she wouldn't take that from him. Tanaquill gave him a hint of a smile. "I am perfectly well," she said to reassure him. "I have not been harmed." It seemed irreconcilable between them. Maybe if he'd never caught the scent of the female shapeshifter on the wind, by the end of the night he would have decided to stay with her. She would have accepted him, and for a time would not even have given a thought to the obligations she had forsaken. But that was over. And bedding him again had only made it more clear that he would go to *her*, be with *her*.

When he should be mine, she thought, realizing she still stared down at her dress.

A pixie incantation could make the dress appear newly made. But Tanaquill did not want to see what they had torn made whole under her fingers as if nothing had occurred. Instead, she glanced over at the large wooden wardrobe that stood in a corner of the room. She felt her pulse quicken a little. She knew what would be inside. She dropped her own dress, forgotten, and went to it, opening the heavy doors to find it brimming with garments. "These must be hers," she said intently, running her hand quickly over them.

As the doors to the wardrobe swung open, Gavin stumbled mentally. From the clothes within, a perfume pregnant with a memory had drifted out. He didn't move. *A crowded entryway*. He'd lived so many years—had he come upon this shapeshifter before? How could that be possible?

Silk, muslin, lace and velvet. Tanaquill drew out an evening dress entirely white, with heavy lace at the sleeves and neckline and a thick white sash along the waist. A hint dated, from what she gathered of her cousins' fashions. *Her scent is on it*, she thought, feeling a quick thrill.

"It would be better for you to put those away and close the wardrobe." Gavin's firm tone made her head turn sharply. He was looking at her from where he'd sat, one boot on, the other in hand, his hair softly tousled, his eyes intent on her holding that dress. Was he angry that she had dared to touch the female shapeshifter's garments?

"...If there's some way you might mend your own instead," he said more kindly.

Tanaquill, feeling caught, her hand on the open door of the wardrobe, thought to lie but didn't. "I can."

"Quickly?"

“Immediately.”

“Then it would be safer for you if you wore your own clothes.” He gestured toward the dresses. “They aren’t borrowed clothes, they belong to her,” he said. There was no need to explain the ‘her’ he was referring to. There could only be one ‘her’. “She’s worn them for a long time.” *And they are infused with her scent.* He looked away from her, pushed his heel into his boot, set his foot to the ground.

Tanaquill hid her thoughts. “The female’s scent already covers me from the bed,” she said. Whatever was to come, she wanted this dress for herself and would have it, something that was *hers*. She dressed quickly, not bothering with undergarments; a cumbersome corset, chemise and stockings, although she would have liked to have had those too, instead sliding the gown against her bare skin. The heavy stitching scratched in places. The stays remained unfastened down her back.

Her wings flapped once as if through thick water, testing, sensing something. “They are spellcasting, I can feel it,” she said softly, her eyes glowing dandelion yellow.

Gavin frowned, noting the almost imperceptible tilt of her mouth; the reckless pleasure she was taking in it. He knew what it was to wish to escape pain through foolish risk. “Be careful. Don’t let them overcome you.”

“Don’t worry, they couldn’t. They are not strong enough for that.” She seemed to let it play over her without concern, as if it were a balmy breeze.

Gavin watched her, warily curious. “What are they doing?”

“Taking. Trying to. As they must have done while we mated.”

“You mean they are using us,” he said.

“—As if we have built them a roaring, magical fire.”

“I would rather have thought they’d throw a net over us. I would have hardly noticed.”

She turned her attention back to her new dress, her eyes fading to red as she smoothed it over her hips. “On the contrary, you would not have appreciated being disturbed.”

She whispered a pixie verse into her fingers and reached back, behind her neck, giving the air a little twist that called on fabric to reweave itself and clasps and stays to melt together like soft wax and quickly seal the back of her gown around the base of her wings. “My cousins and Lord Fairbain agreed that you should come with me, despite knowing everything of which the coven is capable, because as long as we remain together we are safe,” she said, closing the doors of the wardrobe with a solid, earthy thud. She lifted her hand above her head and her hair dressed itself, as easily as a compass needle pointing north. “Because there is no net strong enough to hold us both.” As she spoke she spied a writing table tucked into a corner which had been obscured by the wardrobe’s door. Her eyes landed on a pale sheet of parchment against the dark wood of the table. She felt her body go still at the sight of black scribbling on the page. “Gavin,”

Tanaquill called gently to him from across the room, “look here.”

She lifted the small square of parchment and Gavin realized that she held a letter in her hand. The sight brought his heart to his throat. By how intently Tanaquill read it he knew it was in the female shapeshifter’s hand.

Grabbing up his jacket, he pulled it on as he walked toward her. He stood beside Tanaquill, careful not to touch her, for he understood how she was affected by his slightest touch. Her subtle glow lit the room around her, haloing her like the warm aureole of a candle. He looked past the curve of her shoulder, the soft rise of her chest beneath her gown, and down to the letter in her hand.

The hint of an acrid perfume he had first noticed when the wardrobe was opened came to him more distinctly. He realized that, strangely, he smelled the shapeshifter least when he smelled the perfume. Instead he smelled Tanaquill herself more clearly, and had to stop himself from nuzzling her neck. “Read it aloud,” he said, for some reason wanting to hear it through her voice.

“It remains unfinished,” she began. “It says, ‘I am prepared to return to you soon, with what you want. While I have lost your respect, I wish for you, at least, to regain your honor and fulfill your promise. I am willing, again, to fall under the yoke of your rule. I cannot stand to live in London a moment longer—’ It stops there.” She handed him the paper.

Gavin frowned. “This must be a letter to some humans she has been living with. It seems they have some hold over her.” He pointed to the border the female had penned at the top of the page, which looked strangely familiar to him. It almost appeared to be letters. The border seemed to jump out at him and shift in his mind as if trying to fit. He felt uneasy. “There, what has she done along here?”

“Perhaps her hand idly marked the page while she thought, otherwise, I cannot fathom it,” Tanaquill said. She pondered a moment. “But now, if I remember correctly, it looks rather like the borders decorating our books on the history of the shapeshifters.” She paused. “I would have never thought of it, but could it be a language?”

Gavin’s parents had professed in response to his questions no knowledge of a shapeshifter language, and with the ease with which they, and he, picked up and moved among the many human tongues, it had seemed unnecessary. He stared at the strange, vigorous slashes and curves. *Greeting in blood, greeting in kind—Uncle*, something in him whispered. Startled, he stared at the paper for a long moment, then folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket, his heart pounding hard. “We have no time for this. We must find the amulet.”

“But Gavin, was that the language—”

“Yes, it was a greeting to an uncle.”

“You understood it?” Tanaquill said. Then her eyes widened and the red shifted to black.

“An *uncle*?”

“Yes. I don’t know how I read it.”

“But that means...that you and she are not the last—” She put her hand to her mouth, her eyes swam with color.

“It could, or it may not. You have human cousins—could she have a human uncle?”

“That knows your language?”

He sat down on the edge of the bed, staring at nothing. He felt as if he’d dreamed in that language. He pushed his hand into his hair.

“Gavin—” he heard Tanaquill say softly, on a breath of pleasure. She came and knelt down in front of him. She could not but be happy for him, for what he had discovered. “You will know everything when you find her.”

“Tanaquill, this doesn’t mean—” He didn’t know what it meant. He didn’t understand anymore.

It was just then that Gavin remembered where he’d smelled the perfume from the wardrobe before. Where he’d met the female shapeshifter before. He stilled, stunned, feeling numb at the realization: it was at Lady Teversall’s ball, on the crowded stairway, the woman ahead of him had been wearing the same perfume but much more of it. The woman had jabbed him with her elbow and then turned to glare at him, her eyes widening in surprise. For a moment the room fell away and he was there, looking at her—looking past her. The woman with the scar above her brow—*I thought nothing of her...*

The notion was stunning. That he could have encountered her and felt nothing. When tonight, the recognition had been so potent—just when it needed to be.

“Gavin, what is it?” Tanaquill asked. Gavin looked down and realized she had placed a hand on his arm. She continued. “Forgive me Gavin, I have been acting badly. Jealousy is new to me. I will not hinder you—not when it is what you have always wanted.”

His jaw tightened. “Tanaquill I—”

“I did as I wished tonight,” she admitted honestly. “We both took advantage of one another, and neither one of us would want to hurt the other, as we are friends.” She stopped, her throat gone tight. It felt as if she would never get past this. “Are we not?”

Gavin’s expression softened. “Yes, of course we are.”

She nodded to herself.

He touched her soft yellow hair and she smiled at him, understanding. After tonight he would never see her again. Gavin wanted to put his arms around her and, damning the consequences, drew her to him. He sensed how her body reacted to his, but she seemed to want this, simply being together, and she leaned against him, letting how she felt flow into him, for they would have few more moments alone together. Her heart beat steady and slow, and he felt

her smile to herself.

Finally she looked up into his troubled face, her eyes bright. “Stay still and collect your thoughts for a moment. I shall mend your clothing before we leave.”

She whispered her incantation gently, then her fingers lightly brushed his bare chest where his shirt had lost buttons, and where she’d torn it even further, and the fabric closed up, buttons popped up from where they had scattered and settled into place along his shirt, grasped by broken threads that tied themselves off as his torn trousers mended seamlessly. It tickled.

She stepped away from him and went to open the door but he stopped her. He grasped her hand and stood. They both felt how he touched her but he did not let go. “Tanaquill,” he said gently, his voice holding remorse. “Wait. I want you to know—” he began. “I feel the same. But I can’t do that—I can’t do what I want when it would not be fair to you.”

“I know,” she said, her expression honest. He wanted to pull her close again but not with what it would do to her.

“But I’m going to help you somehow, to be free of this spell.” It hurt him to admit to himself that her feelings toward him weren’t coming from her. “I will not fail you.”

“Whatever happens, you will have what you’ve always wished for, very soon,” she replied kindly.

Gavin nodded and said nothing. The truth was, in the brief time he’d known her, he’d grown closer to her than to anyone since his parents had died. And he didn’t want to lose that. No matter what, or who...

Her words were careful and reasoned. Steady beneath the hurt he sensed and she refused to show. “Gavin, you owe me nothing,” she added, and even as she said it she felt an agonizing ache at the thought she would not have him.

“I wish—everything could have been different between us.”

She smiled up at him. “As do I.”

But Gavin knew her feelings were not her own, they came from what she had given to him, what had saved his life and would ruin hers, unless he fell in love with the female shapeshifter they had found.

The possibility of which, he realized, felt very remote.

CHAPTER 19

Gavin glanced over at Tanaquill. Her peach-colored skin shimmered like stardust against the white gown, making its satin dull by contrast. She possessed a quality that made his mind try to convince him she wasn't real. Like a leaf-colored insect, she blended in with a fairy's native environment—dreams, fantasies. "Are you ready?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Yes, go ahead."

Lightly tensed, Gavin swung open the door of the shapeshifter's bedroom and was taken aback. He simply did not know what to make of what he saw. The number of wall sconces was inordinate.

"How curious," Tanaquill exclaimed softly. "Why are the walls blurred like that?"

"You see them as blurred? They're clear to me," Gavin replied. Plain silver wall sconces hung on every available space of wall. They were hung at close intervals, from floor to ceiling, all the way down the long, faun-colored corridor. Each held a partially burned down candle, tilted and unlit, with tear shaped drops petrified half down their sides, their dead wicks blackened.

Gavin caught no scent of humans near, nor any sound of them either. The linen bedding in the rooms behind the doors down the corridor, did not smell recently used, but there was no mustiness; rather, there were hints of rosemary, and the floor's pale wood had been recently polished. The doors were at expected intervals for small servant bedrooms. Other than the bizarre decor, the narrow corridor was ordinary.

Tanaquill straightened, her eyes glowing red. "Look," she said calmly, "they have sent someone to greet us."

A young woman was walking down the corridor toward them. A woman with no scent whatsoever, which made it difficult to accept that she was really there. Then Gavin noticed, with a slight, disagreeable twinge, that her feet did not quite touch the floor. Her dark hair was done in the currently fashionable Grecian style. She could have been en route to a soirée if it weren't for the haunted expression on her strong young features. "I know her," Gavin said softly. But he did not know from where.

"Remember," Tanaquill whispered, "we are safe together."

"Yes." He scooped up her hand in his own. Tanaquill caught her breath when his fingers slipped into hers, then clasped his hand tightly.

The strange woman stood before them, her brown eyes gazing steadily into Gavin's, ignoring Tanaquill altogether. "*Unforgiven One,*" she said, her voice steady and plain, "*do your gods no longer hear your cries? Why do you pray always to me?*"

Gavin was speechless, but only for a moment. His expression darkened. "I don't pray to anyone." Tanaquill felt the tension rise in him. Before she could stop him he reached out and brushed a hand through the apparition, flinching ever so slightly.

Eris was painfully familiar.

Slender as a young girl, she floated before them, her Grecian gown, its folds soft and straight, draping her curveless form.

Disbelief mix with recognition in Gavin's voice. "It was you I felt when I thought I could not go on—" Her hand on his brow, smoothing away the madness so he could sleep. Abruptly, he said, "How many shapeshifters are left in the world?" Tanaquill was surprised by how he spoke to her, as if he had known her for many years. "Who was the female writing to?" he continued, his hand gripping Tanaquill's hard and absently. "She used a language that only another of my kind would know. How many are left—"

"—More than you could have ever dreamed, but not enough for your plans."

Gavin looked taken aback. "That can't be. I've been searching for hundreds of years—"

"Your mother and father are why you are alone."

Tanaquill felt him go still.

"Listen to me. The witches have called me to the sacrifice," Eris said. "You are already trapped. Leave the female shapeshifter here, get what you've come for and quit my house." Eris' smooth, beautiful countenance was unyielding. She tilted her head, listening, her eyes like black pools. "They whisper prayers in my name." Her eyes turned sharply back to Gavin. "But you need not. You have been like a son to me." In an oddly human gesture, she brushed her hand down Gavin's cheek. Tanaquill held her breath, stopping herself from coming to his aid. Gripping his hand, she felt her connection to Gavin bringing Eris to her through his hand, together with an anguish that made her eyes sting.

"My coven would give me your suffering—but how can they give me what I already have?" She settled her gaze over him almost fondly. Then she turned to Tanaquill, noting her, and Tanaquill suddenly felt her judgment upon her. *He has a choice*, Tanaquill heard in her mind. Eris lifted the hem of her gown and turned, floating down the corridor. "This is my house, be wise, and you shall leave it."

Tanaquill began to see the truth of the house through the folds of Eris' gown. The corridor fell away into a wing of blackness, bent like a raven's wing with a distant, sharp turn that looked like the drop into a pit.

As Eris floated down the corridor ahead of them, the walls she passed yielded up the truth about themselves, a truth which had hidden successfully from fairy and shapeshifter alike. Whereas Gavin had seen normalcy but for the wall sconces, Tanaquill had been able to see little beyond the obvious intent to deceive. But now the corridor showed itself.

Its blood red velvet walls were lined, not with wall sconces, but with demons hung as trophies—dead or trapped in time, Tanaquill could not guess. They crowded against one another everywhere the wall sconces had been, their deadened eyes staring like snuffed candles. They

were ugly, cruel beasts, but Tanaquill bristled to see them hung on human walls, and wondered if they could be awakened and their eyes kindled again. These beings belonged in their own realm—for even death was not altogether permanent.

Gavin tugged Tanaquill closer as she passed a demon who looked like a blend of monkey and bat, with razor sharp black claws and fur almost as rough as a porcupine. Its tongue lolled like a dog, its large eyes stared transfixed. Tanaquill's ears twitched, listening. Careful not to brush against anything in the narrow corridor, as she passed, it seemed to subtly clench. "It is horrible to keep them like this," she said. Hung, apparently, half in their world and half in the human one. She did not know which was more horrible—the ones who were caught or the ones who had caught them.

"They were used for hunting," Gavin said, disgusted at what he saw and felt.

"How do you know?" Tanaquill asked him quietly as they followed Eris. Her skin felt flushed by his hand in hers but she refused to let go.

"I can smell the excitement, sticking to their fur," he said as they passed by a creature's grinning snarl, its face black and furred, looking as if made from a cat and a bat. Its eyes bulged, angrily caught with a clawed paw outstretched. Tanaquill and Gavin watched it carefully as they passed. She felt she heard a faint breathing and watched its eyes carefully. "They have the blood of humans and animals of this world still drying on them, as well as their own. The scent comes from hunting, not just being tossed something dead."

Tanaquill nodded, passing another demon petrified in attack. Once Gavin had pointed it out to her, she noticed a smell of blood and decay, grim and truthful, anchoring the space for her. She pointed. "There, do you see?" Wherever Eris passed, there were completely different doors than the ones they had seen before. She could only imagine the horrible workings that went on behind these doors, hidden away. And wondered if the female shapeshifter was to be mounted like this somewhere when she was no longer of use to them.

To Tanaquill's surprise, Gavin paused to touch one of the demons, his expression a solemn frown, scratching it behind the ear. Tanaquill heard a soft hiss, almost a purr. "Some are pets of a sort," he added. "With this as their kennel, just as one would house the hunting dogs." Crammed together along the walls staring vacantly, each seemed alone, caught in its own frozen world. "I wish we could help them," he said softly.

Eris paused very slightly, as if allowing them just enough time to understand something of the place, then led them down a small staircase to the next level of the house which was far more opulent, with family portraits displayed alongside paintings of favorite horses and hunting dogs.

"Here," Eris said, pointing to a stairway further down the corridor. "Do you sense it, Princess? This is where my coven wished you to go. It is a trap." It was as though she was teaching Tanaquill how to perceive this place.

“Yes,” Tanaquill said. “I do sense it.” She sensed the menace coming from it—a kind of endless falling. A sorrow like she would feel when she finally met this shapeshifter female and watched as she lost Gavin to her.

“This is a better way,” Eris said, walking in the other direction.

“Those demons, can you free them?” Gavin asked her.

“Given time,” Eris said. “Whatever comes to naught does so through me, and so shall all this, whether after much time or little,” she said, not looking back at them.

“In order to find the amulet I would have been drawn down that stairway,” Tanaquill said, looking back as they went in the other direction.

“It is a ruse?” Gavin asked, low.

“No, it is the fastest route,” answered Tanaquill.

They passed old portraits of ancestors. In one, a woman bent over a large black cauldron with wild eyes. She was curvaceous, vibrant, with wild black hair flying about her angry, contorted face. Next to her was a demon jumping in excitement over what she was doing. A child sat by the cauldron, legs sprawled, laughing till its face was red. Tanaquill doubted the portrait looked quite like this to the mundane visitor. Eris stopped here.

Beside the painting, through the soft folds of Eris’ gown, Tanaquill saw a doorway. It was low to the ground and square. The small door glowed with red fairy magic, held back by what looked like bars made of black smoke running its length.

Eris bent down and tapped the door, at which the bars vanished. The red glow was stronger now, leaking from every notch and crevice in the tiny door’s gnarled wooden surface. When Eris glanced back at her, Tanaquill received a strong understanding that this route was the safest way to the amulet. “Get what you’ve come for and leave this place quickly,” Eris said. She looked to Gavin. “My son, you have what you need. You will never mate with the female shapeshifter. Trust the gods—this realm is for the humans. If you try to go after the female you put your life in many hands and may perish of it.” It was curious to hear this woman, who looked younger than Tanaquill, call Gavin ‘son’. But when Eris closed her eyes Gavin did so as well, whether he intended to or not. *The oracle is a prophecy of strife, and he is the agent of it*, Tanaquill heard in her mind.

Gavin opened his eyes. He had glimpsed the suffering Eris saw, the anguish of millions that troubled, ever so slightly, her countenance, giving to her very youthfulness a quality of great age, as of an age so great it could only show itself as youth—the youth of the cosmos in its first troubled stirrings. “I wish that I may never meet you again,” Eris said. “May you find peace.” She disappeared and the corridor changed. Fine wood paneling surrounded them, floors gleamed, sconces held candles needing to be lit.

The ancestor portrait had changed as well. Gone were the cauldron-work and demon, and

in their place, a subdued portrait of a handsome woman, her dark hair modestly pinned up, eyes no longer wild, but cast slightly heavenward, was accompanied by her small son, who had been dressed as a girl to ward off mischievous spirits. A little woolly dog on her lap held only a hint of the demon Tanaquill had seen in the painting before, its eyes eager and a bit mad.

Tanaquill and Gavin knelt down at the place in the wall where Eris had shown the door.

“I sense the amulet coming from here, when I had not before,” Tanaquill said. She traced her hand along the wall. “Remarkable.” She found that what looked like smooth wall was actually a door and a handle. “This house is not made of wood and stone.”

“Do you think she was telling the truth?” Gavin asked, preoccupied.

“Yes,” Tanaquill said, not looking at him. “In everything.”

The muscle in his jaw tensed. Ever since Gavin had seen the letter his frustration, his confusion, had been building. A lifetime of trying to find even one of his kind. And now there could be more than he could have dreamed? He should have been elated, but instead he felt betrayed. Not only had he never found them—*Why had they never looked for him?* Why had they *hidden* from him? And how? “I should have caught their scent a thousand times. It’s impossible.” He should not have been alone. His family should not have been helpless.

Tanaquill pulled and the wall opened.

Her fairy vision could not penetrate the gloom beyond the doorway. She thought for an instant that she had slipped into a fairy realm. But the scent wafting upward was of a mundane night, but somehow insulated, so that it had no particular traits. “What is this place?” she whispered to herself. She reached out.

“Careful, I can’t make out anything,” Gavin said, his hand coming down protectively on her shoulder.

“I know,” she said, her arm extending, her hand reaching. She felt a sharp updraft, in half of the small shaft, that would hurtle her toward the sky if she allowed it, while a downdraft in the other half would pull her sharply downward. Her hand hovered in the midst of the opposing forces. Her eyes widened in surprised. “A witch door,” she said. “I have heard of these but never seen one.”

“What does it do?” Gavin asked. His hold on Tanaquill’s shoulder tightened slightly, a comfort to her even as it sharpened the insistent urgings the healing had left. “Witches,” she continued, “especially those with large country homes, use such doors to fly to a sabbat and back. My cousins do have one, I believe, but I did not think it my place to inquire.”

“Convenient,” Gavin said thoughtfully.

Tanaquill peered down into the darkness. She stretched farther into the pitch black, felt across the expanse, and touched wall. The space was not large enough for Tanaquill to use her wings. “It’s unfortunate I do not have a broom, for my wings certainly won’t fit. I’ll just have to

fall.” Even if she reduced her size, she might not be able to control her flight in the strong magical draft. Besides, she didn’t want to make Gavin answer another riddle. Riddles were very personal, she thought, feeling her cheeks grow warm at the memory of her last one. Tanaquill felt the amulet, tugging at her. Her pulse quickened. “Come, we must descend,” she said, suddenly eager. “It will take us to the amulet.”

Wanting to go, she stopped, troubled. “Gavin,” she said, staring down into the blackness, tendrils of her hair gently lifting on the updraft. “You will go after her, won’t you?”

“I have no choice,” he said, feeling the abyss below them, while behind them the unfamiliar corridor felt for the moment like an empty human house.

“The letter gave you proof—there are others. Not just her,” Tanaquill said. She looked at him, at the lean planes of his face, how gaunt he looked after everything that had happened. She wanted to tell him that *she* needed him, but suddenly all she really wanted was to fall away. Disappear and be free. Drown in a darkness she had not been able to find since her arrival in the human realm, the darkness beyond the witch door. She crouched by the entrance. “Jump into the downward current,” she said. “Do not concern yourself with where it leads, trust me to catch you.”

“Catch me?”

“You should listen to your goddess.” Her own voice was strange to her in the silence.

“She’s not my—”

She couldn’t wait. She needed to find the amulet for her cousin. She fell, pulled fast by the downward current. “Leap!” she said, and fell sharply away, gone in an instant.

Gavin’s heart leapt into his throat. He jumped after her immediately, his human form impossible to shed because his human hands ached to reach her and retained the fading warmth of her touch.

Tanaquill sensed him falling along with her, her speed increased. She was spinning as she fell and she gasped, laughing in shock.

The sensation of the amulet grew nearer, quickly, until it rushed upon her and she nearly missed the place where it was. There was no knowing where else the chute could have taken her. She reached out, her hand closing around something, arresting her plunge as the ethereal tides swirled around her.

“Here!” she cried, her voice catching in the void. Reaching out as Gavin rushed past her, she snatched his hand before he fell away. It had been just an instant for him, between feeling the absence of her touch and its return.

His hand warm and strong in hers, she pulled him to a solid place. She heard his breathing in the dark, a gruff laugh that comforted her. “Have they done something to us?” he said softly, under his breath.

“You feel it as well?” she said, trying to catch her breath. “*Yes, by Maeve, they have.* It is the enchantment,” she said, a little breathless, exhilarated from the fall, her voice an echo against cool stone in the dark. “But it is nothing like what I feel from the amulet.” With her surprising strength she shoved against a barrier, releasing a square of light. “Come, in here,” she said, climbing though. She bent her wings, flattening them like dog’s ears, but they still managed to scrape the low doorway. She turned back and clasped his arm, pulling him along.

When Gavin’s wondering eyes caught hers as he stood upright, Tanaquill let go of him quickly. They turned together and took in their surroundings, his hand sliding protectively around her waist.

CHAPTER 20

The room was mysteriously bathed in silvery moonlight. No spell distorted this room’s nature; the room was simply what it was—beautiful.

“This must be the bedchamber of the high witch, Evelina,” Tanaquill said. Along the walls of the round room were columns topped by human figures the size of cats. Beautiful, delicate, each figure had what appeared to be human hair, thick red, blond or brown. Their expressions contorted, they seemed to struggle, their small arms straining as if to hold up the ceiling. The ceiling itself curved like a dome, dominating the room, dwarfing the opulence below it.

Upon the ceiling was, not a painting of fashionable clouds, but a waxing moon in a star filled sky. And it was this her eyes were irresistibly drawn to. “As if they have trapped the sky,” she said. It was like an extraordinarily detailed star map upon which Tanaquill spotted the bright new star which had appeared in Cassiopeia two hundred and thirty years prior. But the ceiling felt nothing like a map; it had no perceptible surface, and felt just like the living heaven frozen with its stars in mid-twinkle and its looming voids arrested in all the weight of their inexorable motion. And its moon was no painting, for it shed real, gentle light.

Gavin’s deep voice broke the quiet. “It’s the sky of a night a long time ago.”

“Yes,” she agreed, her skin prickling at the notion.

“It may be the trophy of an earlier leader—like a stag’s head mounted on the wall.”

She nodded, sensing herself as being at once indoors and yet with the sky above her, remarkably lifelike, somehow transfixed, as the demons in the corridor had been. *How can one hunt the sky?* she wondered, uneasy at the realization that these humans were powerful indeed in

their own brutal way.

Tanaquill's ears pricked up, twitching sharply at the sound of voices in the corridor. She stilled like an insect on a leaf, glancing to Gavin who also listened, alert. The silence felt brittle around them as muffled trills of laughter shot through it like arrows, and slippers hurried past the closed door of the bedchamber. She sensed Gavin's muscles tensing with the urge to fling open the door and grab them. But she knew he would not. His voice was low. "If the amulet were truly in this room they would try to stop us."

"No, it is here, I am sure of it," Tanaquill said. "Lord Fairbain was correct—Evelina keeps the amulet here so that the other members of the coven do not have access to it without her consent." She felt the amulet's pull like a pulse against her own. She walked deeper into the room, across thick carpet, avoiding the steps that descended to the bed in the center. There were no antechambers she could see, only the one door leading to the corridor and one window.

"This is why they are not worried." She pressed her hand over the smooth painted surface of the wall. "I sense the amulet coming from here, inside the wall." The walls, Tanaquill guessed, had secret nooks to hide everything from grimoires to potions. She pressed her hand against a particular spot. "Here, it is coming from here." The wall was smooth, seamless. "There must be a doorway here which the house is concealing. I cannot open it. I doubt it will be opened by force."

"I broke the window without difficulty." Gavin came up closer behind her and, reaching over her shoulder, placed his hand against the wall just above hers. His long fingers clenched, the tendons flexed, and claws slid out, penetrating the plaster. He pulled out a chunk of wall, but the wall smoothed again and the chunk fell to dust in his hand. "No, you're right. It just builds back up. They must have let me in earlier, when it suited them."

"That may be, but there is something..." She put her hand on his arm, gently, allowing herself to take in the sensation it gave and spoke around it, her voice full. She turned to face him, leaning against the wall and he watched how the color of her eyes swirled, as if the amulet affected her through the wall. "I've been thinking, and perhaps there is a reason the house would yield to you that has nothing to do with anybody else. Did you see the house while we flew toward it? Did you see how it changed? How it appeared to be one house, and then another?"

His gaze fell to her mouth, back to her eyes before he realized his mind was wandering and steadied himself. "Yes, I saw that too."

"We may use that to our advantage."

"I don't see how—"

"I felt what you did," Tanaquill said. "When you shifted. I learned it. Compel the house to bend to your will, force it. Ask it to open its walls so that we may look within. Make the house shift."

“Make the house shift,” Gavin said, calm disbelief in his tone.

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I don’t know how we did that together, it just happened naturally. And this is a house, it’s not alive.”

“Yes, it is, and yes, you can.” She studied him for a moment. He did not understand what he was capable of, but now that she had shifted with him, she did.

She understood.

But it was not *innate* to her—she would not be able to call to the house as he could. In a way the house could not resist. “Don’t you realize what you can do?” She paused. “Have you ever tried to summon an animal, not to grow beneath your flesh but to stand beside you?”

Gavin pulled away from her, stepping back. “That’s not what I am.”

You don’t know what you are, her voice spoke into his mind, surprising him for how distinct it was. It matched his thoughts, pulled at him with an insistence she had learned from him. She understood him too well in such a short time. In that moment, Gavin realized how much he’d given away to her—his past, his dreams for the future, and his most intimate gift of shapeshifting.

And she did it better than him.

She had made shapeshifting as natural to her as any other inhuman game. Was it only because she was a fairy? Could a human, taught intimately, learn as well? He had never dared try although he had sensed, in some humans, something—more congenial, more willing. Until now, he had only thought that a willingness to be prey and so he had fled from those, for their own safety, he had thought. It would never have occurred to him to see it as potential.

“You recognized the language in the shapeshifter’s letter,” Tanaquill said.

“I don’t see why that matters now.” His expression was guarded. She had spoken into his mind and an echo still thrummed inside his chest.

“When you call to the animals—”

“I don’t call to anything when I change, it’s not—” He gazed at her, calmly hiding his surprise. Had she done it that way, when she shifted? With a call? His own shapeshifting was driven by the sensation of need.

Then what do you do?

I call with need, he thought back, biting, angry at the intimacy she was forcing from him. He relented, the thoughts spilling out to her before he could prevent them, but that was what his mating with her tonight had felt like. *Before I can think, animals answer me. Not with words but by being present, in me.* He realized the truth of it as he thought it. What he did was innate to him, he’d never questioned how. It was the part of him that meant the most, to question it would have been—too human.

“Gavin,” she said gently, breaking through his thoughts. “The house is alive. But not just alive, it is an animal of the netherworld. The Eris witches must have found it. Most likely it was led here, as a cow follows grass, grazing as it walks, head down. They merely keep it here.”

Understanding flashed along his brow.

“An animal lured with food, a safe home. My guess is that it lives in their magic as a crocodile would a river.” Thoughtful, she turned and pressed her fingers to the smooth wall, to touch the exact spot behind which the amulet of fairy magic lay as if yearning for it in her hand. “The humans, when they perform magic, they create a lake of it in order to extract a drop,” she said, and he felt how intently she spoke. “Witches’ spells are heavy, full of human passions and unfulfilled hope. These witches especially use their magic wildly, erratically, and this being thrives on the remains.” She hurried on. “When they cast the spell in the garden, using me to reduce my cousin, it felt like something had been splashed all around, too large to begin with and yet in the end it tightens into a net, tight and small, that manages to trap you.” She paused, her hand dropping from where she sensed the amulet. “Sometimes human magic feels wonderful.” She stopped and turned back to him, remembering that he might not understand her.

“Gavin, you are a shapeshifter, a being caught between realms. I think that the shapeshifter language can be understood by any animal, of any realm.” She hesitated. “*You can speak to the house,*” she said softly. “I am certain of it.”

He said nothing for a moment. His expression had hardened. She could sense his anger for her invasion of his private world, but there was something resigned in his eyes. His arms crossed his chest, unyielding, but she saw the understanding in his eyes, a hidden warmth.

She wanted him to understand. “I can communicate with many animals, but I would never compel them—as it is in your nature to do. It is not in mine. I shall be a leader for my fairies, but I will not command them, my language is only an asking. *You* compel merely by a thought.”

He shook his head almost imperceptibly as he looked away from her but didn’t move away. The muscle in his jaw clenched. He’d seen his mother whisper soothingly to a mare or cow in hard labor, whisper so softly that even he could not hear.

“Mother, what is it you say to them?”

“Nothing son, it is soothing nonsense...”

Why had they never told him? He thought of the letter. The music of the language had sounded familiar to him, as if he had hummed it before. *It means...* He realized, somewhere within him, that the letter had begun with a common greeting, one he had never had the pleasure to receive. Those words...he closed his eyes and spoke them now, softly, aloud, twice, and felt a pressure break in his thoughts, a trickle at first, then a flood.

It was as if he had forgotten English.

CHAPTER 21

...Greeting in blood, greeting in kind...

Gavin winced as a vision intruded upon his mind, in which he saw *a human* making themselves a shapeshifter, long ago. With others looking on. He searched further, down and down, before humans. His kind were there and he felt—He lifted his head, his eyes shifted and he spoke with quiet urgency in the shapeshifter tongue.

“You agreed, long ago, when you first opened your eyes in this land, to be with us and I come to fulfill that pact. This shape you take, this shell you cannot shed, it weakens you. I release you...”

As Tanaquill stood quietly waiting, she listened, careful not to listen too hard, for though she did not understand what he said, she felt how it brought a rise to her skin. His voice held unpracticed command, the words flowing more quickly as he went on, more smoothly. *How compelling it can be*, she thought, knowing only too well. Against her will, her golden-hued skin glowed brighter, shimmering specks of pixie dust sparkling over her.

In response to his words in the eternal language of the shapeshifter, the house trembled. The walls stretched, the floor gently rose under her feet, as if inhaling. She lifted herself from the floor and hovered, the edges of her wings a blur, vibrating to hold her aloft, and she bobbed gently up and down as if treading water.

Two tiny, human gasps erupted from the corridor, beyond the door of the bedchamber, and Tanaquill’s pointed ears pricked up to listen.

“What is he doing?” whispered a young female voice.

“I’m not sure,” said another, disquieted.

Gavin’s eyes glowed thoughtfully, his expression calmly unreadable as the house responded. He continued to speak to it, and in his tone was not the brutal force of one will bending another. Rather, within the strange language Tanaquill sensed a kindness, compelling with a gentle insistence that she could not help but wish was directed at her.

As his final words trailed off, the wall suddenly formed a long, smooth crack like a fish’s gill which spread into the outline of a pointy doorway, then fell inward with a slap.

“Oh!” she heard a delicate voice exclaim from beyond the bedchamber door, followed by hurried footsteps growing faint as the young witches ran off. They were not to be troubled with, Tanaquill thought; whatever they brought to Evelina, the master witch would know already.

Gavin pushed his hair back slowly, in a way that made her mouth fall gently open at how the thick locks slid softly through his fingers. She felt it like an ache in her stomach and her wings beat a little harder as she hovered. He was almost smiling, his green eyes warm as he turned to her. "Are you well?" she asked, hiding what she felt.

Gavin glanced about him thoughtfully, calmly. "Yes, I am." His expression was gentler, somehow younger, and something in his eyes told her that he was the better for what he'd found. She was happy for that. When his eyes caught hers again they lingered for an instant before they turned together and peered into the nook which was no longer entirely hidden, the wall resting slightly ajar.

The opening revealed a triangular room hardly large enough for a human to stand in. Inside, on a low, plain wooden table, was a sachet of red velvet, closed, drawn tight at one end by golden rope. Within the sachet was the outline of a solid item of distinctly rectangular shape. "There it is," Tanaquill said, refocusing her thoughts on the task at hand, her tone almost formal for its calmness, hiding the sudden eagerness that sprang up in her from what was inside the red velvet. Her eyes flashed. "I *have* to open it," she said quietly, darting forward.

"Wait—" Gavin said quickly, pulling her back just as she sensed...

Something familiar.

Raised on hind legs, front legs extended to grab flesh, fangs. Hundreds of them.

Gavin gave a quick, sharp word, his hand sweeping out. It surprised Tanaquill how quickly he had acquired full command of his people's language. She could not help the eerie sensation that she was witnessing the disturbing stories of her childhood come to life in this man. But unlike those shapeshifters of long ago, Gavin was here to help her.

A shimmer of webbing appeared crisscrossing the nook. Everywhere, the small translucent spiders appeared, their front legs raised aggressively, facing down the trespassers with tiny, poison laced fangs. Prepared to fend off a fairy, even unto death.

Gavin spoke low, his tone gently chiding, and the spiders lowered their legs obediently, tucked in their fangs shyly.

"Thank you," Tanaquill said, descending to place her feet firmly on the ground. She must be more careful in future. "I did not expect to find such creatures here."

"What are they?"

"Fairy spiders. They make their homes in relics, safeguarding them from any who might wish to take them. Someone must have brought them to the human realm. Their poison is debilitating to us. If I had reached in, they would have bitten me, defending their home. But they do not seem to wish to bite you. How did you sense them?"

Gavin pulled down the now empty webbing they had spun over the doorway, the spiders having withdrawn to the edges. "Their webbing has an acrid smell," he replied. Stepping past

her, he reached in and grabbed the velvet sachet as the spiders on the table scurried away from his hand. “Like the common house spider, only with poison.” He handed her the velvet encased box. His eyes met hers. “And a sweetness, pollen, a little like you.”

At his words, she remembered vividly his hand around her neck, drawing her toward him, the pressure of his mouth as his tongue slid quickly inside. She took the box, savoring his nearness to her, even with the longing it evoked. “They are fairy too,” she said.

She paused, looking down at the box in her hand, smoothing the red velvet, careful now to sense before she opened it if there were further fairy traps. “In the ancient stories it is said you turned our cousins against us; the birds, the forest creatures, even the insects. I had not believed such things were true.” She spoke almost to herself, not looking at him. “Your kind fought us by compromising our ancient loyalties, but it was not known how.” She stopped, her expression grown a hint formal. “Now I know.”

Gavin’s countenance sobered. “Your kingdom was attacked by shapeshifters in the past? Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Of fears formed thousands of years ago? It no longer signifies,” she said, knowing that was not the reason. She should not have said anything. What would be the point of raking up a painful history he did not need to know? At least, not before he had a greater sense of what he truly was.

They heard a creak, like a door heavy on its hinges, almost as if the house had sighed reluctantly. A loud rumble came from the walls and the opening to the small chamber slammed shut.

“The witches have regained control of the house,” Tanaquill said, the ancient moon still bright above her in its captured night.

“Yes, for now,” Gavin replied in a way that told how sure he felt in his newfound ability. Tanaquill noted how easily he became accustomed to the notion of having control over others. It relaxed him, she realized.

Pulling off the velvet, she looked down at the box in her hand with the amulet hidden inside, prickling her palms through the walls of the box. *Finally.*

There was an intricate carving on the lid. She stilled. A small thrill of unhappy surprise came over her at the slowly dawning recognition.

She should be happy. She should be glad to discover she held her freedom from Prince Rohmier in her hands. Instead it fell heavily on her conscience.

Upon the box, silver vines climbed along what looked like a mother of pearl and glass exterior, and a silver fairy with big, glossy dragonfly wings was pictured in mid flight on the lid. The fairy looked ecstatic, her smile serene and wise, her eyes closed—it was an expression found in only the most ancient portraits, yet the box was new. She felt her cheeks blush; the persona

was embarrassingly heroic. The fairy was surrounded by a design of silver lily pads along a lake below her. Within the lake, in perfect miniature, a tiny kingdom glittered under the slowly spreading waves. Along its border ran the words: *'By Tanaquill's good judgment no kingly law shall slip. No kingly act not bound by her fair counsel. In our Great Queen we trust.'* Frowning in thought, Tanaquill ran her thumb along the outline of the lake.

She felt Gavin's presence and was comforted. "What is it?"

"It's me," she said simply, sadly. "It is a portrait."

"That was made for you—"

She knew what he must think. "Yes," she said. "But not as a trap. It was made for my wedding."

Gavin stared down at the box with renewed interest. When she looked up, she caught the conflicted emotions that played on his face. "Will you have difficulty opening it?" he asked calmly.

"No." She smoothed her hand over the top of the box. "I know what to do."

Tanaquill drew her hands away and the box floated, bobbing in the air, heavy but buoyant.

"It is so pretty," she said with regret. It was a lovely present, fashioned by the best craftsmen of the prince's court. In the workmanship, remarkable even among the Fay, who were not known to create its like any more, she felt their very essence, and their hope for the future. The prince's subjects were waiting for her—not the prince and his family, but the common fairies under the hill. It was as if she could almost see their faces, hopeful, expectant. Hoping she would change their prince and ring in a new era like the heroic age of the Fay.

Tanaquill saw now why the prince had courted her. Their engagement was uncomfortable to them both, perhaps because as children they had once taken it seriously. But she had not realized the full situation until she saw this gift from the fairies under the hill, which embodied their painfully high expectations for the match. If only she could give them what they wished.

"He is mad, or a fool," she said as she watched the beautiful box float before them, slowly turning. "He will never gain his throne without me."

Gavin gazed at the box, bathed in the captured moonlight. "You mean the prince?" His voice seemed lonely in the air sweetened by the scents of Evelina's bedroom, lavender among the linens and Evelina's own scent, faintly peppery under a musky perfume. Deeply human and not unappealing. The room, like the whole house, also smelled of witch's magic, if smell was the word for a sensation that seemed to stimulate the faculty of scent without, however, any true scent of its own.

"Can't you feel it?" Tanaquill said.

"The box? I can only see that it's beautiful. What do you feel?"

"The hope," she said. "The fairies under the hill fell in love with a princeling more

beautiful than any they had ever seen. They favored him especially. The king and queen doted on him, even to the neglect of his brothers.” She gently touched the box’s underside, watching it slowly rise in the air, the light of the frozen moon and stars animating its details as it turned. “Over the years, the fairies under the hill watched their prince grow. He was cunning and graceful in his youth.

“Yet soon they realized their favored prince was not like his brothers. He was willful, cruel and incapable of respect for anyone or anything.” Tanaquill paused. “They should have denounced him, but they faltered. They began to see, as I did in time, the danger he represented. Yet his subjects still delighted in him, for he is captivating, despite the malice that has grown in him.

“I had thought that the fairies under the hill had made peace with their choice and wished, despite his flaws, for him to rule. But that is not what has happened.” She stopped. “His subjects have convinced themselves he can be transformed. By me.” She faltered, disturbed by the notion. A queen to temper him, to bring forth his goodness for them. When they could not find it. “I cannot help them,” she said. “I see that now.” The box slowed and grew still as it hovered in the air before her. “I will never marry him.”

Gavin felt a stab of guilt at how much it pleased him to hear that. It wasn’t fair, not when he had his own plans. And though it would have been terrible to imagine her married to such a man, it was what she had apparently expected for a long time, and her future would now inevitably be in upheaval. He was grateful for it, yet it was not a moment for someone who cared about her to relish, even if his heart beat a little faster to hear it. “It will be hard,” Gavin said, choosing his words carefully. Tanaquill heard in his tone a certain careful restraint. He wanted the best for her, and held his feelings in check. “But you never wanted to marry him, and now you won’t be expected to, is that correct?”

“Yes,” she said. She would have married a prince who had tried to kill her, because the joining of their two kingdoms would have assured peace, and the fairies under the hill, if they chose the prince to rule them, would have a hard time with him as their king and she could try to help; but to know that *she* was the reason the prince would be *allowed* to become king, no, she could not agree to that. The rites had been performed to sanction the union, and it was rare for such things to be overturned. But now there could be no question of it, not when she knew what his kingdom was truly asking. She would never be responsible for bringing him to any throne. “There is witch magic on the box.”

Gavin tensed. “Then step away from it,” he said, his voice a steady command.

Tanaquill had never wanted to marry the prince, or at least not for a very long time, but she suddenly felt very alone. Gavin would soon leave her, and now the role she had envisioned for herself all her life was gone, and all was uncertain. There would be turmoil among the fairy

kingdoms as a result of her choice, a shifting of alliances, to what end she could not know. “No, it is all right. It does not matter what sort of spell the coven may have tried, this box will never harm me.” She opened her hands and the box sunk slowly into them. The engraved images came to life, the vines rose and turned and her own tiny image smiled as it flew up to give her a quick wink before it sunk back down into metal and shell. “I’m going to keep my gift,” she said, “—and help the fairies under the hill, but not by becoming their queen.” *By getting their beloved prince banished.*

She placed her hand on top of the lid. A light began to glow beneath her fingers. It was warm to her palm. The golden light spread and wrapped itself around the box.

“The witch’s spell dissolves. But the box needs to be sung to. You must be the one.” Tanaquill held it out to him.

Gavin looked down at it with a quizzical frown. “Sing to the box? Why?” He looked for a moment like an unhappy boy.

“It is a music box,” Tanaquill said. “All the music boxes I’ve ever come across have been very ancient and do not open for many years after they are made—not until they have grown full of songs. Once they are full, then they open forevermore to any of the songs they have been sung in the past. But this is a new music box—which is very rare. If I were to sing to it, the box would demand thousands of songs from me before it opened. But if *you* were to sing to it—the music box would find it a great treasure to have just one song of a shapeshifter inside it. At such an honor, it will open and sing it back, I am certain.” She paused. “Go on,” she urged when he hesitated, pushing it forward. “Sing in the shapeshifter language.”

Gavin grimaced. He never *sang*. But then he thought of Tanaquill’s shrunken cousin Chloe. He would never call a human a friend, but he had to admit she had been most decent to him. He couldn’t help but feel for her. He had come this far, and if getting this box open was the key to helping Tanaquill’s cousin then it seemed it lay with him to save her. But it was in some way the hardest thing anyone had ever asked him to do. It was very *intimate*. “There is always a request more strange than the last,” he said softly, almost to himself. After a moment, resigned, he took the box; it felt cool and solid in his hand. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve sung, Tanaquill. And I’ve only begun to speak the language, I don’t know any songs in it.”

Tanaquill seemed to absently watch his hands around the box, then forced herself to look up, into his eyes. “Of course you do,” she said kindly. “Fairies are born with knowledge, your kind are as well, I’m sure. You were born with such things, knowledge of the gods and stories of your past, only with no one to share them with, you have forgotten.” She paused. “No one can take them from you—they are in your heart.”

He frowned and, after a moment, walked a few paces into the room, toward the window, seeking something solid to settle his thoughts on. He stared into the night outside, the world that

seemed like a distant memory in this house.

“Just try,” she urged from behind him. “You have a lovely speaking voice,” she added. His brow rose privately in surprise.

Resigned, Gavin exhaled and stared down at the box for a moment, trying not to feel like he held an enemy in his hand. But then he saw that it really was Tanaquill’s likeness on the lid, and something in him centered itself. He ran his thumb over her long dragonfly wings and could have believed they shuddered in response. The room was silent around them, the two moons, one waxing from long ago, another waning just outside the window, mingled their light on the awaiting box.

He tried to remember. Gavin hummed very quietly to himself, drifting into the language he now found a comfort, and something in him tugged his head upward. He smelled the woods nearby, crisp, until it seemed like dawn peeked behind the curtain of the night. It was a time before he realized that his humming had turned into words. He could only remember the song as it came, and only one stanza. He closed his eyes and saw a scene in his mind. It was a hunting song, Gavin thought, as he *felt* the box grow excited, resonating. He clung tighter and it seemed to sigh in agreement. The song was violent, he realized with surprise. For what they were hunting there was no human word. It seemed unrecognizable even to him; a blur of mass and fury, long gone to the world, perhaps even having come from a world closer to Tanaquill’s than this one.

He saw a man racing behind it. Then the man was shifting, his hands turning into claws, the earth raked behind him as he took to the ground on all fours. Gavin physically jolted when he sang the leader’s name, *Tyne*, and felt his pulse quicken as the pack behind Tyne sped forward. The beast raced to the edge of a cliff, twisted in anger; it turned to face Tyne as he leapt at it, having shifted into a likeness of the beast. *Agony*—he saw it on the beast’s face and the song faltered. No, Gavin realized. *He* had faltered, because he could sense the creature they hunted and it had disgusted him.

What they were hunting could think.

Gavin stopped, repelled by what he had seen. He didn’t want to hold the box anymore, it shivered with excitement and had grown dewy. Turning back, through fogged vision, he handed her the box. “Did it work?” he asked, his voice cold around the tightness of his throat.

“Yes,” Tanaquill said. “I believe this box now has something to boast of. Ask it to open, it should do so straightaway after that.”

“Open,” Gavin said, composing himself.

The box lid popped open. A streak of gold pixie dust flew out in a tiny shower like the king’s fireworks. A human child’s song, imperfectly sung by a little girl, wended out with a distant longing. Then the small cry of a delighted crowd went up after it.

“That had to have been the witch Evelina’s voice,” Tanaquill said as the box happily hummed the shapeshifter tune it had learned. “He had to let her be the lock. That way, Evelina would always be able to open and close the box.”

“An old lullaby, isn’t it?” Gavin said absently. He peered into the box, wishing to see the amulet, but could see only a red glow within.

“We hear it as she sang it long ago,” Tanaquill said, looking down thoughtfully into the box. She glanced over at Gavin. “As she sang it while a child...which must mean he knew her, even then...”

“Who?” Gavin crossed his arms over his chest, wishing to put distance between himself and what he sensed coming from within the box.

“Why, the prince.”

The bright red glow of the amulet grew stronger, lighting Gavin’s skin. Something about it seemed distantly familiar to him. “What is that? Is it the amulet?” he asked.

“Yes, this is what we came for.” Tanaquill laughed softly as the full implications unfolded in her thoughts. She felt sad because of how much the amulet reminded her of her mother and father, her home. But that was not what surprised her. “I simply cannot believe it,” she said, looking down into the box, her countenance lit in an ethereal pink. “The prince loves Evelina.”

CHAPTER 22

Tanaquill had not imagined it in the prince to love anyone but himself. To feel the amulet’s glow against her skin reminded her of the day when, just a girl, she’d been allowed out of the castle for the ceremony, flying down the wasp-carved caverns of Rohmier’s home, when she had still looked upon her betrothal with breathless expectation. When the prince had been more handsome to her than any fairy in the lands, his strong hand clasping hers as they flew. He had taken her that day to the secret chamber where his family kept their kingdom’s prized possession. Floating before the amulet high up near the tower’s amber ceiling, her mouth open in wonder, Tanaquill had caught the prince watching her expression, a corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile.

How strange to see the lovely amulet now, in this house. Tanaquill thought of the witches who, seeing it with human eyes, would perhaps think it stone and silver. Yet the amulet was of a matter entirely different.

“Why do you believe he loves this Evelina?” Gavin asked, the amulet’s red glow shining brightly against his skin and turning his green eyes nearly brown.

“The prince wishes her to be queen of the fairies under the hill. This is why he has given her my wedding gifts—the box, which he would wish to be rid of as quickly as possible, and the amulet, which has been entrusted to every queen of his realm for generations.”

Tanaquill paused, her wings buzzing absently in thought, lifting her heels slightly from the ground. “He risks his kingship in trying to make her queen,” she said. Her mouth curved thoughtfully, her eyes glowing brighter at the thought. “A human queen.” *Would his kingdom have accepted it?* “Is she willing to be turned into a fairy by him?” *I wonder if she knows that he is probably doing it already,* she thought to herself.

Gavin gestured toward the glowing item inside the music box. “It was this, then, which affected your cousin?”

“Yes.” Tanaquill lifted out the amulet. To Gavin’s surprise the beautiful gem slid into her palm and flattened like a red egg yolk, then, sensing her, turned darker, purple. A silver sigil spread over her hand like a lace glove. “The prince would not have wished to see this fall into my hands. They must not have expected us to be able to retrieve the box, or to open it so easily.”

Tanaquill paused. “He did not—or could not—share with the witches its true use. Perhaps he was too prudent to show her yet. They used it clumsily,” she said, tilting her hand and watching the silver tendrils of the sigil slide and drip, clinging to her fingers, weaving like vines around them. “If they only knew how easy it is...like smelling a flower. And the things they could have done...But then I would have known it straightaway. If they had unlocked the true power of this amulet, I would have recognized it. Instead I only knew that they had used some fairy item.”

Gavin caught himself holding his breath as he watched her wielding the strange, living gem, like a master musician tuning an instrument. For the first time he truly saw Tanaquill as the fairy queen she was meant to be. It suited her, he realized.

Yet, at the same time, as he watched Tanaquill turning the gem in her hand, he became aware of the strangest impulse to snatch it from her. *Gem of binding trust,* he thought in the shapeshifter tongue. *Such things belong with my kind. It is our right,* something in him said as he watched. The idea felt alien, but at the same time more true than the floor he stood on.

But then he saw himself instead taking the amulet, forgetting the female shapeshifter and all she represented, and taking Tanaquill with him somewhere far away.

It has been used for a base purpose, Gavin thought with sudden, surprising anger. Alarmed at these thoughts, these impulses, he wished to put distance between himself and what he sensed coming from the amulet.

Yet a strange spark of hopefulness had caught in Gavin’s chest. He crossed his arms over

it, as if he could force it back. "Where does it come from?" he asked, his tone hard, trying not to sound as curious as he was.

Tanaquill studied it, not looking at him, turning her hand, and the amulet slid down along her wrist. Not as if falling, but seeking her pulse. "Alf-heim. I suppose you know of this place from your time among the Vikings?"

Gavin was surprised the Vikings' tall tales could have had anything to do with the real world. "I've heard the name in stories," he said.

"Those are not stories, they are the history of the gods. The prince's family is intimately connected with the gods of those whom you came to know as Vikings. My family has our own gods, but in time I would have come to know his if I had married him. But I do know that this amulet was made in Alf-heim by the metalsmith Volund, a human of divine gifts who still lives among the Fay."

Gavin could hardly make sense of the notion that the stories humans told of their gods were somehow true. It was as though only Tanaquill could tell him now what in the world was true, and he suddenly wished to avoid having to face his own thoughts on the matter. "Can you wield it? Can you remove the spell from your cousin?"

"Oh yes. But I won't, not in this house. I do not wish for further knowledge of its workings to end up in the Eris coven's grimoire. It would be like activating it in the middle of their circle. They would learn too many things and be much more effective on behalf of Eris...That could be for the good, but only in the long run. Perhaps the gods would have it thus, but I cannot be the one who releases that into the world." She paused, her gaze turning to him after her long stare at the amulet. Her eyes seemed heated by it, and it was as if she looked at him for the first time. He fought to hide his reaction from her. "I would not wield the amulet anyplace in the human realm except at the Lockwood house, where I could be sure Evelina's coven would gain no insight into its workings."

"Then take the amulet to your cousin." His tone revealed only a hint of his tension, but his eyes, darkly intent, held hers. With a command spoken softly, he gestured to the window and it obediently opened to let Tanaquill leave.

Her eyes lingered on it. He caught her reaction and it pained him.

Gavin's thought entered her mind. She wasn't sure if it was entirely deliberate. *Your work here is done.* There was no reason for her to come with him as he sought the female shapeshifter, and he did not want her to. He would not force her to see their first meeting.

He hesitated, not sure if he was telling the truth. "I'll come back to the Lockwoods' for you, after I'm done here."

Doubtful. Tanaquill knew the truth; if he was satisfied with the female shapeshifter he would not come back for her. Unless he felt he must help her, which would be humiliating.

“No,” she said without thinking, and his expression revealed his surprise. She looked back at the amulet, her heart beating hard, but steady. “There is another way to help my cousin that does not require my returning to her—yet.”

He shook his head. “Tanaquill—” He wished to contradict her.

“But first—here.” She reached out and gripped his wrist, her hand incredibly strong. But it was the quickness of her action that took him off guard. She put the amulet in his hand, and he was aware of a feeling, as if he had waited all his life for this. Something awful would come of it, something he never wished to face—

Upon touching his skin, the amulet pulled together tightly into a solid gem as if protecting itself. But then, as if recognizing something in him, it pulsed.

Tanaquill was watching his reaction. “The amulet asked for you, I felt it.”

Gavin found his voice, though his throat had gone dry, and spoke calmly. “It is the heart I keep for you. It senses it. That is why it reacts to me,” he said, trying to reassure himself.

“No,” she said, closing his hand over it. “It has something for you.” *My blood remembers you*, she said into his mind. He looked up quickly. Only it wasn’t Tanaquill’s voice, it was someone else, the tone deeper, abundant. *You run and cannot catch your breath*. The woman’s voice spread through him, he tasted it on his tongue, heard insects at dawn. The gem no longer felt separate from his hand, then he realized he could feel its tendrils reaching into his arm. A tight breath slipped past his teeth as the sigil of the amulet slid deep inside him, opening like a net thrown by a fisherman that fans out into the water, sinks, then gathers in. His head tilted back and his mouth fell gently open as his eyes shifted. The voice was somehow like Eris in kind, and yet completely different. As one human woman is different from another. One woman just passes by, while the other you love. *Go with her and leave this house*, the voice said, familiar. A voice who had called to him and he had never listened. Taking a deep breath he released his hold on the amulet.

It was not an offer he would take. And so, to his surprise, he was offered something else. He mouthed the word.

My name, he thought, *the name my mother called me at my birth*. In a vision he stood behind her, watching as she cradled the baby, whispering the shapeshifter name she had secretly given him. Why had she hidden it? It could have been for his protection, it could have been for a reason he did not yet understand, but would. He felt something set free in himself. His mother had secretly called him, and thought of him, in the shapeshifter’s tongue. *Thank you*, he said quietly, and was aware of something great and good responding to him.

And then it was gone. Confused, conflicted, his eyes shifted back and he handed the amulet to Tanaquill again, knowing it was in him to keep it. “What does the amulet have to do with...Freya,” he found himself asking, a part of him incredulous. “How can this amulet be the

blood of a goddess?”

“Freya, running along the rocky coastline, looked behind her to see Volund chasing her and cut her foot on a sharp stone. A drop of blood fell to earth, and before it could bear fruit or flower Volund took it and carried it to Alf-heim. It is kept here, in this Fay sigil.” Tanaquill turned the amulet in her hand and it dulled to solid stone. “To those in the human realm the amulet appears as carnelian, encased in silver. In truth it is encased in a mercurial sigil, trimmed with sand struck by Thor’s hammer, which has turned into a sort of glass.”

Gavin forced aside his interest in it. “And your cousin,” he began.

“She will have her freedom now that there is nothing left to hinder me. But you shall need my help yet to take the female shapeshifter from the witches. And my cousins would not want me to leave you here alone. Chloe herself would want me to help you find what you have been searching for your entire life.”

“Tanaquill.” Gavin grabbed her upper arm gently. She looked up at him in surprise, her mouth fallen softly open. “It’s too dangerous. I already feel...” His eyes shifted, brightly, his gaze resting on her mouth. His hand, subtly relaxing, slid down her arm and into her hand. She quickly tightened her fingers around his, the sensation riding up her back, nearly making it arch. “It’s something the witches have done,” he continued. “As if there were a light rope around my neck that tightens the more I pull it. They have already found a way to tie me to this house.”

Gavin let go of her abruptly. She knew then that he did not want her to touch him. He backed up, pushed a hand through his hair as if to steady himself. “—the female,” he said in the shapeshifter tongue, then, in English, “I have to find her.”

She studied him carefully. Something was happening, she felt it in the air, directed at him like lightning about to strike. She spoke calmly. “I know, do not worry.” Tanaquill’s skin tingled, and she felt a giddiness, a numbing, unhealthy excitement. It was very dangerous for her to stay. But, for him, deadly for her to leave.

She would take what came.

He spoke gently, his gaze steady. She felt him marshaling his strength. “Their spells,” he said, “whatever they’re doing—you claimed they were taking from us when we were—and turning it, using it against us—”

“They have brought a spell down upon you, crafted out of what they distilled from our bodies. I cannot help you. We should leave, now.”

He turned away, frustration edged his voice. “I can’t—”

“You are making a grave mistake. An extraordinary effort could yet free you; but if we go deeper into this house, deeper into this enchantment, I don’t know what will happen. We shall find her again, Gavin. Now that you know she is out there you cannot lose her for long.”

“How can I be sure? There has to be a reason they never looked for me. Eris said it was

because of my parents—I have to find out.”

The way he spoke sounded final. He had searched for hundreds of years. How could she ask him to forsake that?

He seemed weary suddenly, and Tanaquill was alarmed.

His hand raked his hair. “I can’t let you come with me and jeopardize yourself, your cousin, everything,” he said.

“Nor can I.” Tanaquill looked down at the amulet in her hand and closed her palm around it. “Crafted works,” she began and then spoke rapidly, as if only partly addressing him, “whether human or inhuman made, hold beings of differing sorts. A piece of jewelry holds a being warmed by the closeness to the one who wears it.” She stopped. “I do not know who is in here. But I must apologize. You will find your way.”

At once, Gavin had a premonition of what she was about to do. “No, Tanaquill—”

She whispered quickly in a language he did not understand.

“Tanaquill!” he said sharply as she squeezed and broke the amulet in her hand with a pitiless force. Gavin watched in shock as the amulet which had once appeared unbreakable crumbled into tiny shards between her fingers, then liquefied and seemed to slip between the air, back to the realm from which it had come.

CHAPTER 23

Chloe was sitting on a perfectly fashioned tiny replica of a Queen Anne chair with a red velvet seat when she felt overcome. The room was spinning, but she quickly stood up, steadying herself against the chair.

Daphne and Lord Fairbain looked over in surprise.

“I must get off the table,” she said. Lord Fairbain stood abruptly.

Chloe’s mauve gown, more suited to a wax doll, but nonetheless perfectly sewn, began to grow along with her, while her dark hair, coiffed respectably in a small ribbon discard, began to come undone as the ribbon became too small.

Daphne helped her to a seated position on the table’s edge. “Easy there,” Daphne said.

“I am well,” Chloe said, growing, her mouth feeling strange as her lower jaw grew a fraction faster than the rest of her face. She closed her eyes briefly against the feeling of rapid motion while utterly still.

Lord Fairbain came forward, his blue eyes sharply intent on her. "They've done it," he said with soft elation.

Chloe nodded. "They should be home soon."

Daphne spoke up. "Concentrate, sister."

"There's not much for me to do, Daphne, don't worry," Chloe assured her as she grew and grew, laughing in surprise and gratitude to feel her hands, her arms and legs, her long hair. It felt wonderful. *How lovely to be large!* She lifted her arms and looked at them, as she set her feet on the floor and stood up, feeling as tall as a tree. Such a nice feeling, those great strong arms, hands and feet. And her big, big smile reflected in the grins of Daphne and Lord Fairbain.

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Evelina's bedroom glowed softly under two moons. Tanaquill stood with her hand open, empty, looking down as if at the amulet which was no longer there. If she was going with him, when goddesses had warned them against it, she could not risk the amulet falling into the wrong hands, nor make rescuing Chloe incumbent upon their success.

Now their task was done. The moment the amulet was broken Chloe would have regained her normal size. Tanaquill did not regret her action. She could not stand to think of the witches trapping Gavin if she left him alone. It was her fault he was in this house in the first place. To protect her. And now, he believed he would not need her protection in turn?

Whatever happened, he would need her.

Gavin came and stood beside her, his arms crossed over his chest. Tanaquill tensed as he drew near, sensing him with a familiar anticipation. Yet she was careful to keep her distance as he gazed down at her, his green eyes thoughtful. "I'm sorry you had to do that. Have you saved your cousin?"

"Yes," Tanaquill said. "The amulet's connection to my cousin has been severed." She felt the witches' magic temporarily weakened by the amulet's destruction. She kept her eyes on Gavin as she spoke, hoping to hold his attention and make it more difficult for them to reestablish their grip upon him. "We should leave, now, Gavin. Despite what I've done."

Gavin nodded to himself, then looked to the window, his eyes shifting to study further into the night. "I can't." His face held a hardened expression and she realized that he was fighting the influence of the witches' magic again. She doubted he could continue restraining it for long.

*If he loses control once, he will not be able to get it back again,* she thought. Suddenly, the resoluteness with which she had destroyed the amulet seemed to have left her.

"This female, she could be working with this coven, in my gut I feel that is most likely." The sharp angles of his face formed a stony mask. "My father, my mother, I had to bury them and walk away. I don't know who this female is, but she could also be in trouble. I need to get her out of here, and later, if she's willing, she can open a door to my kind for me. I can't leave

that here and walk away.”

Tanaquill looked at him and for a moment they said nothing.

“I don’t want you with me,” he said.

“You do not have a choice in the matter.” She felt a warm desire spread over her, pinkening her cheeks, climbing eagerly along her neck, her breasts, her thighs, to the very tips of her wings. She was prepared to fight for him, and it stirred her every craving.

He quickly looked away, relenting. “I do want you with me,” he admitted. “But that isn’t fair to you, or your cousins who put their trust in me.” But he wasn’t strong enough to resist her either.

After a moment Gavin looked back to where the door they had come through had been, now only smooth wall. He gestured with a nod. *The witch door is where we need to go, not the corridor*, he thought to her, sharp and clear.

“Yes,” she answered his thought aloud.

Approaching where the witch door had once been, Gavin crouched and ran his hand along the smooth wall. The moon shone over his tense back, the black fabric of his jacket taut along his broad shoulders. A low growl of frustration, entirely inhuman, built in his throat and he bit out a command in shapeshifter. Tanaquill did not understand the words, but she guessed he demanded the house let him pass.

As if unwilling to respond to his anger, the house remained unmoved. The powerful but gently coaxing tone which had opened the house to Gavin before was no longer in his voice. It was not mere force that brought the animals to heel, it was a certain compelling affection. In his frustration, he had momentarily lost his ability to command.

She took a step on the soft rug. “Gavin—”

It seemed inevitable. He reached back, frustrated, and slammed his fist into the wall. The door appeared and burst, shattering into the tunnel behind it. The sound echoed like a crack of thunder behind the wall as the shards fell away into the dark. Tanaquill felt the house tremble underfoot, unwilling to fight back.

Suddenly she was afraid he would leave her behind and, forgetting all caution, hurriedly crossed the room to him. The chill Tanaquill had felt when they’d first jumped through the witch door had changed. This time, a warm current of air called up to her like sleep. “They have altered the passage,” she said. From within the shaft a dull chant rose, the distant voices carried like seaweed on the tide, rising up not from a single circle, a cluster of witches together, but, she realized with dread, from witches hiding everywhere in the house, creating a tunnel of magic for them to fall through. The sound made her hair rise. Her mouth felt thick, her words full. “Gavin,” Tanaquill spoke as she grabbed his arm to hold him back from leaping. “Not this way—”

His hand snatched hers and she realized what she had done by touching him. He turned to

her, his eyes glowing and alien. His other hand went around her neck, into her hair. She felt her heart pound as he leaned forward. "It's dangerous to touch me," he said. Her desire surged, Gavin's voice, redolent with the power he had just recently discovered, awakening her as she opened her mouth in wonder. Her skin shimmered, her eyes glowed. Gavin tugged her forward, eager to tumble into the witch door, where he would go with or without her.

She twisted away from his hand, felt herself falling, but he jumped quickly after her, grabbing her arm as she fell and pulling her up to him. Sucked downward into the darkness, he turned Tanaquill to face him and drew her against him in the midst of the void.

He firmly grabbed her hips, pushing her against him. Everywhere he touched her burned with eagerness. In the rushing darkness Tanaquill only heard his breath as his lips descended over hers with a groan of relief. They sailed downward endlessly, and in the back of her mind she recognized the endless falling that she had sensed at the end of the corridor that Eris had guided them away from. They were in it now, spinning downward, witches' magic heavy against her skin.

Tanaquill heard Gavin's impatience just before she felt his hand between them. Claws dug into her gown and tore the fabric between them like paper. Her sleeves fluttered like sails and slipped off and she felt the rushing air against her nakedness. He opened his trousers in a long gash before they fell away between them.

She couldn't get her breath. She pulled her legs up, wrapping them around his hips. His mouth came down over hers, his tongue entered her. Gavin's hand on her hips guided her with no hesitation. She gasped into his mouth when she felt him easing inside her. Opening her. She clung tighter around his neck, taking him in deeper. His hips began to move, his hands sliding down to hold her buttocks. He thrust and she took him in, gripping tightly against him even as she felt the disquieting and lovely sensation of the shapeshifter force storming through his body mixing with the witches' power turning them, twisting, letting them fall and fall.

Gavin whispered in shapeshifter to her between kisses. And his demands went deeper, words he could not have said but thought into her, willing her, pushing out any other thoughts. Tanaquill tilted her head back, letting them, as they began to transform her. She felt claws coming out of her fingers as if to grip him tighter. She clung to his human shoulders, his human body, seething with beasts, imprinted like writhing, running, living tattoos. He moaned, thrusting, gripping her tightly as he came in long steady waves that shook her. She glowed so hotly at the rush of it she nearly saw the shadows cast by her as she peaked, as his essence throbbed and spilled through her, the sensation spreading out to the tips of her fingers and toes.

In the pitch blackness he cradled her as she felt the gentle impact of his feet touching solid ground, dipping her as he ended in a light crouch, like a cat gently landing in the silent, darkened room. He laid her down, kneeling over her. Tanaquill felt him brush her hair from her cheek and



she watched him, lit only by her glowing skin, as he looked down at her. Gavin's eyes were a deep green and smiling, and it was bliss for her to see it before she remembered where they were. The tunnel they'd traveled down had opened up into some kind of room whose limits she could not discern but there was room enough for her to spread out as Gavin lay her on the ground. The corners of her wings beat against the cold stone floor in her excitement for him. He was as aroused as she, his erection hard and visible to her.

Down what sounded like endless spiral stairs, feminine footsteps hurried in their slippers. Dozens of them, running, running down stairwells like mice scurrying.

Straddling her, his arm muscles bunched as he supported himself, Gavin nuzzled her hair and whispered in his language as his lips descended over hers. His kiss lingered in her, ran down her spine with prickling warmth that melted into her belly. Tanaquill tilted her head to kiss him deeper as his strong arms wrapped tightly around her. She wound her legs around him, feeling the shiver of him easing into her again.

Light. The room glowed softly. Her eyes fluttered hazily as he kissed down her neck. Her heart was beating hard as the walls, formerly dark around them, took on a subtle hue of magic, soft and golden like his eyes. Gavin had a shimmer of witch magic, like a ghost riding above him as he thrust and thrust, coming gently into her with a quiet gasp.

Tanaquill lifted her hips to meet him and let the magic pull at her, let it in deeper. She pressed a hand against his muscular buttocks and pushed harder. He jolted as something alien stirred in him, his last thrusts stopping for a breathless instant before, entranced, he faded into nothing.

## CHAPTER 24

Darkness.

*"Be ready..."* a darkly familiar male voice said. The thrumming sound that at first she'd thought was the beating of her heart had steadily grown, not louder, but more insistent. Something was wrong.

Tanaquill lifted her head, her breath steady and deep, as a lantern appeared above her, its glass walls glowing, and her heartbeat rose to meet it, to match the thrumming chant, everything happening too quickly for her to stop it.

The prince's shadowed eyes brushed past her, vacant over an empty smile. Her skin tingled

with the magics the witches used, leaving her breathless, unable to move. Her eyes widened in alarm as a wisp of white smoke curled and drifted from her mouth.

She caught his profile as he turned, a corner of his mouth lifting ironically to someone. Regal, sharply handsome, his hair red, his lips full, pouting, Prince Rohmier turned back to her to study what was happening as one would watch a terrible event that one felt safe enough to relish from a distance.

The white curl of smoke drifted away toward the chanting, then turned toward the lantern. Tanaquill felt herself falling, the prince intent on her, his eyes bright, almond-shaped, purple, his head tilting. "There there," he growled out softly. "Don't resist." Tanaquill gasped, slipping, unable to find her balance. She felt herself floating and then tugged, directed into the lantern with the smoke. She heard him, his breathless, satisfied laughter muffled by kissing someone. *Where is Gavin?* she thought, kneeling on the cold glass floor, as the lantern shut her in.

## CHAPTER 25

*Tanaquill...* Gavin awoke alone in what felt like the underbelly of the house, gray incense winding acrid tendrils around him. He stood raggedly, naked, his senses enlivened, his gut aching from how forcefully he had spilled his seed. Cold, smooth stone was beneath his bare feet, while the smell of moist earth told him that beneath the floor lay solid ground. Cavernous and dim, the space might encompass the entire ground floor of the house and was long and windowless, with curving rough hewn walls, dirty and unstuccoed, with archways leading into tunnels whose ends he could not see.

A cloaked woman emerged from one of the archways and approached him. His heart pounded hard, lifted by a strange, bitter elation. Her figure vaguely outlined in the gloom, her features obscured by the hooded cloak, Gavin sensed her as he never had another being. The sensation aroused a delight he could not hold back. It was her, *really her*.

Gavin looked down as she knelt before him, head bowed. They had caught him, Gavin thought, and given the female shapeshifter to him.

There were more of his kind. *More than you ever dreamed*, Eris had said. Gavin wished she would get to her feet and take him to her like a long lost sister, but he didn't want to startle her, even by forcing her to raise her head. Perhaps she was greeting him formally, in a manner befitting of one shapeshifter to another. If so, he would greet her back, Gavin thought proudly,

for the first time speaking as a member of his kind, as one who belonged. Not better or worse, higher or lower, alien or pretending to be familiar, but the same, as an equal to another of his kind.

Strangely, there was no fear in knowing he'd been captured, not while she knelt before him, exerting such a fascination upon him, overwhelming all else.

"Please don't be angry," she said in English, her head bowed. Gavin felt a surprising twinge of disappointment as the sound of her voice failed to live up to hundreds of years of expectation, but that was smoothed immediately by how her voice slid into his mind like a counterpart to his own. *What* she was flowed out of it, and so he heard her more clearly than anyone in a hundred years.

He felt himself smile a little. The dungeon around them was dim and silent. "I could never be angry with you," Gavin said quietly. She was meek. He had not imagined the females of his kind to be so. He knew then that he would be mistaken to think she'd worked against him. She was being used by the witches. Misled by the humans. Being face-to-face again with her own kind would remind her of what was right. Even if she had been wronged by other shapeshifters, or had been frightened by them, he would show her that *he* was now who she could turn to when in need.

Head still bowed, her words were resonant nevertheless. "I have waited for you. I will go with you, I promise." Her willingness, expressed so simply yet powerfully, spread through his weary loins. A satisfied tremor grew along his spine. It was real—this woman would accept him. He gazed down at her, kneeling in submission to him, head bowed, averting her gaze. He would go with her at his side to the others of his kind and they would welcome him. He would discuss their plans for the future, for he would demand they had them. And discover why they had hidden from him, show them they had been wrong. And someday his kind would no longer hide from wretched humanity, but take their rightful place, in the open.

"Where have they taken Tanaquill?" he coaxed gently. He needed to find her again so that the three of them could leave. He'd been selfish and led her into a trap. He had risked too much to find this female. "Give me the truth."

"I do not know," she said innocently, still looking down, hiding her face.

Beside him, the mouth of a cauldron smoked thickly. Smoke rose over the cauldron's lip and wound around his legs and arms, but never touched her. He felt the smoke drifting along his skin, gripping his naked hips and abdomen, curling between his fingers. He felt rooted to the spot, but could not decide whether it wasn't the compelling presence of the shapeshifter before him.

"Take down your hood, dear, and let him see you," he heard a woman in the shadows say.

The shapeshifter lifted her hands to her hood, drawing it down, the sleeves falling back to

reveal milky arms, hands that had not known hardship. Her eyes shifted, gold and willing as she slowly lifted her gaze.

*She is beautiful*, Gavin thought. It was the woman he had met on the stairs, only without the obscuring perfume she had worn that night, and that made every difference. It was remarkable to see her eyes glowing like his. He stopped himself short, pulling back before what he wanted to say came forth. It overwhelmed him, how much he needed her to understand who he was. There was so much he needed to know. Where had she come from? What had her life been like? And the others—He'd waited *hundreds of years*...

Resisting the spell which sought to hold him, Gavin reached out and gently touched her cheek. He felt her grow still when she saw he could move, her reaction one of surprise.

Together they would find Tanaquill, he decided.

She gently but firmly grabbed hold of his wrist with both her hands. Her eyes held his, warm and pleading. "I'm right here, don't struggle," she said. "Remain still. I am glad you have awoken, for I must help you and I could not while you slept. What I must do..." she hesitated, searching for words, "might surprise you. You must not misunderstand my intentions." Her eyes grew a hint eager, Gavin felt her subtle tug on his arm, as if she wished to draw him closer, her voice quickening. "Let me place my hands upon you. When you feel what I do, know it is for the good." She stopped. "You do wish to give me what I want, do you not? I, in return, will give you what you wish for."

The cauldron's smoke sought Gavin out like blindly searching limbs, slipping into his mouth, but instead of making him cough it entered his body without resistance on his own, deep breaths.

The hunting song came back to him. For his entire life he had been the beast hunted. "Give me?" He studied her, full of questions. "Where is Tanaquill?" he asked more forcefully.

"I don't know," she replied quickly, honestly, her voice changing too, matching his. "Gone."

He knew she wasn't. *She can't be gone*, he thought. He didn't know how he knew, he just did. The humans made her lie to him. He knelt down to face her directly. "You have a home among your kind, and a family," he questioned. "Where is it?"

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "In Cheshire."

*Britain*, Gavin thought with a satisfaction that surprised him. He had not known until then how much he wished to belong to this land where his father and mother had lived so long. Just like Tanaquill, what he'd sought had been here all along. "How many of our kind are there?"

"No one can know. I alone have heard of ninety, scattered in distant countries. There are surely more. Others who are far more important than those in England."

It seemed impossible. Gavin's thoughts turned inward, his expression remote. He reached

out to touch her and her reaction brought him out of his thoughts.

At the instant he touched her, he could see in his mind's eye how she had wanted to leap to safety as a gazelle. Gavin had sensed it so strongly he'd nearly seen it, though outwardly she didn't so much as flinch. *She is terrified of me*, he thought, surprised.

He dropped his hand and immediately felt the constraint upon it tighten. He gazed at her with steady curiosity. "Don't be afraid. How can you understand that you have everything I've ever wanted—a home, a family, a life among our kind. I only want to know what that's like. I won't force you to become my wife, or to return to your home, to your uncle is it? If you do not want to. I merely wish to talk with you. Now tell me, what is it you want from me? For when we are far from here you will have it, but not before." He paused. "It is in your power to release me, isn't it? I will protect you from these witches. You and I will find the princess and leave this place."

Her mouth fell open in surprise and she hesitated as if trying to determine what to say. She shook her head. "No..."

Gavin noticed others discreetly entering the room from under gloomy archways. "What power do the witches hold over you? I don't understand why you help them." His voice was kind. He wished to comfort her so she would no longer be afraid. "I have nothing of value. What could you want from me?" As he spoke he let his voice tug at her, one shapeshifter to another. "*All I can give you is my name.*" His true name. The one his mother had secretly given him and a goddess had given him back. It would be an honor for the first time he spoke it aloud to be to another shapeshifter. Nevertheless Tanaquill came fleetingly into his mind, and he regretted he had not shared it with her. "I am <~~~~>" he said, for the first time in his life speaking his name aloud.

Gavin caught the surprise in her eyes, the flash of sober questioning, then realized what had surprised her.

*Why* had she believed he would not have a shapeshifter name? He was alone now, but it had not always been the case. Had she expected he would know nothing of who he was? Could she have known that his family tried to hide *even that* from him?

Why would she think that he was any different from the others? Why would she *know* that he was different? How could she?

*She knows of me*, he realized, as anger warmed his limbs.

*She does have something to fear.* He gripped her hard, though it was like pulling the weight of a ship's anchor on his arms and legs, pulled her up by the neck, dragging her off of her knees. She took in a sharp breath, frozen, not struggling, like a stricken deer. He pulled her ear to his lips, his anger bringing forth claws in the hand that held her tightly. A sudden, steady beating told him Tanaquill was alive and that he still had her heart. His weary muscles trembled with

relief. For the first time Gavin felt the value of what Tanaquill had given him. *I was not lost. I was an outcast.* Understanding swept through him that he had not sought, and he gazed at the female before him, no longer even wanting her body. It nearly swallowed him whole. *I've been a fool,* he thought angrily.

The shapeshifters he had yearned to know and save had never wished to know him, thought they'd known all about him. *Why,* he thought, furious. As he held her as close as he would ever hold another of his kind, despite everything he recognized in her, and the powerful effect that had on his senses, what mattered was missing. Trust, companionship, love. Because of that, she was more alien to him than any human had ever been.

"How do you know me?" Gavin bit out cleanly, the spell faltering. Tanaquill was alone, somewhere in this house and in trouble. Why did he waste his time here? *What am I trying to save,* he thought bitterly as he stared at her, *when they never wanted me?* He nearly shook her, his sight blurring. "I don't understand what you want. You never looked for me before. What do you want now?"

The full impact of the strange woman's beautiful countenance shone at him like the moon coming out from behind a cloud. The full frame of thick, wavy black hair, the vivid planes of her face, spoke of the strength he had not perceived in her sham submissiveness, just before, with lightning speed, she snatched away his hands and broke free from him with startling force. She jumped away and stood before him. Her eyes suddenly held something akin to truth. He finally respected her, though he could never love her.

"*Why are you helping these humans?*" he said, steady anger in his tone. He felt the witches suddenly push in against his mind, saw dozens of them striding forcefully at him from the shadows. Yet a moment later none of the witches had moved. It was the impact of the spell, they had reinforced it, Gavin realized, noting for the first time just how many people were in the room. Some hid their faces, others were brazenly exposed.

He felt like he was splitting in half. The shapeshifter's voice, meant for him alone, came sharply into his mind. Utterly unlike her earlier submissive tone, it revealed the true woman, confident, a predator. *You should never have come here for me. They will tame you.* The hard words lanced into his mind. He gazed deeply into her eyes as she came forward. Her voice in his thoughts again unnerved him; he had only experienced Tanaquill's voice in his mind.

*They are more powerful than you,* she continued, demanding he hear her, her expression cold. *You should have run. I won't go back to my uncle without the power!* Her eyes glowed with rage. Her lips curled back. A taut ferocity lit her calm exterior.

He shoved her out of his mind.

She glared at him in shock and suddenly began speaking in a stream of shapeshifter, too fast for him to understand without letting her back into his mind. Instead, her anger and scorn

washed over him in waves.

A hooded figure twisted to her. “Stop that. What are you saying to him?” the woman asked sharply.

The shapeshifter stopped abruptly and held his gaze a moment longer, breathing hard. She looked over at the hooded witch, her expression stony, her thoughts hidden, her eyes calm and fearless. “He’s strong, and resists being subdued.” She paused. “He no longer wants me. I must make him yield by another means.”

“Then get on with it,” the witch said impatiently.

The shapeshifter looked back at Gavin, her eyes angry, her voice hard. “Give me what I ask for, or I will take it.” Then, a flash from her in his mind—*Give it to me and they need have none of it.* “One way or another, Gavin, I will take everything from you. You will give me your being. You will know the instant I begin to take it from you and you will let me. You will ask me to take it. You will have no choice—for I am not the one alone, you are.” She came a step closer, her scent changed, her eyes almost languidly content, a small smile at the corner of her mouth. Like a fat cat anticipating an easy dinner. “It will be easy,” she said lightly, without bravado, coming closer. “Given how you’ve lived. You don’t know anything, do you?”

She looked deadly, in a practiced way, but nonetheless effective. Gavin had a feeling she could do exactly what she said she could. This was a mortal encounter. He held her gaze unflinchingly. “You want my life,” he returned. *Is that all?* He thought into her and watched her flinch. Her jaw tightened, her eyes flickered to where the ropes of incense held his wrists. “It was unseemly for your mother and father to have a child after Tyne banished them. But it’s not surprising that they felt they could teach you to be *a man among men*,” she scoffed. “Born to outcasts like a piece of rubbish. Your mother and father were soft and foolish and they died for it and left you alone.” She shook her head, in mock scolding. “And we do not do well alone. Just as when you left your mother alone, she did not do well, did she, killed by villagers. *But did that really happen?*” She grew a little eager, with a little, fake smile. “Gavin,” she whispered, “What were you doing that day? Bedding one of those humans you hate?”

“See, I know more about you than you do. Things about your life which you believe to be true are not. Your mother wasn’t killed by those villagers, she was captured, on the orders of a certain nobleman.”

A cold dread descended over him.

Her voice was controlled, and less satisfied; he could see that what he’d done genuinely bothered her. “They had no choice. When you left your mother alone, they lured her to a house where she thought someone was ill, a house with magic to bind her and steal her away, leaving behind a wolf’s corpse charmed with your mother’s scent.”

Gavin felt a sharp revulsion toward her. “The witches have found my memories. You can’t

know any of this.”

She shook her head. “You don’t believe that, you know what I’m saying is the truth. Remember back, the scent on her corpse, it was different, wasn’t it. She was alive when you buried her, when you walked away, she suffered still.”

“You don’t have to make up stories to convince me of what I’ve had to live with for these hundreds of years.”

She came closer, her eyes raking his chest, his abdomen, as if she wanted to touch him. He recoiled at the thought. “But has it been so long as you think?”

His hand clenched and he felt the incense locked tight around him, binding him like nothing one might strain against, but like the impossibility of straining at all. “Say what you mean, <---->.” *Whelp*, he had called her.

Her mouth crooked at the insult. “He kept her in a cage, Gavin, and over the years he used her.” Her words became knives in their simplicity. “He and his family prospered from his spellcraft, gaining further prominence and wealth by slowly draining your mother of what she was, until the stench of necromancy was so overpowering that even the villagers could stand it no more. They sought the help of a mage who sealed the sorcerer and his family in the house while the villagers set it ablaze. There were no survivors. The humans had never imagined your mother might still be alive, but they found her body in the ruins, for the mage knew how to identify our kind.”

She stopped, as if worried he would break his bonds. But they felt heavier than anything in the world. What she said couldn’t be true. “How do you know this?”

“Humans are always scribbling things down and searching for what they shouldn’t. One of the villagers wrote down the whole story and one of his descendants decided to learn if there was any truth to it. His researches brought these events to our attention,” she said derisively. Her expression altered subtly. “For many of us, your mother’s misfortune was a grave reminder of our place.” Her voice softened, but not in kindness. “This world belongs to the humans. We have all been called to the sacrifice,” she said, oddly echoing Eris’ words. “She wasted away, Gavin, trapped. They used her.”

Gavin glared at her, but there it was in her eyes; the simple, sad truth. He knew then she wasn’t lying. The body he had thought to be his mother’s—there had been something in its scent that he’d never encountered. Something akin to when he’d met this shapeshifter at the ball. No one had told him that enchantment existed; he’d had no way of knowing or learning to fight against it. Maybe if he hadn’t always pushed humans away he would have found some like Tanaquill’s cousins or Lord Fairbain sooner and he could have learned from them. He had been so naïve. *Tanaquill*, he thought, as he stared into the shapeshifter’s golden eyes. Why had he ever searched for this one when he had Tanaquill? For nothing, he’d given her away.



“I forgive you,” Gavin whispered. He couldn’t know why she did this. In her he saw the cruelty of where she’d come from. He himself was blind and deaf to the world around him and Tanaquill would pay because of it. How long would she be trapped because of him?

At his words, surprise lit her eyes, and something more, hidden under them, that might have regretted what she’d done.

“*Quickly now,*” he heard a witch say. “He hasn’t the will to stop you.” They were crowded behind him, he realized. Their hands pressed down on his shoulders. “I would not have forced you to go back,” he said and fell to his knees, feeling his body stiffen.

The shapeshifter stood over him looking down. Her eyes, for the first time, held a begrudging kindness. “They gave her a proper burial, Gavin, and those who hurt her are all dead. There is nothing left for you to do.” Her eyes were honest, steady and glowing. “Pay for what you did. Give in and give everything to me.” Then, in his mind, *For I alone am without blame—give in and give everything to me.* Gavin found he could no longer move. His jaw stiff, his body ramrod straight, his breath grew shallow. She knelt in front of him. “Empty into me.”

He tried to fight it, but the painful truth was in his mind and held him back, his limbs leaden as the witches steadied him for her. He wasn’t worthy of this life. He had to rescue Tanaquill, but he couldn’t move, couldn’t fight them.

The female shapeshifter’s eyes glowed hot and eager as she focused. She pressed her hands onto his chest and his body jerked. Talons came out and gripped, hard. Gavin groaned and she gripped harder. A fleet shadow shot from his body and she trembled as it entered her chest. Beside him the black cauldron crackled as a smell of burning milky weeds infused his bonds. The smoke tightened around him like a noose.

Her voice drifted soothingly into his mind. *It is too late to fight. Let me grow strong.* Resignation descended over her countenance. A coldness came into her eyes like that of an animal in the moment when the struggle to subdue prey passes over into the perception of meat. She watched what she drew from him, looking inward as she ingested his essence.

She lifted her gaze to urge him on. *I need your strength to fight him, Gavin. I will fight him for both of us,* she said in his mind.

His focus grew dim. At the sign of his weakened state she pulled back her claws and slid her hands down his chest to his abdomen. At her warm touch he flinched, the muscles twitching under her fingers. A force pushed into his gut.

“*That’s right,*” he heard the witch say.

He took in a sharp breath as the splitting sensation throbbed through him. For the first time in his life he felt the value of *what* he was as she tried to gently but firmly tug it out of him. Her brow furrowing, her mouth twisted unhappily. “There is something that blocks me taking the core,” she said. She placed her hands on his chest again. “Here, I must remove something here

first.”

“Then do so,” said the witch.

She glanced up at him quickly. *Even with your strength I may not win against him*, she thought into his mind.

The witches hadn’t told her to, but he knew she was killing him to draw out what she needed quickly, the strength she hoped would be hers alone. Gavin finally understood why Eris had told him to run. It had little to do with understanding that he would die. Everyone dies someday. He wished he’d never known what he couldn’t bear to live with.

He looked at the female shapeshifter, the determination on her face. He wanted to find a place in himself where he could just say yes. But there was something he wanted, only he couldn’t remember what. He just knew it wasn’t her, but he couldn’t remember why. She looked at him, her eyes worried.

It was sweet, this feeling which burned behind his eyes. Why had he waited this long before seeing it? The human world had no use for him. Now his time in it would finally be over. The shapeshifter was trying to concentrate, focus, but her eyes were haunted, sorry. She appeared so small, kneeling in front of him. “It’s all right,” he said, forgiving her. “I can’t know what brings you to do this.”

Her brow furrowed, upset, before her determination grew and she pulled harder at some knot within him. He groaned between his teeth and the witches, gathered tightly around them, held him. He felt his stiff body arching upward, bending. He expelled a breath, surprised when he wasn’t gone and instead a golden glow rose out of his chest.

The witch leaned forward, curious. Her eyes widened. “What is this—”

The shapeshifter’s mouth moved, she leaned her head back, tasting it. “I’ve—never felt anything like it—The princess, has she made you a—Oh!” she said as it drew out of him and it enveloped her inside a glowing golden orb that held onto Gavin by a thread. The female looked down at her arms, startled as they shimmered, and gasped, laughing. She cast her cloak from her and huge dragonfly wings sprouted from her back. “Is this her heart?” she said, her eyes shining red.

## CHAPTER 26

“*Her heart?* Give it to me,” Evelina said, stepping hurriedly forward.

“No! Now stay back!” Melanie snapped. “All of you. It’s mine!” They stood at an impasse. The prince, seemingly, had not warned any of them that this might happen. Or he had not known.

*Gavin?*...Tanaquill peered down through the glass floor of the lamp, Prince Rohmier below her. His large, handsome butterfly wings flapped lazily. The air in the lantern felt cool, as if she alone could heat it, the space behind the glass barren save for her. *What has happened to Gavin?* she thought miserably as Rohmier looked up.

The prince studied her in her prison. Moments ago he’d walked across the room and pressed his palm to a spot on the wall. Like a mirror he had formed by asking, sweeping his hand across the surface, a large oval appeared and showed a second room like a window. “I’d wager you’d like to see it when he meets our Melanie.”

And she had. Her eyes glowing warmly red, she flew to the door of the lantern and pressed her hands against it, wanting to slip through its glass and touch him.

The prince had watched her unguarded reaction. Every fairy knew of the healing spell, but it was a strange thing to actually see its effect. He could not have *really* understood what it meant to want someone the way she wanted and needed Gavin.

Settling in, he leaned along the wall and watched with her. “Look,” he pointed into the strange window, “There’s the one he’s been trying to find. What do you think of her?”

Tanaquill’s hands pressed flat to the glass floor, her legs folded under her where she sat naked. “The witches do not understand,” she said to him. “Eris has yet to receive a worthy gift from her coven tonight. In their carelessness, they are about to give her a gift she will truly appreciate.”

“You are a princess, Tanaquill. You should have acted like one. Don’t threaten me now. I know you, and you wouldn’t dare. You cannot offer what is not yours to give, what belongs to all of us.” Turning his attention away from her, he took up a shirt of human workmanship from where it lay carelessly tossed on the floor, and, to her surprise, he began slipping the shirt over his muscular shoulders while not looking at her. She had never known him to wear human clothing before.

“Evelina does not love you,” Tanaquill said. “Humans do not allow whom they love to lie with another.”

He looked up at her in that way he had, like an older brother; fond of her, but who could never take her seriously. “You don’t know as much about humans as you think,” he said. “Or perhaps you don’t know the right ones.” The shirt opened for his wings, and he tugged it down smooth. The buttons obediently fastened. “The ones to whom you can do anything and they’ll still love you, love you more, in fact.”

From the clothing which lay scattered around, she gathered that he dressed as a fashionable gentleman when in the witches’ company—a gentleman with butterfly wings sprouting from his

back. With crisp cravat still strewn on a chair, his shirt remained open at the top; the last buttons had been neglected and revealed his smooth throat. His red hair fell over his brow, pointed ears poked through its artful disarray, framing the handsome features which had once, long ago, made her eager for his visits.

The prince's narrow, upward tilted eyes caught hers. She'd seen long ago in those lovely eyes and knew he was remembering. And in that moment she recognized the boy she had known.

"Remember when we looked forward to our wedding?" he said finally. After a moment he laughed to himself, light and confident, and glanced away. He shook his head. "*I could not believe* that you fucked him. Knowing what he is." He looked up at her, frustrated. She'd seen his face her entire life, first childish, now fully matured, yet she could never quite adjust to how beautiful he was. No one could. It was the problem with him. "Look at how you behave given any freedom," he continued. "But then I should have expected that. The moment they let you out, you did something ridiculous. You woke everyone. I had to calm them all down. I was the only one who didn't feel it." His jaw flinched, almost imperceptibly.

She knew then that he hated her for it. For making him feel helpless. He walked to the window. "I could have *killed* you," he said, remembering with cool frustration.

"You tried," she said.

"Yes. And with good reason. I cannot believe how easily led you are. You, who would lead others." He paused. "But then I remember who I'm dealing with." He glanced over at her. "What a child you are. It would have been a mercy for your family if you had died that night. As for him." He turned back to the window, his voice hardening. "She's going to mount your lover like those demons you saw on the walls."

"Is she?" Tanaquill said, her voice as hard as his.

"Tanaquill, you are not a princess here. Evelina is your master and you'll come to know what that means." His eyes held hers, the memory of a long life shared in many ways falling between them. "You will be humble toward me as you should have been from the beginning, ever since you were a child and knew you would come to live in the palace my family built. You will learn your place."

"I had thought my place was beside you in marriage, though neither of us wished it. But I would not marry you now," she said without rancor. "For everything you are, and because of everything you have done, your kingdom will have to let you go."

He said nothing. A corner of his mouth lifted, irritated. The prince of the fairies under the hill. He who would be their king. It was almost sad to see him in this narrow human place, when she had only ever seen him in palaces.

"*Why* do you love her?" Tanaquill asked. "A human woman—you do not even like humans. You used to disdain their company. Yet you wear human clothes as you never would

have before. You do so to please her. I have never seen you this way. Is it because you enjoy being under her yoke?"

He rolled his eyes at that, as if she would never learn.

She felt a familiar, childish frustration growing—she'd felt it whenever she had tried to argue about anything with him. Her wings buzzed, agitated. He had turned away, unusually pensive. Somehow, that was more unnerving than anything, his sudden growing silence. Tanaquill pressed him for an answer. "I cannot see why she is so important—"

"—I made her," the prince said, startling her. He did not look at her, knowing that it was demeaning for him to admit when he'd always spoken of his contempt for humans. He finally looked over to catch her shock. He smiled a little at it, before looking away again, embarrassed.

Tanaquill could see his profile and his expression warmed in a way that she'd never seen before, almost parental. He stared out ahead of him, remembering. "I flew by her window and heard her crying in her crib. She was beautiful—" He glanced over. "She stopped crying the moment I touched her. It was charming. She had a spark. But at the same time she was really *human*—do you know what I mean?"

She silently shook her head.

"That's why other humans are horrible. They look human, but they're never human enough." He paused. "I thought about keeping her. But I felt she needed her human family to grow. She is from a very good one, with a long tradition of witchcraft, so I made her a witch and put her back. She's known me since then, on and off," he said reluctantly, as if admitting to her that he couldn't keep away. "I've kept watch over her. It was only recently she summoned me—one of those spells to summon fairies that never work.

"But I came anyway," he said.

*That means it worked,* she thought to herself.

"I was curious what she would think of me. I revealed myself to her completely. I've been coming to her ever since."

"Her suitor."

The prince ignored the comment. Staring out the window for a moment he said nothing. "Why did you do it?" he asked finally.

Tanaquill wondered how, knowing her, he could need to ask.

"I've asked you a question."

"Because he had saved my life and was in trouble for it." She paused, then offered something further to this fairy she had known since they were children, for they were children no longer. "Because he recognized a part of himself in me, and I did not want that to die," she said.

Silence hung between them. She stared into the looking glass, stunned as Gavin gave in, and the long, painful process as Melanie pulled out her heart.

## CHAPTER 27

Trapped in the lantern, Tanaquill could no longer enter Gavin's mind, and so she craned to see him in the strange looking glass.

Worn out, Gavin was letting go. He had taken what Melanie offered him. An excuse to find oblivion. *He wants to give up. But I will not let him*, Tanaquill thought.

She should have understood this coven sooner. The female shapeshifter, Melanie, worked comfortably alongside the witches, and the witches' understanding of the shapeshifters appeared old. And had not Melanie claimed that Gavin's mother was used by a sorcerer against her will? What if some shapeshifters had allowed themselves to be used willingly? In some mutually beneficial arrangement. This coven and perhaps others like it concealed the shapeshifters, not from the fairies, for she still did not accept that humans were capable of that, but from those like Fairbain.

And this house was an animal. An animal that shapeshifters could control—shapeshifters who understood what they were capable of. They had not expected Gavin to be able to do anything.

They had not expected him to know himself.

She slammed her fist into the glass, to break it and save him, but the glass of the lantern grew subtly colder, harder, defending itself.

Prince Rohmier scoffed, glancing up at her.

Tanaquill saw with alarm that Gavin's breath was labored, his skin gray. Claw marks on his chest dripped blood, not healing as they should. A few witches remained around him, no longer restraining him but holding him up, as if he would fall the moment they let him go.

Worse yet was that his face was peaceful. Distant. After her heart had been taken from him, Gavin's head had tilted back limply almost as if looking up at her. His eyes shifted slowly back and forth, green, then gold, dulling, dying out. *He waits to die*, Tanaquill thought. Gavin had almost seemed about to break free, and then Melanie had said those terrible things. Far more than it had hurt Tanaquill to see him reach out to her and touch her with compassion, was to see him defeated as he kneeled in the crowd of humans. Melanie had laid upon him a burden he could not bear and accomplished the coven's goal. The most powerful of beings can be destroyed by the weakest if they give up the fight. And the weak humans had swarmed him.

The healing spell throbbed in her, strong and full and yearning. *He dies.* Her hand grew fur as it slid down the glass, her body wanted to follow, to sink down in bitter misery but she would not allow such weakness, the princess in her would not allow it, especially in the prince's presence. She was like a statue, her expression, moulded from long practice at court, only hinting at how she felt. She looked to Melanie in her brown, highwaisted dress with short, buttercup sleeves. *She looks well in my wings,* Tanaquill thought. *For however long she will bear them.*

Like a bubble on the surface of a lake catching the sunlight, her heart sparkled in the shapeshifter's hair, along her arms, her expression one of wonder, power. But beneath her expression Tanaquill sensed nothing but sadness and anger. *I am sorry for you, for what you will have to feel.*

As Tanaquill watched, Melanie's expression slid into curiosity, then into confusion, her mouth twisting downward amid the golden hue. Suddenly regret streaked her face as, immersed in Tanaquill's heart, with the witches looking on in surprise, she pushed past them to Gavin, wrapping her arms around his neck and clinging to his unresponsive body. "Is it real?" Melanie said, nuzzling him, her eyes glistening, distraught. Some of the witches started to try to tug her gently off of Gavin, but she held him tighter. "No. I can't, I can't—" she said, her voice an urgent, frightened whisper.

Worried murmurs grew among the witches as the shapeshifter pressed her damp cheek against Gavin's neck, smoothing her hand in the back of his hair, her eyes frightened. "Leave us," she said to the witches. They remained, looking at one another.

The prince shifted uncomfortably from his relaxed pose, watching the events in the looking glass with Tanaquill, like a prison guard below her. She glanced down at him as he watched the scene, tense, not looking at her, hiding his nerves.

She looked back to Melanie; something was happening to her. As she watched, a glowing design, intricate, like carved quicksilver, flashed across the golden orb surrounding the female shapeshifter before vanishing. *The healing sigil.* Tanaquill felt its impression trace itself quickly upon her own skin, reasserting that it still owned her as well. It was as though it was making sure it would not lose her, after having been divided between herself and Melanie, and that if it lost her, it would find her again. It would never let her go.

Melanie inhaled a ragged breath as she tried to master her emotions, then noticed something, bringing her hand to her face to look more closely. Surprised, she lifted both palms to study the sigil's intricate, curving lines which climbed along her arms, glowing now like hot iron. Her new-found fairy wings flickered like a rainbow along her back.

Tanaquill felt a sharp pang of regret as Melanie suddenly felt for her neck where the sigil's mark had formed a shining choker. Tanaquill recognized the same startled look she'd seen on the shapeshifter when they'd met at the ball, only now it was infused with a slowly awakening

delight. Melanie's delight grew triumphant, making her look like a little girl, her red eyes bright. Her laugh, sharp and quick, was like a bell as the sigil climbed up her face.

Tanaquill pushed on the glass even though it held fast, unyielding beneath her hands. Watching this shapeshifter's foolish misunderstanding of what she had stolen.

Trapped in a fairy's healing sigil, Melanie would be past all health or harm, beyond the help of any witches' magic Tanaquill knew of. And if Gavin died, she would be tormented in a manner unknown to either of their kind. Over the years she would change into something unrecognizable, an empty, ravenous creature—a fate even worse than Tanaquill would face if Gavin did not live to find love, for the shapeshifter would long, not only for Gavin, but for fairy too, once Tanaquill's heart had left her, as it inevitably would. A fate too cruel, no matter what crimes this shapeshifter had committed. For she would not even know what was happening to her. Furthermore, how might the Eris coven use it? If they could control a shapeshifter who had undergone that change. *I cannot allow it*, Tanaquill thought. And she would not allow Gavin to die. Not after he had finally found what he'd been searching for. It did not matter that his kindred were not all that he had dreamed. He would learn that what they were was enough.

An open, hungry smile transfixed Melanie's face. Her dark, exotic brows, one with a thin scar running through it, gave her a look of cruel beauty when she was unselfconsciously pleased.

Evelina gestured for the other witches to stay back, but she herself remained where she was.

Connected by the sigil and by the heart suspended for the moment between the two shapeshifters, Tanaquill felt Melanie's will. Bitterness and ambition, she learned, were her dearest companions because they drowned the fear. *She wishes to overpower two men, one whom she loves, the other whom she hates, but she fears she is not strong enough to do either.*

"*Maeve guide us,*" Tanaquill whispered, a quick prayer, her heart beating hard, feeling the sigil pull, not letting go of her as it engulfed Melanie too. The shapeshifter, breathing hard, elated with the feeling of the sigil claiming her, suddenly looked Tanaquill's way. It was jarring, although Tanaquill knew Melanie could not see her, and must have been staring at an empty wall. Tanaquill's heart leapt—*Could the prince's looking glass also be a door?*

Melanie's eyes closed for a moment, her gaze directed inward as she attempted to take hold of, and possess for herself alone, the sigil that seemed to her simply like more power.

Tanaquill sensed the healing sigil shift like the roots of great trees moving inside the earth, and her limbs went still, she did not take a breath. To be for one moment free; *one moment* to understand—In a single heartbeat, to *see* outside the sigil's embrace. She could experience the world again, for one instant, *without* the sigil covering her heart as Melanie, without comprehending, bent her whole force of will to possessing it solely. Tanaquill did not even dare move or close her eyes. She peered out carefully, reaching out with her thoughts and it almost



felt as if her mind was split by a flash of lightning when she glimpsed the truth.

*Gavin, I really do love you,* she thought. She had never known love before, and for the first time she understood what it was. There was no jealousy in it, no madness, only the quiet longing to build a life with him, spend long hours alone with him. It rested calm and steady in her, a place of strength and hope. And for an instant, sitting trapped inside the lantern, she saw the sigil's imposed desires as the alien thing they were. Love looked nothing like the sigil; how strange such an infatuation seemed to her now, when she saw the beauty that lay beyond jealous longing.

She was grateful. No matter what would come, she had known true love. It felt stable and permanent, as if somehow, despite what she must do, it could be all right if she trusted it. Then the sigil, whose strength had healed Gavin, dragged her back and clung to her tightly.

The shapeshifter seemed to notice none of this as the sigil climbed along her brow, wound past her eyes and down the bridge of her nose, slipping into her mouth like golden honey. Melanie sighed, tilting her head up to taste it.

Tanaquill recognized the expression she wore, her feelings so like what she had felt when she first accepted the healing sigil. She remembered how it had felt, incredible at first, to experience such a great hopefulness, an expectation of satisfaction that for a moment you believed could be filled.

Tanaquill's eyes returned to Gavin. *He cannot leave me,* she thought. For that was the way love was, she realized. Where the sigil demanded to possess him, but could never be satisfied, love meant that Gavin belonged not only to himself, but to her now. She was not strong enough to escape her prison as she was, Tanaquill knew. There was one way to regain her heart. And that was to give it away.

## CHAPTER 28

Tanaquill closed her eyes and surrendered her heart. She sent it away, glimpsing Melanie's anguish as the blissful sensation of her possession was ripped from her. With a moan of alarm, the shapeshifter tried to catch it in desperately grasping fingers, doleful as her dragonfly wings curled and disappeared.

The golden glow of Tanaquill's heart, which no longer bathed the shapeshifter's limbs, now hovered in the air, turning slowly, growing more compact until it formed a small,

unassuming shape like spun sugar or something fashioned from lace. It was full and round, golden, slowly spinning while frost climbed up it.

The witches started forward in a race to catch it, without any thought to what they might do with it—or what it might do to them. It was simply a treasure to them, a magical prize.

“Don’t interfere,” Evelina said, her voice commanding, if a hint breathless. “Keep hold of the shapeshifter, hold him! Melanie! It’s gone. Don’t try to take it back! Ladies, mind her!” The witches complied, but Evelina hardly noticed. Evelina could barely contain her excitement. The heart no longer belonged to the female shapeshifter and now the coven had a chance at it. “Remember, ladies,” she continued, confident, everything having gone quite well tonight, considering. And there would be a next time for Chloe. “If you don’t know what it shall do, by Eris, let it. Let us just let...it...happen...”

*A dangerous rule*, Tanaquill thought, as she rested at the bottom of the lantern, her hand pressed flat to the glass, trying to breathe, eyes closed, as she felt the change bloom in her. She opened her eyes and felt a surprising thrill to see the room around her lose its vibrant tones. It reminded her of ice seizing the lake, the queer reflections on its surface of black birds flying overhead. *Are you certain?* something in her asked. Her breath was slow and deep as she lay naked upon the glass that no longer felt cold to the touch. The sky in winter had no such beauty as this.

“Yes,” she whispered gratefully. The sweet relief of feeling nothing swept over her and the ice crept through her limbs.

Prince Rohmier was facing the large, oval glass. “That doesn’t seem right,” he muttered to himself. With a mute recoil of surprise he turned to face Tanaquill. Peering in the glass lantern intently he remained at a distance. “It can’t be—you’ve caused some sort of mirage with what little strength you can gather in there,” he said. “You never would,” he finished softly to himself.

The glowing heart spun slowly, looking as though it were turning into glass. Tanaquill sat on the floor of the lantern, a little inelegantly, and pushed her hand into her hair with a sleepy smile. Peace. Finally. Emptiness.

She felt her love freezing, dying. To feel nothing. The promise of the White Fairy. She hadn’t admitted to herself how much she wanted to be free of this aching love, this insistent pull.

The sigil was gone and *She* was there, the White Fairy, ancient, quietly asking, *May I be your final becoming?* and she accepted, exhaling deeply and opening her eyes, which were bone white.

Now that her heart was truly leaving her she realized how far she had been from giving it away during the carriage ride to this house. *Did that really occur tonight?* she thought, remembering impassively.

In the other room something overcame Gavin, as if he were listening. “Yes,” he said into

the silence, surprising the witches who had assumed him comatose. "I accept it," he finished. Her heart, a small thing now shrouded in ice and snow, drifted to him and entered his chest, casting away its wintry coat in a wisp of vapor.

A warm breath of life flooded back into Gavin as Tanaquill gripped for purchase, finding none on the smooth glass floor. She opened her mouth in alarm as frost claimed her blond hair from the roots to the tips. Her peach skin iced over like a mountain's tip. She was ice cold and hard like a lake in January. She lifted her arm to gaze at her bone colored skin, flecked silver where gold had been.

She felt nothing.

The witches, who had started chanting again, trying to regain control over events, faltered. Tanaquill's head turned, listening.

Gavin was ruddy and slick with sweat, his breathing deep and even. The witches hurriedly switched to a different incantation as he stood up easily, as if coming out of a warm bath. The incense binding him dispersed into the surrounding air.

"You cannot have it! You never wanted it!" Melanie cried at him.

"I never wanted to be what I am. But now I do. Come back to me." At his command and as Melanie blinked in disbelief, a fleet shadow shot from her and leapt back into Gavin's chest as if pulled by an irresistible current.

The prince glanced over at Tanaquill, looking relaxed. "I didn't think you'd do that." His smile, however, was bitter, and he looked away to contain it, then glared back. "If my parents could see you now—" He paused. "When you did that, every fairy could have changed with you. You're so irresponsible."

Suddenly, his eyes glowed white for an instant. His jaw flexed, like a snake settling down after a meal that was, to its surprise, still alive in its throat. "Look at the effect I've had on you," he continued smugly.

Silent, her eyes bright and sharp, Tanaquill stared at him. His eyes lost their amusement. "The lantern should hold you," he said to himself.

She flew to the front of the lantern and it rocked, her dragonfly wings sharp and white like tiny blades. She pushed her hand to the glass and it shattered at the coldness of her touch as it never would have to her warmth. A shower of tiny icicles melted in the air. The air was sweet and warm on the outside. She stepped a foot out and reached the floor human sized. The witches' spell was broken. "You should have used a riddle," she said. "My family honors no other binding."

Rohmier stood his ground. "I had no idea how lovely you would look when you killed your heart." He seemed honest, his expression open, strangely youthful and handsome. "Perhaps we should marry after all."

She felt intrigued now by the cruel little boy he had been. She took a step toward him and his jawline tightened, showing his nerve, but he didn't step back.

It was then she noticed that a tiny fleck in one of Rohmier's eyes had turned permanently white. He hadn't even noticed, hadn't even felt it. Before she changed, she had satisfied herself that the Fay were strong enough to resist what she was about to do. Now she merely noted it. She came closer. "I used to dream that your mother and father would banish you. Then we would not have to be married."

He put his hand along her neck, his gaze hard and steady, yet a muscle in his face flinched at how cold she was. Still, he rubbed his thumb along her neck, his eyes hard and intrigued, roaming. "What will you dream of now?"

She gently took his hand away from her neck and squeezed it.

He fell to his knees, whispering a quick pixie swear.

She gazed down. "Suffering, perhaps," she said, her eyes curious. She let him go, her attention suddenly going elsewhere.

He yanked his hand away and blew on his fingers. He saw her approaching the mirror and reached for her, grabbing her arm but his hand merely slipping over her smooth, glittering skin. "Goodbye," she said, and stepped gracefully through the looking glass.

"Damn it all," the prince said, his fingers throbbing, slowly returning to life, and carefully climbed in after her.

## CHAPTER 29

Something woke him. Gavin tilted his head and looked at the girl who had appeared in front of him, his curiosity growing as his mind cleared. He was still alive. *Why?* he thought, staring at the girl. The other figures in the room were bulky shadows, vague, noises and smells a mixed blur. But the girl was clear and facing him, and he focused harder.

A young fairy, he realized; she looked like a human of about seven, if not for the pointy ears peeking from her long hair and the dragonfly wings that grew from her back. She was dressed in a green robe that looked as though its very substance was the same as that of leaves. She was so vivid, but no one else saw her.

He smiled to himself, squinting, because what she held in her hands was too bright and hurt his eyes when he tried to look directly at it.

He smelled grass and flowers before he saw them, heard the wind stirring the trees before he reached out and felt the bark under his hand. He saw within the glow a shining lake, sparkling, on a hot summer morning—a memory, he realized, somehow coming from what the girl held.

The buzzing of a dragonfly wandering out over the water's reedy surface caught his attention and when he sought to watch its path the girl was there before him in the dimming sunlight. She stood on the water, and beneath her feet, in a puzzle pattern of stones at the bottom of the lake, was a kingdom. He did not see it as much as sense her awareness of it hidden and ancient, *alive* where humans could not find it. It was teeming with an inconceivable amount of activity, a whole world in this quiet place.

He saw something in her face; her bright eyes, how she smiled to herself. For the first time escaped! Excited, she wondered furtively when they would notice she was gone and come looking for her. She had escaped the palace, and for the first time in her life she was alone, away from guards and obligations and fawning attentions, everyone she knew distant and tiny beneath the water.

The girl knelt on the water's surface, gazing down at her tiny kingdom. Her hand, reaching, disturbed the water and for a moment she could no longer see her home. She made a small cry of alarm—realizing for the first time that everything she knew was kept there. And suddenly she was afraid that something would happen and she would lose it. *Home*, a place she protected. Why did he feel himself there? he wondered, as the sunlight dimmed. The girl was standing inside the witches' dungeon with him and he could see now that she held a curving icy form in her hands as if it were a bouquet of spring flowers. "The princess has lost her heart and cannot find it. I have found it for her, but I don't know where she is anymore. Will you take her heart?" She held it out to him, the colors swirling in her eyes, her dragonfly wings at rest on her back. "It needs safekeeping and it belongs to you as well."

*Her heart belongs to me?* Only because of the healing spell. He hesitated, until he realized, with surprise, that he knew how to care for it. "Yes, I accept it." He took it from her and grew alarmed at how cold it was. Something had gone very wrong.

"Thank you," the girl said, and when she ran forward to hug him the heart between them was pushed into his chest. He hugged her back and something broke over him. Her heart held the sound of her voice, her scent. It was comforting, a familiar presence that steadied his own heartbeat. The witches' magic would no longer affect him. Together, they were twice as strong. He could move, his arms were limber and warm, his kneeling legs steady as if he'd just crouched for a moment. He felt his heart protecting hers, and because it protected hers it grew strong. And two hearts beat in him. He closed his eyes. *Thank you*, he thought.

The spells were falling down around him, the incense dispersing into mere smoke. Terror

caught his chest when he saw the girl begin to change. “*Find me,*” she whispered as her skin frosted over and her hair turned white. He was terrified that he might lose her, too terrified not to act.

He stood, calm and steady. For the first time in so long he felt clear-headed. And however he made it up to those who had gone before him, this he understood: *Mother, the last thing you would have wanted was for me to die of my regret.*

*Tanaquill.* He needed to talk to her again, to hear her voice. He needed to touch her and tell her that he loved her. Whatever the consequences.

It took only a moment to deal with the female shapeshifter. He called to what was his and it came to him. As the fleet shadow leapt from her, it shifted in the air, a small living thing composed of many animals, racing toward him with joy and longing; their pact had not been broken. Grateful, he welcomed it inside him, felt himself awaken, his ears grow keener, his sight sharper, his thoughts familiar again.

The witches were obscured around him, veiled by a spell while they tried to catch him again. They flitted past him like shadows, careful not to get too close—

He chose carefully, but easy and quick, snatching Evelina like a fish from a stream and felt her heart beat fast in her neck under his fingers. He would bid the house make him a stairway to Tanaquill, but he needed Evelina to unlock whatever magics they held her in.

“Unhand me!” Evelina said, sounding offended, if breathless. “I am the wife of the Earl of Mercaston. I hold Lord Fairbain personally responsible for this!”

She had been a great cause of his troubles tonight, his and Tanaquill’s, and had long been a problem for the Lockwoods. And now he had the root of the problem in his hands, tugged out like a weed from a garden.

Evelina squirmed. “Mind yourself,” he said, quietly but sternly, and she grew deathly still.

## CHAPTER 30

Tanaquill stepped through the looking glass. Across the room, through the bitter smelling incense that drifted like a greasy dust in the damp air, Gavin looked over at her.

Their eyes met.

Gavin stared, absently gripping Evelina and his mouth fell gently open. “*Tanaquill,*” he said softly. His grip on Evelina loosened, and as if noticing her again, he finally let her go.

Tanaquill crossed the room with a wholly unnatural speed. She was bright and cold, making the room seem pitch black around her, as if Gavin was staring directly into a white flame without warmth. Hands at her sides, fingers lightly tensed, a little spread.

Gavin reached out slowly, so as not to threaten her, and touched her cheek. He nearly flinched at how cold she had become, smooth and hard like stone, her expression more devoid of feeling than he could have imagined in a living being. “Tanaquill, I’m so glad you’re safe—” he said warmly.

Around Gavin, the witches’ last desperate incantation fell away, lone voices trailing off as they saw Tanaquill and in their surprise popped back into view, some still lifting the hem of their robes so as to move about more easily, ankles brazenly exposed.

*What has she done to save me?* Gavin thought. Suddenly frightened, he listened for her heart inside of him, beating beside his. It felt so much like the young girl—Tanaquill would stay. But in another way she was gone.

The witches, in their dark cloaks, scattered in the room like birds, surprised faces, alarmed ones, downright unhappy ones, some still hidden under hoods, others with their hoods down as if hot, hair immodestly escaping down their backs, some young, some old, a few rashly curious, but everyone exhausted from the long night’s work.

Tanaquill reached up, mimicking how Gavin stroked her hair, wondering if it made him feel at all as strange as it did her. “They cannot harm us,” she said. *They do not have the right to kill you*, she thought to herself, *Only I*. She calmly entered his mind, something she now did with as much ease as any shapeshifter. *I hear two hearts beating inside you*, she thought. *Is one of them mine?*

Her thoughts in his mind were intimate, and sudden hope forced itself upon him.

“I’m keeping it for you, they’ll never get it.” *Why did you have to let it go?...* he thought, forcing the tone to be calm, but the anxiety slipped through. *Let me give you back who you are*, he thought into her mind.

*Why?* she asked as if she didn’t understand.

“Did they want you to do this? Tell me what you’ve done.”

“Saved you,” she replied, feeling strange as he kept touching her, her hair, her shoulder his hands starting to shake with cold. She felt confused. “Gavin,” she said quietly, in a voice he would have recognized as hers, only perfectly hollowed out, an echo of the being he had discovered he loved, “they are escaping.”

Slowly, as if awakening, he drew her at arms length, his green eyes sharp and questioning. She looked at him, an unreal thing with unflinching eyes, mild curiosity in her expression. Gavin didn’t care who was escaping. “What’s happened to you?”

Her eyes held his. "I broke free," she said simply. "They have no hold over me."

He stared at her.

The air had grown steadily colder around her. Gavin sensed the earth pressed under the stone floor they stood on, the walls that led deeper into the house. *It feels like a tomb*, he thought involuntarily.

"The house, can you still speak to it?" she asked.

After a moment he found himself nodding, "Yes."

"Tell the house to bring them back to us. Then seal them in with us."

Gavin hesitated.

But *she* wanted them. And she was still Tanaquill.

"They will help me," she said coldly, persuading, her hands tight claws at her sides. "I need the witches to change back."

Gavin looked around, for the first time since Tanaquill's arrival noticing what was happening. There were only a few of the witches left, three or four, the others having scattered. Loud whispering drew his eyes to a soft glow across the room, a winged form. It was clear, though Gavin had never seen him before, exactly who it was: the prince. He stared hard.

Evelina and the prince were arguing in low voices, when the prince suddenly looked up to see Gavin watching him. Their eyes met, and Gavin felt the burn of rage, a sensation as if his hands were virtually on him. In one motion, the prince visibly reacted, his mouth twisting down as he grabbed Evelina's hand and, though she turned back to protest, pulled her through the wall after him.

Gavin closed his eyes and called everyone back.

## CHAPTER 31

Tanaquill's gaze settled over Gavin. He was doing as she said. Good. It wouldn't be long now.

Gavin spoke gently but sternly, commanding the house to bring them all back. The house responded eagerly and he heard the distant cries of dismay erupting, the witches slipping through wall after wall which turned them aside, again and again, faster and faster until one by one, like a door had slammed behind them, they were shoved back into the room.

Evelina and the prince were pressed back through the wall last, still holding hands, the



prince with a resigned, frustrated expression.

Gavin's skin hurt from the cold. He could sense Tanaquill was growing colder, her skin changing, as if it were becoming stone.

An incantation fell from her lips.

It felt wrong.

"No..." Gavin said softly. Around them the room was alive again with human bodies, crying quietly, murmuring, praying, silent and trying to be unseen. "The witches can't help you, can they?" he said, feeling sickened inside. "Nor can the prince. That's not why you had me bring them back."

She shook her head, *No*.

"*Then tell me how to save you,*" he said, a welling sense of desperation making it hard to think as she continued the incantation she'd begun.

## CHAPTER 32

"What is she doing?" Evelina exclaimed. She yanked her arm but the prince held firm. "Whatever it is—stop her!"

The prince tugged her gently back to him. "*Evelina,*" he said low, his voice cautious.

She yanked her arm again. "FOOLS!—" She spoke hurriedly, her eyes wild as she turned on her coven and the prince. "YOU let her go!" She turned to Gavin, shouting from half way across the room, "and YOU who would aid her in doing whatever she pleases!" She gestured to Tanaquill. Tanaquill didn't seem to notice as she spoke quietly to herself, hands at her sides. She finished and closed her fists. Gavin noticed the intent look she had as she stared at nothing in particular and felt his unease grow. He drew his attention back to Evelina.

Evelina was shouting. "You invade the sanctity of my chambers! That amulet was a gift to me! Destroyed! How *dare* you—" She stopped, looking up as the house trembled.

The prince looked up, his mouth falling gently open. "Stay near," he said, grabbing Evelina's hand and drawing her decidedly away from Gavin.

Gavin stared at Tanaquill. "What have you..." he said softly, listening to the rumbling, feeling it underfoot, the thunder of feet—a stampede streaming down the stairwells. Strange high pitched cries and grunts accompanied the thunderous din and they grew louder, more distinct as whatever it was drew closer, until it was nearly on top of them. A huge shadow darkened the

ceiling and Gavin realized just before he saw them what Tanaquill had done. *To lead such an army.* The sensation awoken in him—he'd never felt its like before.

His pulse raced, pounded in his temples, his claws slid out to greet them, his very being awakening as the ceiling seemed to fall open against the weight of a thousand pressing bodies. It tumbled open like a silk curtain against a flood of angry fur, claws and fangs. The humans began screaming. Across the room, at the thunderous noise the female shapeshifter's dulled eyes lit and she stood hastily, her back against the wall as the flood of demons swarmed past her along the floor and darted in the air.

The prince grabbed Evelina around the waist and took to the air. His stare intense, he bobbed, hovering, his wings buzzing, and looked hungrily toward the opening the demons had made, but it clearly was a way *in*, not out. The other witches clung to any niche or nook they could, shrinking from the sniffing noses, slavering jaws and raking claws.

Gavin turned to Tanaquill as the flood reached them, the scent quickly recalling the trophy-lined walls upstairs, the creatures suspended along the corridors. The cruel half-life he'd felt beating in them when he'd touched the coarse fur had been set free. Their brutal existences as trophies—she had ended it. *But how?* She hadn't known the way before.

The memory of Eris came into Gavin's mind, walking ahead of him in the corridor outside of the shapeshifter's room.

*I walked through death to become what you see before you,* Tanaquill said into his mind, anticipating his question. *After that, anything is easy...to walk with them, lead them out from where the witches had hidden them, given them to Eris...To the oldest gods, who turn their faces. I can see through Night, through stone and silence that has forever been...*

Gavin felt a sense of wonder amid his distress. In her words he recognized Eris, standing beside her, together with her in a lonely, wild place.

Tanaquill's attention was drawn back to the creatures around her. How peaceful she appeared as the demons surged around her, at home amid chaos.

*Beautiful.* The thought caught Gavin off guard. But she *was* beautiful even like this. He saw in her what he'd always needed in a mate, why he'd searched for so long. He'd wanted another shapeshifter; but the truth of it had been simpler.

*Power.* That was what he'd needed all along. And she was even better, he thought quickly, because *she* was even stronger than him. Stronger than anyone he could imagine. The thought satisfied him in a way he couldn't hold back or hide from himself. He'd always longed to find that in the woman he loved.

*We will be together,* Gavin vowed. Everything in him demanded it. *As she was or as she is.*

Tanaquill looked down quietly and watched as the demons crowded around her bare feet, climbing over one another, a long, writhing train on a black, fur topped gown. She lifted her

arms as they stormed around her, her eyes bright as moonlit snow.

She bent down closer as the spiky demons scampered and tumbled about her. “You must be hungry,” she said. “Would you like to eat the humans?”

Humans screamed from every corner of the room. The demons seemed to sing, swirling up her body like a funnel in almost mournful delight, grateful after having been starved, then turned in every direction to seek the humans.

### CHAPTER 33

*Come to me*, Gavin said, and the dark sea began turning obediently.

The screams of the witches fell off in choked surprise. Gavin closed his eyes, feeling himself ride the demons. It was oddly selfish—because he realized now it was what he’d wanted to do the moment he’d felt them. What he knew he could do but had stopped himself. He’d felt a glimmer of it with the spiders tonight, sensing them *as many* before he had seen one. He’d glimpsed what was possible: not just to control one animal, but thousands. *As many as I could want*.

Tanaquill’s expression darkened and she looked calmly over at Gavin, her expression hard. Gavin was pulling their hearts away from her. Hearts that in a small way filled the gap left from her own.

Her eyes ice, her face a cool mask, *Why stop me?* she asked calmly into his mind. Aloud her voice was merely polite. “My intentions are prudent and in accord with justice.”

The creatures clustered around Gavin, circling slowly, with less of the frenzy she had instilled in them, guarding, while the ones who flew on bat like wings landed on the backs of others and folded their wings in to rest.

She watched how they writhed around him, docile, obedient, while he ignored them.

*I cannot compel them as you do*, she thought into his mind. *Just as his kind always did*, she thought only to herself.

He was suddenly stronger, armed as he was. Tanaquill inhaled deeply and surveyed the room, queerly conscious of being watched by everyone, for many different reasons, with many different emotions, the overriding one being fear.

The humans had begun getting up, hesitantly, looking to Gavin to control the demons and protect them from her. As if he could save them. The witches looked to her as bleached as bone,

with just a purple smudge here and there where exertion and emotion tinted their flesh. Empty, she never would be empty enough.

In the shadows she caught sight of the prince as he landed, letting go of Evelina, watching her with a look that said, *Why the hell did you have to give him an army?* She noted him with a mixture of curiosity and nothing in particular. With her vision drowned by a bleaching storm, he looked like a big white moth.

A witch came forward. She was young, pretty, with a determined expression. She looked at Gavin, not at her, her manner tense but unbowed. “We wish to leave now, if we might,” she said to Gavin.

Gavin sensed the tension rise in the room. He smoothed his hand down Tanaquill’s arm, steady and firm like two people who had known one another for years, though her skin was cold and hard. His voice was unhurried. “It’s time for us to leave, Tanaquill.”

The humans in the room seemed to hold their breath. A human with a desperate air rushed forward and, keeping her distance, knelt and placed Tanaquill’s music box, what would have been her wedding present, on the floor, clearly hoping she would take the offering and leave, but Tanaquill took no notice.

Tanaquill studied Gavin for a moment, gazing steadily into his eyes, her own an alien white. “I want to see the sky.”

At her words, a muffled excitement erupted in the shadows around the room.

Tanaquill ignored it. Something in her eyes told Gavin that she wanted to be alone with him.

*The sky*, Gavin thought, letting her hear him in her mind, to feel what it was like to control the house and gently, immediately, the house trembled in response; the walls cracked, its archways opened, the cool night air swept in and the wind picked up. Freed, the humans cried out in delight and began running.

With a loud cracking noise high above them the house split open like a hive, revealing floors of rooms bending aside to reveal a huge blue-black pre-dawn sky looming above them.

*Give the demons back to me*, she said into his mind. *I am not going to use them against the humans*. Gavin glanced over to where the demons waited patiently along the wall, waiting for him despite the open air. Then Tanaquill surprised him by sliding her hand into his. Gavin’s eyes held hers. He grasped Tanaquill’s hand firmly, though her fingers chilled his palm. The demons streamed toward them. “You shall come with us. Would you like that?” she said, and they bayed contentedly.

Gavin pulled Tanaquill closer. “Where shall we go?”

“I will show you,” she said, and holding his hand she leapt into the sky, pulling him away with her.

## CHAPTER 34

Rising into the clouds above what had been Eris' house, Tanaquill's hand tightly grasping his, Gavin took deep, grateful breaths of the open sky, the vast sense of space filling him. The sweet smell of the land below mixed with an awakening dawn yet dark, but so bright to his eyes that it was like a blazing torch.

In human form, unable to fly on his own, it felt incredible as Tanaquill propelled him forward, fast, straight and hard. Filled with the strange sensation that he might fall out of the sky, he pulled his hand out of hers and she turned to see, stopping in midair, lightly startled, but waiting, curious. For a brief moment Gavin was falling and he nearly laughed, breathless, before shifting into a great raven, a shard of blackness against the coming day soaring up to her, and the cries of the demons erupted in excitement to have him flying in their midst.

Gavin circled her and Tanaquill turned in midair to follow his flight, her wings beating hard and steady against her back as she held herself aloft, her hair floating around her, her eyes keenly curious. Gavin saw in her expression, in the rise along the corners of her mouth that sharpened in her eyes, something that he would almost have called a smile if he hadn't known better. *The world has changed for you*, she said into his mind, knowingly, and he had a feeling that he couldn't understand the whole of what she meant. She turned in place, her ethereal stare following him through the mass of creatures who parted for him as he flew, their cries and growls deafening yet isolated as a mountain peak here, high above the earth. The demons flew more in Tanaquill's fashion, with an otherworldly disregard for gravity, a sheer buoyancy of being, while his flight was the work of wind and feathers. As Gavin's black wings arched, graceful and steady, the demons smoothed their flight to mimic him in a clumsy, almost hopeful imitation. *Take me where you will*, he spoke into her mind.

Her eyes lit with a disquieting light, their whiteness stark. "Yes," she said eagerly, aloud. "Come, hurry now," she whispered quickly. *I will steal my heart back and destroy it*, she thought brazenly into his mind.

*I know you will try*, he returned. She pushed down with her arms like a swimmer coming up from the bottom, her wings beat heavy, sharp, and she bounded higher into the sky. He flew with her, his wings slicing the air.

As they flew, Gavin found that the world he had known for hundreds of years had changed

in ways he could not have imagined before tonight. The fields which, in the carriage, he had thought lit by fireflies, he saw now were lit by mysterious forms. He nearly veered in the sky, catching his breath when a huge, bright hand came down and through him. The demons around him squeaked and shivered with surprise and satisfaction as the beautiful hand passed through all of them, even Tanaquill, rustling Gavin's feathers like the kindest breeze he'd ever known, leaving him giddy, with an unrecognized hope stuck in his throat, as her hand glided downward like the sail of a great ship upon the green ocean. He watched as her palm caressed the grass, bending it as the 'fireflies' hopped and flew around her, doing their work.

Gavin looked up along the huge, graceful sweep of arm, along a shoulder, a neck, and saw a vast, lovely face that was part of the sky, part of the air and the dawn and a vision unlike any he could have imagined. But he *had* seen it. It was every dawn he'd ever seen, only this time, for the first time, he understood what he saw. *She is a god, the dawn*, he realized and to his surprise her eyes met his and the warmth of her attention bloomed in him as her mouth lifted in a smile. *Welcome home*, she said to him, the words flooding his mind, leaving him breathless.

The wind whipped through his feathers. He looked at Tanaquill as she flew ahead, taking no special note of what he saw. *Show me the way to give her back her heart. Give the gods my plea.*

The wings of the mighty Dawn herself spread across the sky. *Which god?* she asked, in the tone of one of the humans who had taught him long ago, showing a boy how to tie a rope, "Which knot?" She lifted her hand from the ground and like a powerful wave swept it over him and through him, forcing him along in a strong current, watching him as she pushed him on his way. *It will come to you...*

Gavin shifted, jumping onto the back of a demon to so that he could face her as he flew forward. But she had vanished from the sky and he saw a young woman walking along the road by the field, using a thin, budding tree branch as a walking stick. *Call me Eos*, she said in his mind as she walked off, far below him, into the world.

And in that world, the hidden seemed to burst forth before his eyes. Below him was an ordinary day. Thousands of fairies, what had looked to him like fireflies, went about their work. It was wondrous and strange and beautiful and filled him with a sense of something he'd never felt before tonight, a sense of truly knowing. *This is what the world is*, and he was part of it. This belonged to him, he thought, elated—he should have seen it before. He should have known.

But why did he see it now?

He was sure of his mount as he guided it, matching Tanaquill's speed until they stood face to face in midair, while yet flying incredibly fast.

His eyes were sharp and inhuman, handsome as they studied her, his hair blown forward onto his brow by the whipping wind, his lean, naked form muscular and strong atop his demon

mount. “I see a difference in the world. Why?”

“You see the truth. For the first time in your long life.”

“Why was it hidden from me before?”

“It was hidden from all your kind.” She beat her wings hard, flying fast and straight.

“But why? I don’t understand. Why is it that before tonight, I had never seen a single god or goddess?”

“You saw Thor’s statue,” she said, frustrating his question. “You have seen the gods.” Then, as if with a peculiar reluctance, “You see as you did not before because I remade you. Welcome home.” She grabbed him brusquely and they soared down together, spinning, falling, until they landed on their feet, with a solidity that shook the ground.

## CHAPTER 35

Tanaquill and Gavin stood together by the shore of a lake. The demons crowded around their legs and splashed the water at its edge. Gavin remembered his vision of the fairy girl with her castle under the lake, remembered as well the lurch of panic he’d felt when she’d faded away. It was strange to look at Tanaquill, knowing the girl was her. “This is not where you live.”

“No.” She looked into the lake’s stillness.

For as far as Gavin could see, grass and trees, familiar plants, grew around most of the wide lake, but the vegetation was sparse where they stood.

She spoke up. “I have heard stories of caverns where one might hide for thousands of human centuries. I have imagined what it would be like to be in such a place. To be alone.” She paused. “It is what I looked for as we flew. And now I’ve found one.”

Gavin looked across the lake’s calm surface, across which birds hunted insects. The wind rustled the distant trees while water lay still against the bank. The soft, drifting breeze against his bare skin was pleasing after the strong wind that had whipped them in flight. It felt good to be alone with her, on the land, it felt right.

In a rocky outcropping where the lake bottom dropped off and quickly became deep, within the nooks of stone there, under the water, was a pattern of tiny crevices. Gavin could see them all the better, even under the grey-black water, for how they faintly glowed, drawing curious fish. “It’s too small,” he said, puzzled, as he took a step into the water, getting his feet wet, pressing his toes into brown mud and smooth black stone. Surprisingly near the shore a large fish swirled

the water. It was a steep drop only a few steps in.

Tanaquill's feet met the water and the fish darted off. "It will be my hideaway." She gripped his hand. "Come," she said and they plunged into the icy water. It was a long time since he had taken to the water without assuming the form of some creature to whom the water was home. Tanaquill kissed him, the water swirling cold and heavy around them, and willed him to be with her, and they sank deeper as the demons eagerly dove in and paddled around them.



Gavin woke on what felt like a stone bed. She was bending over him, her legs tucked under her as she sat on the slab with him. Her eyes lingered down the curve of his naked shoulder, to the breath in his chest.

He wasn't frightened. She could see that. Instead of struggling, his hand came around her neck, gently but firmly, and he pulled her down to him, closer. He lifted his head to meet her mouth. The ice of her tongue slid into his parted lips and he inhaled sharply at the cold, mingling her cold breath with his. Her breath sought her heart.

Gavin smiled under her mouth. *You'll never get it that way*, he said into her mind, teasing her, his deep voice patient with her.

Tanaquill drew away a fraction. He watched her face. Something deadly slid into her eyes as they brushed across his. Then he realized that it was just desire. Desire without love, calling to him, and he responded to it, letting himself pretend that she could feel.

His hand lingered on her neck, his thumb smoothed her stony jaw. They were in a cavern of smooth wet stone. "Do you know what those fairy spiders are telling me?" he said. "They are whispering that they wish for a truce with your people. I can hear them even now—they want me to ask you." His thumb rubbed under her ear. "They make a different connection with me than I've ever felt before. They speak to me—I feel it still." As he stared at her, his golden eyes darkened into green. When his vision shifted the walls fell away and he saw himself floating head down in the lake, maybe dead, and she was gone. The demons were there, too, in a furry, disgruntled pile at the lake's bottom, along with the two boxes they'd carried in their claws. The demons were from another realm, neither the human realm, nor this, he realized as he watched them waiting. He was with Tanaquill, in her cavern, in an inhuman realm she could take away and *really* allow him to die.

He blinked, snuffing out the phantom vision in his eyes, turning his gaze back to her.

"Yes, it is true," she said absently, her gaze lingering on his chest. "But you remain alive." She trailed her fingers across his ribs as if wondering how he breathed. Her eyes grew distant as she watched her hand move, the white seeming to grow less opaque. "There are some experiences," she said, "not worth living past."

"Don't worry," he returned, watching her. "You'll come to see another way. I'll show



you.” He paused. “I promise.”

She said nothing for a moment. Her fingers had settled over his chest, beside his heart. He took her hand in his, pushing his fingers between hers. Looking into her eyes, it was undeniable to him how much he loved her even now, like this.

She looked up at him then, into his eyes. He could imagine her expression looking like hope, but her face was like a mirror.

He shifted his eyes from gold to green and watched the empty bottom of the lake, and himself a drowned man, floating, then shifted his eyes and came calmly back, like exercising a muscle. He could never drown—unless some rapture of the deep overcame him and he let himself. Instead, he spoke of the future. “If it is worth having, I will take my place among shapeshifters. But I’m no longer sure what it’s worth.” Not when he had her. “Even if it’s rightfully mine.” He ran his hand along her waist, up the rise of her breast. She felt like stone, but supple, like nothing he’d felt before. “Tanaquill, tell me.” His eyes grew sharp, surprising her for how they glowed languidly as they studied her. “Why could I not see the fairy realm until now? Why did I have no notion there were other inhumans? I sensed you that night at the ball only because you were partially in human guise.” Her gaze had drifted again to her heart hidden inside him, but his voice gently compelled her to pay attention. Trusting, he let go of her hand and touched her hair, spread its hard but pliant white threads over her bare shoulder, down her breast. “Am I right?”

“Yes, you are,” she said, letting him.

He pushed her hair behind her ear as he thought, speaking almost to himself. “But tonight, I saw more in the world than I had ever known. I saw fairies tonight, when I have never in my life before you.”

“Yes, you see them. And in time it would grow easier for you. You would be able to walk though our gates, and meet us as equals.”

“But why now?” Gavin persisted.

“You have lain with a fairy princess in whom a piece of every fairy tribe resides and you took her heart. My blood, the royal blood, runs through every fairy, and when I healed you I gave you entry back into the inhuman world, I gave you entry into my kingdom as well as kingdoms of which I am scarcely aware.” She paused. “I have opened the ancient realms for you, Gavin, and for your kind, which had been closed off to shapeshifters by the gods themselves.” She stopped. It didn’t matter to her now.

He studied her remote expression, startled. Would she even want his thanks? Suddenly he began to realize how weighty a decision she’d had to make when she chose to save his life. Especially if... “Why had it been taken away?”

“You know nothing of who you are, Shapeshifter. You are human and yet never born of

human. You are strength and yet the gods have made you weak.”

Gavin’s whole body grew taut at her words. He remembered the violence of the hunting song, the female shapeshifter’s desperation. Until then he’d thought the shapeshifters were peaceful, and that they they’d lost to the humans because, like his parents, they’d been unwilling to fight back. He could not have imagined his kind being any other way. But it was obvious that Tanaquill had always known about the history of the shapeshifters, and that she hadn’t told him for a reason. “Tell me,” he said, his voice steady. She had been too kind to tell him before. But that Tanaquill was gone now.

She loomed over him, white as a marble statue. “It is written in the Book of Storms that the shapeshifters came from the steeds of the gods, who fell to earth and walked as men, populating the world in its earliest time. But others say your kind was born of the giants to wage war upon the gods, but the giants set you loose upon the earth while they waited.

“I do not know the truth of the matter. Even to us the stories are as myth. I only know that you came to us as a scourge, like a living storm across the sea, battering the land, a million strong, an invading army, the humans scattered or bent beneath your yoke. Your kind were like the winter roaming the earth and causing the land to go barren beneath you.” She made a long, icy white tiger tail for herself and curled the end around one of his legs. “The gods banished the shapeshifters from the inhuman realms, while aiding humans against them. Even human books speak of Thetis, against whom the gods conspired and wed her to a human, so that her children would henceforth live in the human realm—and much strife came into the world for a time.” She paused. “What happened to the shapeshifters afterward is not written. But it was not long after that humans rose to prominence in the world.” As if having taken an interest in her story, white fur and grey scales streaked over her face and body. Her eyes blazed white and her wings beat a steady rhythm. “Humans are favored by the gods of every land. The privilege of walking between realms was taken from the shapeshifters, for your destruction of those whom the gods had chosen. You are monsters that should not have come to be. That is what every fairy believes.”

Anger caught in his throat, followed by sadness and hurt. He understood why Tanaquill had not told him these things until she had lost her heart. The Tanaquill he’d known wouldn’t have wanted him to know these things. She had tried to convince him of the kindness of his parents. How, despite what even she herself might have felt about shapeshifters, that his parents had shown the goodness in them by their actions toward humans. *This is what she must have thought of him when she’d first met him.* She had protected him. He sat up on the slab of stone, his mood serious, thoughtful.

She leaned against him a little as she sat beside him, chilling him. “You blame the humans for how they treat you,” she said. “But shapeshifters almost destroyed them. The humans forget.

They forget everything. That is how they go on, I suppose.” Her stare grew distant. “Because of the shapeshifters, the fairies formed an alliance with humans that most men and women have forgotten. But we have not. The kings and queens of England have not, and the emperors of Cathay. As a child I was given an oracle that I would be responsible for bringing the man who is not man, to storm the gates of Fairy. And that is you. You and I have given back to the shapeshifters what the gods took from them. I gave the shapeshifters back their birthright, fulfilled an unhappy prophecy that was mine. The man who is not man will storm the gates of fairy kingdom and I would want it so, it said. And I did want it so, for I did not want you to die.”

Gavin said nothing, sitting beside her, thoughtful. That was what she had meant when, as they had danced, she’d said she’d waited for him. “And these books, are they still read?”

“They are very popular among fairies,” she said. “For the young they are the stuff of nightmares. For the old and wise they are our history, though lack of acquaintance with your kind over time has led some to question their true meaning, and if the shapeshifter might have been, not an actual living being, but a lesson we should take about ourselves, too alien to understand.” She paused. “When we first spoke of it in the carriage, I remember thinking that you would never want to know. But I don’t care about you anymore.”

He nodded to himself. He’d brought her too much pain to begrudge her her peace. But she would have to accept her heart again. He would see her whole or he would die. “But what if you did let it come back, your heart?”

“There is no place for it. It would fall and fall and fall.”

“You feel uneasy, I know it. That is your heart calling you.”

“When my heart was with me I had no choice but to follow it. I do not want it back. I do not want to be its servant. I shall do as I wish now.”

“Without your heart, I can’t imagine how you’ll know what you wish. Perhaps that is why you want me with you still.”

“I want you with me so I may destroy you.” She paused.

When she stopped talking she looked like a marble statue, as though if she was quiet for too long, she might never speak again.

Gavin spoke up. “What was the last thing you felt before your heart was gone?”

“Relief that I no longer loved you,” she answered immediately.

“Is that all the White Fairy is? When we spoke about it in the carriage, you claimed to know very little. But do you know more now?”

“Yes. I do,” she said. “But what I know will not help you return my heart to me, if that is why you ask. The White Fairy is emptiness itself. That is why my heart would fall and fall and fall and never find ground.” She paused, staring, her body completely still, and his anxiety began to rise, just as she spoke again. “Gavin,” she said, “I do not wish to have my heart belong to

another, for you to know it and act on its behalf. I want to take it from you and send it into the abyss. Give it to the White Fairy and let it fall forever.” She paused as if trying to explain something complicated. “It seems I cannot take my heart from you, you must give it to me.” She looked at him. “Will you offer it to me now?”

“No. Perhaps later.” Unable to stop himself, Gavin cupped her cheek in his hand, pulling her forward. Tanaquill closed her eyes as he kissed her gently on the mouth, surprising her for the ardent, soft brush of his lips. She made no move to flee from his arms.

He could sense the emptiness in her like a strange magic. Felt the curve of her hip against his, the pressure of her bosom. And he knew she couldn’t help herself. Just as he could not. Eyes closed, he rested his forehead against hers. “Tanaquill I...I’m so—” *in love with you*, he whispered into her mind.

He felt her entire body react to his words, a quiver under his touch. “You don’t love me. If you loved me you would have given me back my heart.” Her slender arms wound around him. They felt not cold, but cool against the warmth that rose in him. Her flesh was dry and smooth, living, yet not in a way he could have thought possible. Her eyes burned brightly white. “Give me back my heart,” she said firmly. “Why would you wish me to be as I was before? I am stronger now.”

*Not stronger than her*, Gavin thought to himself. But he did love this one too. He couldn’t help it. “Are you afraid?”

“I don’t feel fear,” Tanaquill said. She clasped her arms around him and he felt a chill spread along his skin. He shivered, kissing deeper, drawing her out, willing her to search deep inside him and be warmed by him. “Gavin...” she whispered, and for an instant it sounded like the old Tanaquill, surprised, coming up from some deep place and then gone.

“Tanaquill, do you trust me?” He kissed her ear. Its pointy tip.

“I trust you,” she said immediately. She paused. “You loved what I was, and you love what I have become.”

“Yes,” he admitted. He wished that how he felt about her could be enough to draw her heart back into her but he knew it wouldn’t be.

“Then do not fight me.” She grabbed his head between her hands and kissed deeper. She couldn’t help trying to reach for her heart even though she knew it was useless. He felt her probe and, without thinking to, he protected her heart. He sensed who within him guarded it—an army of animal spirits, his essence as a shapeshifter. Something in him lifted hopefully, and Gavin felt her heart beat harder inside him.

*Perhaps the White Fairy*, if indeed there had been other times, *always destroyed her heart*. A helpless human, another fairy—they would not be able to resist her. But this time she had given her heart to a shapeshifter.

“I will take all of you,” she said between kissing him ardently. There was urgency to her voice, but no feeling. “I will take it back.” She climbed onto his lap, her body firm and cold against him. Gavin slid his hands down to her thighs.

*Let her take and take and take.* He felt her tug at him with her need, growing eager to delve inside him. He drew her face away, cupped it between his hands. Her eyes were lit with desire. He wanted to say goodbye to her as she was now.

“Do you agree?” she said sternly.

“I will make sure you are happy. I will be good to you,” he said, *because when you are my Tanaquill I will never neglect you again, as I did when I forced you to become this.* He finally understood and felt something break over him, warm and satisfying. Gavin kissed her cheek, the lid of her eye, kissing her, saying goodbye to this one that he knew in a way was Tanaquill too, and not wrong or evil. “Let me give you,” he said, kissing her neck, “what I finally understand.” *That I love only you and you will stay with me forever...*

*My heart,* she said into his mind as she snatched his hands away from her face and bent forward to kiss him hungrily.

He grabbed her hand, drew it down and rested it over his heart. “Take it,” he insisted.

Her mouth fell gently open. A blink of hesitation. Then her eyes widened, blazed. Eagerly she covered his mouth with hers, her eyes glowing white with hunger for him. Though his will was firm, Gavin’s body jolted, trembling as he felt something sink in, cold, cold that burned and before he could stop her she was pulling out what was within him.

She lifted her head sharply. “Make them move aside!” she said, suddenly, breathless. Without blood or wound she had sunk a hand into his chest and her skin was lit up, ablaze, as she got the tips of her fingers around her heart.

“They won’t,” he said. The animal spirits that made him a shapeshifter gathered in a final defense against her. He felt them like a quiet army on hooves and claws, ears pricked, eyes alert, ready. “They won’t abandon your heart, even if it’s cast into the void.”

She was looking at him intently. “And you? If I take them, too?” she said, clearly, calmly.

Her glowing hands rested on his chest, but it was as if they lay just beneath the surface, rippling him like the still surface of a pond. He would hold his voice steady. “I think it would be my death.”

She nodded slowly, as if he had confirmed her expectation. “Yes, over time. I would keep you with me until then.”

“Why?”

“To watch it.” She paused. “To say goodbye.”

He grabbed her, pulling her near to whisper as he felt her hands close around her heart within him. “Enough,” he said roughly, kissing her while she blazed with white light. He

trembled as animal spirits charged through him to her. Her body jolted back from his, surprised, but then he felt the animal spirits pouring into her, her skin in flux under his hands, fur and scales and flesh of every description.

At last a tiny, translucent fairy spider, racing, breached the space between them.

*Farewell...* it said in a tiny voice as it turned in the void, poisonous fangs tucked gingerly in.

For a moment Gavin stilled, watching it float away into her in his mind's eye.

She felt it, a harmless spirit.



“It is done,” Eris said to herself, sitting on her throne where she listened to the sorrows of the cosmos. Picking out his, she studied the bauble in her hand and rolled it away from her.

A hand caught it up. It glowed brightly, at home. Freya lifted it to her eyes and smiled to herself.



Tanaquill stopped a moment, all of her wild eagerness gone. “Now I will have my heart,” she said.

Gavin kissed her neck.

She ran her hand through his hair, bringing his face back under her steady gaze. “You have never been my enemy.” Her hands went to the place in him where her heart hid, now unprotected. Gavin grabbed Tanaquill's waist, keeping her steady and preventing her from standing or flying off. His throat closed over the emptiness as she drew her heart out, fear rising in him as he felt it leave, the warmth he'd once taken for granted, that helped him, that made him strong. Without realizing it, hardly feeling it, he'd come to rely on her being there. He didn't want to, but he let it go.

The White Fairy pulled out Tanaquill's heart. It glowed in the air between them, silvery pink, turning slowly in the air above her hands as she cupped it. Gavin stared, his eyes glowing in its subtle light that bathed them both. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life.

“I will eat it,” she whispered, “like a dragon eats a pearl.” Spellbound, she stared into it, then stopped. “I feel...”

She looked suddenly at him, but it was too late.

She gasped and with her intake of breath Gavin pushed her heart into her chest and her heart was pulled eagerly in by the animal spirits who had not really relinquished it, nor had they been claimed by the abyss in her, thanks to one of their kind.

Gavin seized her. “Don't fight it,” he said. She was stiff with the effort to stop what was happening inside her. Gavin brushed her hair back, speaking to himself and perhaps to a part of her that could hear. “You told me that your heart would fall if I gave it back to you. So my

friends have made a web. You cannot command the fairy spiders, only I can. I've learned more about myself this night than I had ever believed I could, about my people, about my past, but what would it matter if I couldn't use what I'd learned to save you?"

The fairy spiders were hard at work as they had promised him. Spanning voids was their way of life. Needing no more shelter and nourishment than the warmth of her heart, needing no more foothold than the very threads on which they launched themselves without fear into the darkness, they would build a web that would hold her heart fast until it grew strong, to glow and warm her with its own strength, in a place of its own making.

The first brave skeins that caught her precious heart snapped and were rewoven, the threads doubled and crossed denser each time. The fairy spiders, diligent, careful to never sting, wove and wove as her heart fell through the cavernous abyss. Weaving around and around her heart bonds to slow its fall and at last to stop it in place.

"I'm sorry Tanaquill, but you must learn to live with your heart." Gavin cradled her against him as she remained stiff in his arms. Meanwhile, the work of protecting her heart done, across the bridge the fairy spiders had built behind them, Gavin's animal spirits returned to him.

His strength renewed, still holding her, Gavin took a chance and launched himself at the bubble's wall that kept the lake out of the cave, then up and up through the surface of the lake, bursting out into the day. He carried Tanaquill from the water and placed her on the lakeshore, no longer stiff, but limp. The demons tumbled out after them, a furry mass that crowded silently around them.

The demons looked from her to him, making quiet, questioning noises. One held the music box in its jaws, another the box Fairbain had given Tanaquill.

Tanaquill's skin was no longer white, but clear as glass. Gavin laid his head against her chest.

He heard something coming in fast behind him, his whole body alert to its speed and enormity. "You will guard her," he told the demons, and they crowded closer.

He turned, looked up and saw a chariot in the sky.

## CHAPTER 36

It looked like the sun was falling to earth. The goddess towered in the sky, colossal and beautiful in a thickly woven wool dress patterned like those still wore in small northern towns on

festival days. She was young and strong with long, wavy, light blond hair and a face as inexpressibly lovely as it was honest. And Gavin's certainty it was her was as strong as his hope.

As she sailed down, the spokes of her chariot wheels, made of white holly wood, turned with a clear and strong sound, a sound Gavin knew from his youth, and recollected like a pleasing taste. Where one expected horses at the end of her reins were two cats no better or worse than grey barn cats, but huge, soaring downward in their harnesses, tails alert, driving the chariot toward him.

Freya. He recognized her from how seeing her made him feel—it was like falling and knowing he would land on his feet. Around her neck was what looked like braided gold studded with amber, with ruby nested in it like bird's eggs. *The brisingamen*, he thought, surprised that the necklace said to have been forged by dwarves looked more like a dress ornament than the opulent finery he had seen on many a continental aristocrat. Its thick braided links were draped carelessly across her shoulders as if to hold a cloak. But it shimmered as if turning the sunlight into the buzz of a bumblebee.

As the chariot came down toward him, instead of growing larger to the eye it grew smaller and Freya became a very tall, human-sized woman. The chariot's wheels met the earth with a satisfying grind. The goddess, jumping off before it came to a stop, walked briskly up to the princess where she lay.

Gavin wondered how something so incredible could seem so fitting and unremarkable as she walked toward them. Freya bent over Tanaquill. "Her mother and father are distraught," she said. She pressed her hand to Tanaquill's forehead. Tanaquill stirred, her skin showing a faint peach luminescence before turning clear again. Gavin saw that there was something like silver thread in the goddess' hand. She grasped the thread with her other hand and pulled. As it stretched, he could see it was a sigil. Then it snapped, and Gavin knew the bond of the healing rite was sundered. If Tanaquill awoke, how would she feel toward him?

Freya looked down at her, her profile thoughtful, eyes serious. "Her kingdom has been troubled since she saved you. I have told them that all shall be well. Theirs is not a kingdom much known to me." She straightened to her full height and her eyes flashed. "But you are known to me, aren't you?"

Gavin felt a blush climb up his cheeks. He opened his hand and the amulet appeared, the one Tanaquill had destroyed at Gore House. The silver sigil stretched like an octopus and gripped his hand as if it would never let go.

"That belongs to you now," Freya said. "It was meant for your kind. Show it to the clans as my welcome and my warning. You have been allowed once more to travel between the realms." They stood eye to eye. "It is time, Shapeshifter. Your kind has been punished long enough. You can see again, and may walk the realms beyond the human, seeking entry and dwelling wherever



you are welcome. And you, <~~~~>, are to be the ambassador for your people, whether they would have chosen you or no. Consider no longer your *race*, but your heart, and the good of all beings. Let your people know what you have given back to your kind—their rightful place as walkers between worlds.”

“And Tanaquill...” Gavin began.

The goddess made no concession to his anxious concern, but continued with what she wanted him to know. “Your mother and father have gone to my palace Sessrumnir, in Folkvang, the ninth Hall of Asgard.”

Gavin was amazed. “I had thought there was no such place, and no home for shapeshifters, in life or death.”

“No one is forsaken by the gods,” Freya said, “and all things live in more than one world.”

“If shapeshifters weren’t able to stop fighting before, then how can we now? My parents —”

“Are pleased you have found your mate,” she finished. She walked back to her chariot and stepped on. It was just a slender podium and it rocked with her weight.

“The humans—” Gavin began.

“Are animals as well.”

She lifted the reins. The cats stretched, arching their great backs and splaying their claws. She noted Tanaquill. “You will be good to her and honor your parents who watch from the great hall.”

“The great hall...” Gavin said softly.

Her eyes grew thoughtful. “The fairies bring my cats milk.” At that one of the huge cats purred like thunder. “You will have children with her,” Freya said then, and Gavin felt a sudden fullness in his throat. She looked to him and it felt like something went straight to his heart. “Children of my children.”

She snapped the reins and the cats sprang into the air. “Farewell, pact bringer,” she called back. “Call on me, henceforth, and Eris no more.” She sailed off across the sunny sky, over the heads of some distant cows who swished their tails in appreciation, calling skyward as she flew away across the earth.

“Watching,” Gavin said quietly to himself. Could it be true? *That I’ve never been alone.*

A herdsman appeared over the hill behind the cows and paid Gavin no mind as he called out to his charges, and for the first time Gavin realized that the man probably couldn’t see him because he was still in the inhuman realm. It was as if Gavin walked behind the ordinary world, or deeper inside it. He turned back to Tanaquill, crouching beside her.

Tanaquill lay unchanged, her skin like clear glass. The demons crowded around him as he sat beside her and lifted her gently into his lap. “Tanaquill.”

The warmth of a good surprise awoke in him; subtle, barely felt, but enough. Gavin felt what Freya had done. She had helped the spiders, teaching them to weave a new pattern, one so complicated and unique as to suit their princess, for so they considered Tanaquill now.

He bent down to kiss her. Tanaquill's skin changed under his hands. He felt the warmth rise in her like a trembling breath. Her icy lips reddened and softened. In one moment she felt lifeless, in the next she was moving as if in her sleep. Her arm came around his back and she pulled him tighter, her lips pressing against his. He tasted happiness in his throat. She drew away and he looked into her eyes, familiar to him again. "Do not cry," she said and he laughed. She smiled.

"Tanaquill," he said. Gavin wound his arms tight around her back. He never wanted to let go of her.

"You did it Gavin, you found me. Gavin, I love you," she said, and kissed him, her mouth warm and urgent over his, giving him the love she felt and he took it, kissing her back, longing to show her how he felt.

*I love you*, he thought into her mind, kissing her. He realized that he should have known the moment he saw her on the stairs that night that he was no longer banished. He drew away to study her face, rubbing his thumb along her jaw. "I love you," he said aloud, wishing everything he felt could be put into those words.

He saw that she understood.

Tanaquill sat up. She was warm and peach colored, shimmering, her fairy wings a rainbow glint in the sun. He watched as the last of the White Fairy receded to the edges of her wings, which would always be like crystalline blades. "The White Fairy was me," she said, her expression grown serious. "I was lost, but whatever she would have done, would have been my doing. Do you understand?" She stopped and hugged him harder. "Thank you for stopping me from hurting them."

Her eyes swirled with color. She seemed to realize for the first time that something was different. She tested her wings, stopped, and turned to look at one, not upset, just thoughtful. Her experience had changed her. She moved her wings, felt how they cut the air. They would make a slightly sharper sound when she flew. A higher, cleaner pitch. "That is not so terrible," she said, a little surprised with herself. She had looked at the world outside of her castle and it had looked back at her. And it was a part of who she was now. A reminder of all that had happened. She understood the world a little better now, and sometimes that left one a little hardened in places.

She looked about her at the demons.

They looked at her warily, some with their legs stretched out in front of them as if in an awkward bow. Tanaquill knew that most fairies would flee from them, and with good reason, for they might have liked to eat her as she was now, warm and smelling of flowers. But she reached

out and scratched one behind the ear until it growled in a way that seemed something like a purr, or the best it could do. The others watched with interest. “They need to be returned to their realm,” she said as more ventured forward, sniffing her tentatively.

Gavin knelt beside her, scratching the spiky head of one, making it loll its big head back and forth. “We can bring them to Aubrey Fairbain,” Gavin said with good-humored irony. “He’s quite resourceful.”

“Yes, let us go to my cousins’ house right away. They will want to know that we are well.”

Gavin stopped petting the demon and looked at Tanaquill again, searching her face, still marveling at how it had changed and softened. His eyes met hers. He looked more relaxed and more *human* than she had ever seen him, even with how his eyes glowed.

She shook her head gently, but he did not relent, bending down instead to kiss her. She felt the pressure of his lips like a potion and melted against them. Her hands glided up his strong back, over his broad shoulders. He was everything she wanted, what she could never be without.

Tanaquill gasped softly even as she kissed him more deeply. *In my heart*. It was there, still surprising her that it had returned, and she felt everything that love could be.

## CHAPTER 37

Soft beams of yellow sunlight filtered past the pale curtains of the Lockwood’s front parlor.

Aubrey Fairbain was writing in his journal, deep in thought, when he looked up from his chair and saw in the large front window something that at first startled, then delighted him. He stood and, with a deep sense of relief, let them in.

“Gavin, Tanaquill! What a fine surprise,” he said warmly as he threw open the windows.

“You’ll pardon our appearance,” Gavin said, stepping through with the ease of a man walking through his own front door. “We saw you at the window and decided to forgo formalities.” Tanaquill threw off the glamour she’d made to conceal their arrival in the human realm and stepped inside.

Chloe gave a small cry of delight. “Tanaquill!” she exclaimed. Gavin was relieved to see she had regained her proper size. “Tanaquill dear, we were so anxious!”

Daphne hurried into the room. “Oh my goodness, they’re here!” she said excitedly. She stopped short and turned away, shading her eyes with one hand. “And not wearing any clothes,” she added, embarrassed.

Chloe glanced down, then away. “Goodness!” she said in a burst of nervous laughter. “I hadn’t even noticed!”

“I should think it hard to overlook,” said Daphne, teasing.

Melanie was sitting in the next window box, looking out, sullen and alone. She remained seated when they came in, quiet. Gavin had caught her scent long before their arrival, but it was still a surprise to see her there. Perhaps she had nowhere else to go. Her dark hair in a careful, if hurried, upward sweep, she looked into the room at them for a moment, before she turned back, her expression remote, and seemed to fall into contemplation out the window again. She wore a heavy red velvet gown, with long sleeves and a low waist. The dress was of an older fashion. She looked lost, he thought, wistful.

“Primrose!” Chloe exclaimed, calling for a maid, drawing his attention back. “Where is she!”

“What’s all the shoutin’, Miss?” the maid said casually as she came in carrying a tray arrayed with sweets and tea. “Oh!” She exclaimed, dropping her tray.

Unflappable, Chloe relayed her instructions. “Bring the gentleman’s clothing from when he was ill. Quickly now. And a dress for her highness.”

“Yes, Miss,” the maid said as she hurried off excitedly, biting her lip to cover a furtive grin at the sight of Gavin naked, her cheeks turning red.

“What ho,” Chloe said in a tiny voice, eyeing the demons as they streamed in like a river, unable to wait outside any longer.

The furry horde crowded around Tanaquill. One stretched up to greet her and she petted it as it growled happily.

Chloe hesitated, conflicted. “May I approach? For I should dearly like to greet my cousin properly, dress or no dress.”

“Please do.”

Chloe made her way to Tanaquill and threw her arms about her. “We heard what happened to you,” she whispered.

Tanaquill closed her eyes and rested her cheek on her cousin’s shoulder. “I am so relieved you are well,” she said, hardly able to express her feelings.

“I know dear,” Chloe whispered warmly and Tanaquill squeezed her tight.

Daphne stepped gingerly over and around the fidgeting mass of demons. “She is perfectly well now, you needn’t worry about my sister. Now move aside Chloe, don’t be selfish.”

Tanaquill laughed, her voice tight in her throat as Daphne hugged her. “I am very grateful to you both,” she said. “For everything.” And they knew what she meant.

Tanaquill dried her eyes quickly and, seeing Lord Fairbain who had been politely, and intently, admiring a painting above the mantle, gave a quick formal greeting. “It is good to see

you again Aubrey Fairbain. Thank you very much for helping my cousin.”

The maid hurried in with garments for Gavin and Tanaquill.

“It was nothing,” he said, as if to the painting.

Gavin and Tanaquill went into another room to dress. “They must be exhausted and starving,” Chloe said. “I doubt the Eris coven fed them.”

“Right away, Miss.” The maid hurried off, clearly startled by the demons, but happy to be busy with a crowded house. Everyone was finally home and the house seemed to awaken with it.

After a moment, Tanaquill returned to the drawing room in one of her human gowns, a modest yellow dress the back of which she had altered to fit her wings. Gavin was still dressing.

“Does he control them? Or do you? Or both?” Chloe asked when Tanaquill returned. The demons had begun to wander about the room and into the hallway, heads bobbing as if looking for Gavin. Their low guttural barks and murmured babbling filled the room, forcing everyone to raise their voices slightly.

“They take a bit of minding,” Tanaquill returned, pulling her sleeves straight, smoothing her skirt. She was growing to love human clothing, so heavy and warm. Comforting. She picked up a cup and saucer from the tray that had been placed on the sideboard, began pouring out an herbal infusion and ample sugar. “I hate to bring you more of my troubles, when you have been so busy with them already. I know nothing of where they came from or how to send them back, but I would help in any way I can.”

Gavin came in, adjusting his shirt. Tanaquill watched him as she took a bite of cake. Gavin looked rumpled and handsome, and with such stamina, he looked as though he came from a good night’s rest. “I’m afraid I don’t know the first thing about them either,” he said honestly, having overheard.

Tanaquill scratched a demon’s head. “I am responsible for them, for I rescued them from the witches, and although that was surely a good thing, they had a place then, where they do not now. Will they be accepted back into their realm? I just don’t know.”

“I’ll get my men on it.” Fairbain pointed the tip of his pencil at a demon, who leapt for it. Fairbain yanked the pencil away in the nick of time. “That one needs a bath, don’t you friend?” he added. The demon was busy sniffing around on the floor.

Daphne shook her head. “That Evelina—”

“—May not have a house left,” Tanaquill finished, and the three humans looked up at her, surprised. Then they burst into delighted laughter, setting off a chorus of barks, hisses and whistles from the horde of demons.

“Don’t worry about her,” Chloe said, finally, regaining her composure. “We do need to get these creatures home where they belong, though, for they are not in sympathy with the house’s enchantment.”

“Yes,” Lord Fairbain agreed. “I’ll take them with me when I leave.”

Chloe looked at him pointedly. Something passed between their eyes. “Can you control them?”

Lord Fairbain smiled rakishly. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Chloe frowned at him.

“He can,” Gavin said. “And I can help.” After a pause, Gavin asked, “Someone was here, a man, who was it?” He had caught the scent from almost the moment they’d reached London, but only now mentioned it. It was the scent of a shapeshifter male, a scent that reminded him of his father, though it clearly wasn’t his.

Chloe settled her tea cup with a soft clink. “Indeed, Gavin, a gentleman was here to see you, not an hour ago.” She went to a side table and took a card from a small silver tray, walked over to Gavin and gave it to him. “He left you his card. There is nothing on it but his name, and these strange decorations which seem to be freshly penned.”

Gavin looked at the familiar slashes of shapeshifter scrawled at the top. “News travels fast.”

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What have you done? it read, the bluntness startling him a little.

We must talk—Tyne.

The English read, “Le Duc Dumarin wishes your company.”

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Gavin looked up to Tanaquill, speaking the words silently, into her mind. She nodded. He looked over at the sullen figure sitting alone in the window box. “Does Tyne know you’re here?”

“How could he not?” Melanie replied without emotion, not turning to face him.

*You’ve a lot to answer for.*

Melanie gazed steadily out the window. *Yes.* The maid came around to offer her tea but she refused it.

## CHAPTER 38

It was before Tanaquill and Gavin had arrived back at the Lockwoods, yet some time after Tyne’s footman was well away, that there had been a *tap tap tap* at the window. Chloe, Daphne and Lord Fairbain had looked over as one to see a dove staring at them from the window ledge,

looking quite decidedly as though it wanted to come inside. Chloe had opened the window a crack and the bird hopped in, then transformed into the female shapeshifter, looking defeated if stubbornly proud. Everyone in the room guessed where she had come from, if not all the whys and hows, and she in turn had guessed as much from their probing looks. But the Lockwoods were used to taking in strays. And she had nowhere else to go. She waited...Quietly.

Alone together in the Lockwood's sunlit card room, Gavin waited for her to speak. She faced away, the arch of her back tense. Gavin was accustomed to her scent now, and in her manner he finally recognized the aristocratic being that she was. How mistaken he had been to think that, because she was the same in kind, she would be the same in spirit.

She had been so still that when she spoke, it was as though a painting had come to life. "It is said the gods mixed clay in our blood to tie us to the human realm." Her quiet voice called to him with that feeling he was beginning to recognize in another shapeshifter's speech, like remembering and being surprised at once.

"When you were healed," she continued, "the princess loosened that which had hardened within us. It was gradual at first, but after she saved you, the very night of the ball, I began seeing things." She turned to him then, her golden eyes strangely alien to him, for they weren't a reflection of his own. Her expression, open and sad because it was hopeful, made them unfamiliar, too. "Wonderful things, we all did," she continued hurriedly, her voice beginning to shake. "To have heard of the other realms since we were children, as mere stories—" she faltered, seeming to recall to whom she was talking.

After a moment she turned and looked out the window again, as if at what she had faced all these years. "I was the trap," she said calmly. "Tyne needed to fortify his strength by taking yours. He told me to find you, and so I came up with a way. I knew that you sought us, and that if the stories were credible you would follow them. You had to find me at the place and the time of my choosing—at Gore House, where Evelina would help me. After I had stolen your strength, they would keep you as a trophy, mounted like those demons, and I would bring your spirit within my body to Tyne so that he could become stronger. Only I didn't want to. I wanted to keep it for myself." She stopped herself, then hurried on, facing away from him. "There are many of us. That was what you wanted to know, wasn't it? We fight and make rules for one another to break. We call ourselves better than humans and yet we are no better to each other than they. And we use them. We could not have lived in this human world if we did not. We could not have endured our exile."

Her strong profile caught the light, and from her proud stance he sensed she was accustomed to being watched, respected and feared by some, bitterly in need of respect from others higher than herself. It left her with that hardened look around the mouth, the daring in her eyes.

Tinted in the window glass were the pale stone facades of elegant row houses, upper floors of human dwellings like the one he stood in, the sun warming them as the day grew. “You say you lured me to London, but when you saw me on the stairs that night you seemed surprised.”

“I was,” she said, unflinching, but her fingers had begun smoothing the heavy damask curtain.

“Why were you surprised? You should have been aware of me from miles off. I should have found others over the years. It couldn’t have been the perfume you wore that night. No shapeshifter could wear that for long.”

“No. The perfume wasn’t for you. The witches put that on me to hide me from the gentleman sitting in the Lockwood’s drawing room. They didn’t want him to know I was in London.”

“Aubrey Fairbain?”

“Humans cannot normally detect us, but you never know who else might be about. At any rate, the smell was so strong that it dulled my ability to sense you—that was Evelina’s fault.” She exhaled with a rueful expression. “As a result, I didn’t even realize you had gotten to London until I stumbled upon you there.” Then, with satisfaction, she said, “I didn’t need anything to hide me from you. You would not have known me if I was standing naked in front of you.” She paused. “Your family’s banishment was our own magic. The witches merely lifted a corner so that you would be drawn to me at the house. But now that is over, for Tyne wishes you back.” A weariness darkened her expression. A small unhappy smile came to her mouth and she turned and looked into the interior of the room, with its pretty but unremarkable chairs, its card table which spoke of the human and their way of life.

Outside, Gavin heard the carriages pulled by weary horses whose form he could take. He knew she had the same thoughts and felt a kinship with her, and that felt strange.

She watched him, eyes wary. “Evelina said nothing of the prince. Her coven never had dealings with fairies before—or that was what we thought. Before you, shapeshifters and fairies were anathema to each other. It seemed preposterous that any coven who dealt with shapeshifters would also deal with Fay.” She paused, seeming insulted by what she remembered. “Evelina hid him from me, and until what you did that night I couldn’t sense him for myself. We never could,” she said, sounding frustrated. Her brow furrowed and she leveled her gaze on him intently. “How did you know the princess? How did you recognize a fairy through her human guise? Why did the gods let you be the one? Because you were an outcast? That they might humble us one last time,” she finished, her voice hard and unhappy. “What I felt when I held her heart—she lowered herself for you. She’s...different from what I had expected.”

Gavin didn’t think she was looking for answers from him. He didn’t have them. Her face solemn again, she stared into the room at nothing.



“Toward dawn I had begun to realize something had occurred. The prince, Evelina and I sat down together for the first time to take stock. I learned of his plot against the princess and Evelina’s childish spell. Long have my family and hers been allies, but I tell you that woman is the most foolish of her race. Shrinking Chloe Lockwood was a pointless, petty act of rivalry and it brought you and the princess together. It was going to be far more difficult with the two of you protecting one another, but we managed, didn’t we, and captured you both.

“After the egregore struck you instead of the princess—”

“Egregore?”

“Yes. The Eris coven made an egragor, like a creature made of thought, with a body fashioned for a single task, to wield the dart no ordinary being could. It was the egregore who came into Lady Teversall’s garden, drawn into being by the coven with such force that its tread could be felt, and in its hand was the dart that in any human hand would break, and which no fairy but a master assassin could touch and live. Too dangerous, certainly, for the Prince of Moths!” she scoffed bitterly. “When the egregore failed, it vanished, as it would have had it succeeded.

“After what happened at the ball we waited. Over the next few nights the prince was scouting for your arrival, and when he found you were on your way we allowed you my scent,” she continued calmly, as if speaking of the scheduled arrival of a guest. “You were drawn to my room, to my bed, where you and the princess did just what we wanted you to, so as to augment the coven’s magic with your own. From that room, we drew you deeper into the house, making sure the princess followed a false trail to the amulet. But somehow you got to Evelina’s room instead and seized the amulet, despite a thousand assurances from Rohmier that no such thing was possible. But we caught you again in Evelina’s witch door, Evelina and Rohmier captured the princess in a lantern, and you know the rest.”

At the mention of Tanaquill’s capture, Gavin walked away from the shapeshifter female, not wishing to look at her for the moment. He went to the next window and looked out instead at the London street. “Tell me why Tyne had my parents exiled. Why they were unaided and abandoned to die.”

She was silent for a moment. She came up beside him, leaned past, and pushed the window open. The sounds and smells of the street came in strongly on the warm breeze. She put a foot on the ledge, looked back at him, and turned into a hawk that perched expectantly on a railing.

Seeing her change Gavin felt a prickling sensation to do the same. He hadn’t felt that for years. Still the anxiety was there, not to leave Tanaquill for a moment, not yet. Gavin closed his eyes. *Fly with us*, he thought and felt Tanaquill, in the other room, turn her head to look out the window. He transformed into a hawk and warily followed the female shapeshifter into the sky over London.

He caught up to her. *Your family—*

*—No, I'm not bringing you to them.* Melanie took him to the north side of the London Bridge, to the top of a gold tipped pillar two hundred feet above the ground, a monument in memory of the fire of 1666. The city lay spread out beneath them, the great muddy ribbon of the Thames in its lap, the wind hard in their feathers. *This is why they were banished.*

Gavin looked down over the wide human city, with its busy, narrow lanes, its dirt and misery and noise, surrounded by greening land it had not yet consumed.

*This is what your mother and father cherished, as much as any human.*

Gavin jumped down to the observation deck, returning to human form, and stood before the gilt iron rail, Melanie beside him. After discovering what the shapeshifters were like, he finally thought he might understand his parents' fate. "Tell me what happened to them, why they chose to leave."

The light golden, warm on her face, made Melanie squint a little as she looked Gavin in the eyes. "Long ago, when this was the Romans' city, Tyne vanished here and reappeared a year later, having been held captive by a group of human females who were known then as the Adyton of Eris." She paused. "It was shocking that humans had actually managed to capture a shapeshifter, especially him. But more surprising yet was that when he returned to us, Tyne wanted to form an alliance with them. Your mother and father were appalled that Tyne would want to create an alliance with those who had abducted and, most likely, tortured him. In fact, they did not trust that he was still in his right mind. None of us knew anything about human magic then, and frankly I think we were frightened. Your mother and father felt that if we were to seek allies among human mages there had to be better choices than the Adyton, and we should seek them out. But Tyne had made his choice.

"When your mother and father seemed too likely to persuade others in the clan, Tyne told them to leave. No one went with them. No one wanted to spend their days traveling in a tiny band fending off humans and in danger of magical capture as well. The Eris witches devised protection spells for us, one that made the humans forget when they saw us change, another to protect us from other spellcasters who would catch us, while your parents went their own way."

Gavin stared hard below him. Beyond all the hardships he had shared with them, there was an entire world and a lifetime of hardships his parents had kept hidden from him. That had been their choice. He still didn't know if it had been right, but he accepted it. If they could *never* have gone back...If they had told him, would he have understood? "How were they banished?"

"They were banished twice, in a way, first by <shunning>," for which the shapeshifter tongue had a word whose cruelty and effectiveness Gavin innately understood, "and secondly by the witches, who included your mother and father among the humans in the spells meant to protect us from them. So that not only humans, but two lone shapeshifters in the world, would

never again see our kind for what they were, ensuring they would never know if they had met a shapeshifter again, nor the shapeshifters know them. When the Eris witches pulled the veil down over us, they left out your mother and father. As the gods had done to us, we had done to them: the human world was the only one they were permitted.” She paused. “Apparently they embraced their lot, even bearing a son into their misery. You had the unhappy responsibility of proving them right, of proving that shapeshifters could live among humans. But you couldn’t, could you? Not in the way they had hoped. Even the Lockwoods, who accept you, are witches. You know better than I that other humans are not as accepting. We didn’t expect your parents to burden you with the truth, that you were an outcast.” She scoffed softly to herself. “And yet she gave you a name. And with a name, the songs and the history of our people.”

Gavin nodded to himself and said nothing. He wondered if someday he might even see his parents, told in a story that would unfold in his mind.

“A rogue magician can capture an unallied shapeshifter, as happened to your mother. Look at how easily Lord Fairbain discovered you. You’re very lucky to have survived.”

“I was told a story about the MacAlpins having played the shapeshifters false and slaughtering them at a banquet—was that true?”

“Is that what they told you?” Melanie said. “Nothing like that ever happened. The MacAlpins were always true to us. Perhaps the unfortunate alliance your parents had in mind, was with the Adyton of Eris. It was that they could not countenance, that in which they saw disaster.”

Gavin was silent. “All this time and you didn’t learn anything,” he said finally. “Eris just took you in like a stray dog.” He said it with no animosity, just as fact. “My parents wanted to survive for your sake. To prove to their clan, and perhaps even the gods, that the mistakes of the shapeshifters did not have to go on forever. That we had learned to live in this world they had banished us to.”

She looked past him, her eyes following something in the sky. “We never expected you’d learn who you are from a fairy.”

An arm slipped around his waist. Tanaquill’s light, sweet scent soothed him, drawing off the sorrow. “Are you well?” she asked softly.

He put his arm around her and pulled her shoulder against his. “Yes, now that you’re here.” Gavin turned to look at Melanie, who was staring at Tanaquill with a strange, intense look in her eyes. “Why did Tyne come for me now?” he asked her.

She smiled to herself, unhappy, but satisfied. “Our *mighty leader* finds himself pressed on all sides. He has challengers within the clan at a time when shapeshifters are starting to be caught up in the unrest in the humans’ world. I am his niece, passed over for his second in favor of my younger brother. Instead he would marry me off to make an alliance with a French lord I detest.

“For centuries we have met envoys from the Americas, and they had been cooperative, but as their relations with the European powers have grown hostile our interests no longer coincide. Instead they have made common cause with the shapeshifters in India who fight the English. That would not have mattered to Tyne had he not learned to his surprise that there were some shapeshifters in India who were stronger than him, and who have threatened to come West if we do not undermine the English.” She paused. “Perhaps I’ll go to India. It sounds better there.”

“Can you go back?” Gavin asked.

“I’ve failed. He won’t have me.”

“We could help you,” Tanaquill said.

“My problems are my own.” Her expression softened briefly. She looked to Gavin. “Go to Tyne. He’ll take you back into the world you wished to find.”

Go to him? The idea made Gavin recoil. “Why would I want to?”

She looked at him sharply. The emotion she felt hit him, strong, hard. “Because over time, the fairies may come to trust us,” she said. “Sooner, if you can settle your differences with him and smooth some of the strife among the clans. You and I have both watched human history for hundreds of years, Gavin. We both know a maelstrom is brewing. We need to be as united as we can, whether it’s with Tyne or in spite of him. Either way, you’ll have to be involved. You’re the key that opened the gates to the other realms, the one the gods chose.”

“Chosen by Tanaquill, you mean.”

“That’s right. And it will still be her choice to let us in. Although we can enter the fairy realm, guarded kingdoms are still closed to us without an army and there are too few shapeshifters left for that.” She paused, looking at Tanaquill. “The Fay are not loved among our people, as I know we are not loved by yours. But we all live in the same world now.” She turned back to Gavin. “Tyne is a harsh man, but he outwitted the humans in hard times, and kept his clan alive.”

“You defend him? Even though you tried to take my strength to overthrow him.”

“Because if I could have, I would have been worthy of it. I wonder if you’ll ever understand us. He brought me up well,” she said. “He taught me what I am. He taught all of us, you never had that. You’ll be a hero among us, but he already was.”

Gavin watched her and said nothing. A place in the shapeshifter world and he didn’t want it. He wasn’t part of the world she came from. He never would be. But he felt responsible—for the harm they might cause, and for the hopes of his parents.

He was better for not having grown up among them. No matter the hardships his family had faced. The world Melanie came from felt worse than the humans’. A culture exhausted by violence, living in the shadows of their former greatness, a greatness which, as much as he knew of it, was itself nothing but violence. He studied her. When Gavin had sung the shapeshifter song

it had been Tyne he'd seen, a strong, young male shapeshifter, hunting long ago, Tyne hunting a terrified creature to the edge of a cliff. He recoiled at the idea of someone like him being introduced to the kingdom he had seen in his vision of Tanaquill as a little girl, with everything she loved and knew growing up hidden there.

He was the only one who could protect her kingdom from the shapeshifters, no matter how few they were. Who else was one of them, with memories he could bring up from an abyss of songs to teach himself about them, but who had lived outside of their world long enough to judge them by standards different than those with which they judged themselves? By the standards his mother and father had lived by. And died by...long ago, he thought sadly.

Gavin thought of Freya. Her amulet had brought him his name. His mother had put her trust in her. Her touch had saved Tanaquill. Freya had told him that he and his parents had won for the shapeshifters a place in the inhuman realms once more. She told him to warn the other shapeshifters not to act as they had in the past.

He remembered back to why he'd tried so hard to find others, not just for a wife, for friendship, but to someday build a world where shapeshifters would dominate humans. How wrong that seemed to him now—and Tanaquill had known it all along. She had been raised on frightening stories about shapeshifters, but she had still trusted him and had saved him. She'd told him that what mattered was that he had loving parents who had always forgiven humanity. That he should follow their example and their wish for him.

It was his responsibility now. Whether it had been entirely their choice in the beginning, his mother and father had set out unprotected, with just each other, to live a life among the humans to prove that shapeshifters could find a place in the world beyond the dream of domination—and in a way, Gavin thought, they had.

## CHAPTER 39

The demons having been fed and sequestered, for the time being, in the solarium, the dining room at the Lockwood house hummed with laughter and conversation, the clinking of glasses and the clatter of dishes and silverware. As the long day wound down, Tanaquill was cozily ensconced among her cousins and Lord Fairbain, with Gavin at her side. Warmed by the smells of apple tarts, roasted vegetables and rose scented waters, as the candles burned low, the conversation went on well past nightfall. Long past the final course's arrival, when only bright,

sweet smelling rinds of fruits, chief among them the queer prickly skin of the pineapple, remained of the great feast, the Lockwood sisters and Aubrey Fairbain still sat listening, entranced by the long, strange tale Tanaquill and Gavin had told of the events of the previous night.

Tanaquill looked to Gavin. His dark hair tousled over his green eyes, he appeared tired and relaxed, comfortable; he had the contented look around the eyes and mouth that he'd found last night and she was already growing used to.

Gavin reached out and put his hand over hers. Tanaquill smiled thoughtfully.

"...Remarkable," Chloe said finally, into the silence, her plate still in front of her, the maids standing along the edges of the room, in doorways, as still as plants, openly listening, and no one seemed to mind or notice that the tureens remained on the sideboard and the serving plates sat next to half empty wine bottles. The clearing up had slowed to a standstill as the story was told.

For a moment, so deep in thought, Chloe seemed to have forgotten how to move. Suddenly she leaned back in her chair and glanced to the doorway. The maids seemed to wake, looking hastily about them. "I say, has Melanie come back?" Chloe exclaimed.

A maid nodded vigorously. "Yes Miss, she's back, opened the window herself, sat without a word." She had fresh napkins in her hands she'd just picked up from behind her. "Been there all night like a statue."

Fairbain nodded, lifting his brandy. "Seems like you've picked up another houseguest," he said with a wry look to Daphne.

"Aubrey," Chloe admonished.

Daphne toyed with the stem of her glass. "Imagine what Evelina could have done. To have a shapeshifter they had worked intimately with undergo such a process, becoming a being akin to the White Fairy." She looked to her cousin. "Do you have any idea what she might have become?"

Tanaquill shook her head. "I cannot imagine."

"It was dangerous enough that Evelina might have gotten a hold of your heart if Melanie hadn't kept it from her," Chloe said. "To think of that woman holding for an instant—"

Daphne, wine glass in hand, nodded, before tilting it to sip. "Would have done her some good," she said, her words disappearing into her glass as she drained it.

Chloe shook her head, marveling, but her expression was serious. "You and Melanie both could have been undergoing the process of the White Fairy in the midst of the coven—"

"It could have been," Lord Fairbain interjected, gesturing a little tipsily, "it *would* have been very dangerous for the Eris coven to involve themselves in such a volatile situation. It might have destroyed them all, but then again they might have been able to harness it. Chaos is coal for their furnace. They might, once they knew what it was, have done something to

deliberately widen the impact.”

“Or a stronger, more profound invocation to Eris,” said Daphne.

“Who knows how the other shapeshifters allied with the coven would have been affected by Melanie’s transformation? And they and the Eris coven too, with access to the other realms? Jupiter, Juno and Minerva!” Chloe exclaimed.

“What will you do now?” Daphne asked, changing the subject as she looked to Tanaquill and Gavin.

Tanaquill’s eyes met Gavin’s. They had discussed it that very afternoon while looking out over London together after Melanie had left. It had been surprising how common were their interests. Whatever his feelings against the shapeshifters, Gavin needed to honor his mother and father. And Tanaquill needed to honor her responsibility for having returned the shapeshifters to the inhuman realms by helping the fairy kingdoms to cope with them. “Perhaps,” she said, “we will found a kingdom. Where shapeshifters and fairies shall meet. Perhaps at the lake we went to.”

“She knows how to do such things, I’d be at a loss,” Gavin said frankly.

“We’d love you to visit,” Tanaquill said to her cousins. “And you as well, your lordship.”

The sisters looked to one another in delight.

“It would be an honor,” said Fairbain.

“If mother approves, it will be a beautiful gateway for the shapeshifters to all the fairy kingdoms and beyond. It will be a place for shapeshifters to come and learn of their history, through our libraries. And to add new tales, and supplement the old. We have no names of shapeshifters in the history. We would like them. We will help them, as best we can, to claim their new, rightful place in the inhuman realms. And as trust grows between our peoples, who knows what might be possible?” *And Gavin shall be the first, at my court, among my family,* she thought only to herself. Her eyes met his with meaning.

Gavin held her gaze and gave her hand a squeeze, letting his leg brush hers under the table. “We’ll travel too,” he said.

“Let me know,” Fairbain spoke up. “I can give you introductions. People who will be good for you to meet.”

Gavin met his eyes. “Thank you, we will. I think we’ll begin by meeting some of the shapeshifters on the other continents—perhaps the Americas first.”



It was pleasant and familiar at the Lockwood house, but there was work to be done and with the morning’s arrival it was time to depart.

At the door to the house, Daphne hugged Tanaquill hard. The sisters had grown so accustomed to her presence, or the expectation of her, that they didn’t know anymore what it

would be like without her. “Goodbye Princess, come back soon, don’t trouble with formalities, just drop in anytime you wish.”

Tanaquill smiled as she hugged her back. “Be careful, I’m sure to take advantage.”

Chloe looked at the two of them. “And that means you as well, Gavin, you’re a member of the family now.”

“Thank you, we will, I promise,” Gavin said warmly.

Daphne grasped his hand fondly. “Visit us any time.”

Chloe stood beside Lord Fairbain, hands clasped in front of her. “Why, you don’t even have to let us know you’re here, just fly in any window.”

“Thank you again.” Just then, Gavin remembered something he’d held onto for so long he’d almost forgotten it. He reached into his coat pocket. “I believe this is yours.” He handed Lord Fairbain the small porcelain box.

He took the box and stared down at it. It clearly had not been opened because he felt what was inside it. And if it had been, what was in it would have spread.

Gavin clapped him gently on the arm and he looked up, his thoughts interrupted. “Goodbye Aubrey, thank you for everything,” Gavin said.

Lord Fairbain looked a little saddened, and smiled. “I’m sorry to see you go Gavin,” he said honestly. “You made some dull nights tolerable this season.” He paused. “I’m here for you both. If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate.”

Tanaquill clasped her arm through Gavin’s. “To be sure, thank you Aubrey.”

Gavin put his hand on where Tanaquill’s arm looped through his, still amazed every time he looked at her that she was his, and he was hers. They descended the steps of the Lockwood house.

As they took the last step down, Tanaquill and Gavin had stepped into the fairy realm. The humans no longer noticed them, the carriages rolled by, and the gentlemen in hats and dark coats, and the boys in knickers running, and the ladies with maids all around them paying them no mind, they found their secret happiness.

THE END