

THE COMPLETE SERIES

Lost
Princess
of
Starlight

CLARISSA GOSLING

Copyright © 2023 by Clarissa Gosling

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by International copyright law.

This omnibus edition is dedicated to everyone searching for their own portal to Faery. I hope you find it, even if it is within the pages of a book!

Please note: These stories are written in British English.

This is not a typo, just a reflection of my background.

FAE BARGAINS

CLARISSA GOSLING



I: CHAPTER ONE

The man quavered as he stood there unable to move.

Evan stifled a giggle. Humans were so predictable and great entertainment. Just ahead a boggart sat on a tree stump, almost merging with it. His long arms waved as he enchanted the man there. This was his favourite trick, and Evan often watched the boggart toy with the humans he had lured into the faery realm.

The man started to dance, a lumbering, awkward sort of dance forced upon him without music. His shoulders hunched and the ragged sleeves of his once pristine suit showed the frenzied path he had taken through the forest. Somewhere he had lost a shoe. Now his big toe poked through the mud-stained, previously white, sock.

As Prince of the Moonlight Court, Evan easily found the gateways between realms and tempted unsuspecting humans to follow him back. Of course, the riches he promised them were never more than leaves glamoured into faerie gold. Nothing they could take home, or transform their life with. At least not for the better.

For most there was no going home, just endless dancing for the boggart's pleasure until it felt peckish and with a crunch and a crack ended their torment. Not the nicest way to go. Yet there was no lack of foolish humans willing to follow Evan for a whispered promise of delights and riches. The fact he could glamour himself as the person they dreamed of didn't hurt. Mother would frown on the use of his innate gifts, and consider it sacrilege that he

used their dreams against them. But he was young and bored, so what else could he do to entertain himself?

The boggart clapped slowly as the man sped up, his arms flailing in all directions and his feet kicking up clouds of leaves. Those brought through in autumn tended to last longer, as the boggart liked the way they made the leaves spiral. It lived in this clearing on the tree stump at the centre and, as far as Evan could tell, never left. Occasionally snores could be heard, but its eyes pierced you before you got close. The mixed ash and oak showed this was one of the oldest parts of the forest, but the boggart kept the other creatures away. Any that strayed too close became dinner. Except Evan.

The boggart's dark eyes glinted under its squashed felt hat as it smiled, showing off its crooked teeth. "Good one. Me like."

Evan bowed back to the boggart, his courtly acknowledgment always at odds with the scruffy creature he seemed to serve. It had no hold over him, and Evan received nothing from it, just a mutual enjoyment of suffering. These humans deserved what they got for thinking their dreams were easy to achieve. Nothing was handed to you on a plate, as it all needed work and dedication. Only Evan's goal was so far away from his current position there didn't seem to be a way for him to work towards it. And it was more of a negative goal anyway - to escape his mother and her dominion over him.

Ever since he had been old enough to leave the mound and venture into the forest, it had captivated him. But the forest changed every time he visited. Things moved, disappeared and appeared, which made finding his way alone difficult.

Most fae followed the paths between the mounds where the Courts were housed and the Fair at the centre of the realm. They never ventured into the forest itself. But Evan wanted to leave the security of the Court he had been brought up in and explore further. The forest creatures were a fascination, and he dreamed of travelling across the realm and seeing it all. Mapping the edge of the forest, if it had one, and all the bits in between. But that could never be.

So for now he took advantage of this time as a sapling, that in between age after finishing his schooling, and before starting his future role within the fae realm. He wasn't expected, by anyone other than his mother, to be responsible, and so he played the tempter for the boggart. One hundred and fifty moons' time and that would end. Evan would need to return to court and take up his responsibilities as heir, which he would much rather fell on his perfect twin sister.

She had the visions their mother valued and the desire to do her best for the Moonlight Court. She was the perfect heir, and yet Evan was cursed by the fact he had pushed her out of the way while birthing to become the eldest. He would gladly stand down in her favour, but their mother wouldn't hear of it. Eloisa and he consoled each other whenever he resided in the Court, but that was becoming more infrequent.

The rest of the Court worked to curry favour. Evan couldn't stand their phoniness. Give him the boggart any time, with their single-minded desire and easy-to-understand actions. But no, Evan was heir to the most conniving of the five Courts in the faery realm. And he could do nothing about it. Only attempt to hold off the time when he must take up his position as heir.

The dancing man wheezed and grunted, his breath laboured as he gyrated ever faster. Leaves flew everywhere, making a golden glow around him. The boggart gathered all the leaves from the clearing into a pile by his feet, enchanting them to continually fill the area so the dancing man would endlessly kick them up. This was a cruel form of torture.

A hand descended on Evan's shoulder. He jumped, heart racing.

"Looking for your moment to intervene, laddie?" A deep gruff voice behind his ear had Evan quaking. Few people could sneak up on him without him being aware of their approach.

Evan tried to turn and see who held him, but their grip was so tight all he could see was two antlers looming above him with as many tines as Evan had ever seen on a wild deer.

"The boggart has no excuse for following his nature, but what is yours for aiding him against your own?"

Evan swallowed. What could he say?

"Hmmm." The man spun Evan around to face him and frowned.

He towered over Evan, his large beard indistinguishable from the hair on his head. Two dangerous eyes took in every feature of him. He wore a leather waistcoat over a crumpled linen shift of an indeterminate colour. And three giant hounds ranged at his feet, their golden eyes following Evan's every move.

"Answer me lad, who are you and what do you think you're doing?"

Evan's stomach turned to rock, and he searched the trees nearby for an escape, but none came. The stranger still had a hand on his shoulder, holding him tight. The dogs' eyes were trained on him. Stories of the huntsman in the wood had circulated for years, but no-one from the Court saplings had ever actually seen him. Everyone knew to stay safe in

the mounds on a new moon, but they treated it as a silly tradition, not as a necessity. But now Evan realised there was truth in all those whispered stories in the dark.

Behind him the swooshing of the leaves stilled and the crack of bones silenced any other sound from the surrounding undergrowth.

“As sure as I am Herne the Hunter, I have seen enough to punish you, laddie, now tell me.”

Herne the Hunter? He was a creature from legend, who led the wild hunt through the fae forest. The stories never ended well for anyone who crossed him.

Evan squared his shoulders, stood tall and stated his full name and position, hoping that would give him some leeway. “I am Uvanli ter Egureou, first born of Ysult, Queen of the Moonlight Court.”

The Huntsman stroked his chin with one hand, while he looked Evan up and down. “Moonlight’s son.” He looked over Evan’s shoulder towards the boggart beyond. “And what is Moonlight’s son doing consorting with boggarts?”

Evan sniffed and stared back, trying to compel him to back down.

He dropped his chin, and the antlers pointed more in Evan’s direction. “Luring humans here, were you? Opening the gates for them?” He didn’t wait for any acknowledgement. “That’s a gross violation of the Treaty of the Yews.”

Of course that’s how he would interpret it. The worst possible way. “Look here, that’s not...”

“I was there laddie, I know the agreement. And fiddling around with humans is against it.”

Evan’s heart raced and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. To meet the Huntsman and to hear that he was there at the founding of the Courts themselves? Evan felt dizzy at the thought.

The Huntsman frowned at Evan. “Now, what to do with you, laddie.” He pursed his lips. “How many moons have you?”

Evan blinked. “Three hundred and seventy.”

“Stuck in the in between time then, no longer a seedling and not yet grown.” He sucked his cheeks in. “How does that mother of yours treat you?”

Evan stared up at him. Didn’t he know to speak ill of your liege was punishable?

“Not well by the looks of it then. Frustrated within the Court, and yet can’t escape it either, would be my guess.”

Evan gaped. How did this stranger sum up his life in one sentence so easily?

“I knew your mother once, she seemed like the type of lady who was only interested in what she could get out of any situation.” He shivered. “Turned very cold.” He squinted at Evan. “How many humans have you brought here to dance for the boggarts? Be honest now, and I may be able to arrange something for you.”

Evan stared, unable to count.

“That many, hmmm?” The huntsman’s gaze moved to the boggart behind Evan. “Well, that one’s beyond saving now, so let’s see what we can do about you.”

And with that he grabbed Evan’s elbow and led him away. The dogs swirled round them as they strode through the forest, their passing a whisper in the forest mulch beneath their feet.



Evan panted as they cleared the woods and approached the entrance to the Moonlight Court. The huntsman left his hounds at the edge of the trees and strode right into the closed mound without hindrance. Without Evan’s directions, he followed the tapestried corridor, knowing which he could push past to join a different path between them. All too soon they arrived in the throne room which acted as an audience chamber and central meeting place.

Moonlight Court’s was oval, with his mother’s large stone throne sitting at one narrow end. Clusters of fae filled the room, chatting and swaying to the gentle music that was ever present. Evan followed Herne who pushed past them without care. They fell silent and stared as the two passed.

Herne’s path led straight to the opposite end where a group surrounded the throne. As they approached, Evan had to force his trembling legs to keep moving, rather than to disappear behind one of the tapestries and never leave his chambers again.

The Queen sat poised, regal with her ice crown glinting on her head. Her pristine silver hair hung in waves, matching the ivory dress embroidered with white ivy she wore. His sister sat at their mother’s feet, practicing her cold expressions.

Fae who were always the first to do his mother’s bidding encircled the throne, all of them looking bleached and colourless and indistinguishable. In the midst of a heated discussion, they interrupted each other, waving their hands in an agitated manner. As Evan and the Huntsman approached, the fae halted to turn and stare.

The Queen made no reaction to their appearance, refusing to acknowledge them until she was ready. Evan sighed intending to wait, but Herne shoved him towards the dais.

“As is my right in accordance with the Treaty of the Yews binding the Courts, I claim recompense.” Herne’s voice boomed.

The collected audience gasped, but his mother barely glanced at him.

“What has he done this time? Tricked one of your hounds away? Tried to tame your wild beasts? Hunted the wrong thing?” She snorted. “There are no rules in the Forest.”

Herne’s grin widened. “Not in the forest, no, but plenty of rules in the Human realm.”

Silence echoed around the halls that were normally filled with music and chatter. Evan cringed inside and tried to summon his iciest demeanour. He couldn’t afford to show weakness at the heart of the Court his mother was determined he would rule. All those present would remember this occasion and somehow use it to get the better of him.

The Queen made no reply, just stared down the Huntsman. Her brows scrunched and her golden eyes flashed dangerously.

“Now, I have a solution to our dilemma, lady Queen.” Herne looked around the assorted fae and other creatures that made the Court of Moonlight their home. “But let’s find somewhere quiet to discuss it.”

The pixies, smaller flying fae who normally circled above the assembled Court, flickering silver lights over the throng, landed. The stillness of their lights reflected the stillness of the room.

Finally the Queen nodded. With a flick of her eyes to her guard she stood. “We will retire to my private drawing room. Eloisa, attend us. No one else.” She swept out through the tapestried doorway behind her throne, expecting obedience.

Herne turned to Evan. “Well then, we’d better follow, laddie.”

“Can I say No?” Evan knew the answer. Whatever happened with Herne, there would no doubt be further punishment from his mother once the Huntsman left. But he had a lot of experience in surviving what she doled out.



2: CHAPTER TWO

The Queen sat in the tallest wingback chair in her drawing room, the one with arms that curled into claws. Eloisa chose the chair closest to their mother, and mirrored her position with her knees and ankles together and her legs slanted to one side, waiting for the Huntsman to speak.

Herne sniffed and pulled a pouf over from one corner into the circle. “There ain’t no way you’ll get me out of one of those narrow seats you have. Last time I tried was hard enough, and I’ve grown since then.”

The Queen made no reaction to whatever recollection the Huntsman referred to, but Eloisa and Evan exchanged glances. When had he visited their mother’s private drawing room? This was where she came to relax, not to conduct business. As seedlings it had been off limits to them, and even now the Queen preferred no one to visit her there, not even them.

Evan slunk to the smallest chair between his sister and the Huntsman, unsure which side to support in this confrontation.

The Huntsman looked around the room, his eye pausing on the large ornate gilt urn on a marble stand by the bookcase.

The Queen snapped her glance to it and then back to him. Her gaze tightened. “What is the problem, Herne? Can we deal with this quickly, I have had worrying news.” A wrinkle between her eyebrows marred her perfect face.

Herne's smile showed off his crooked teeth and wrinkled skin. "Laddie here is owed to me. He played about with boggarts, mis-using the gates to bring them flesh. Human flesh." He paused. "Taunting boggarts and helping humans cross the gates to cavort with them is not good. No Sirree." He leaned forward so she couldn't mistake him. "The royal fae promised they were responsible, and so they were allowed to continue having access to the human realm when it was restricted for the lower fae. My forests don't want nasty human bones messing them up. That causes dangerous things in the deep."

The Queen sat up tall. "Boggarts, you say? What tosh. I don't believe it." She turned to him. "Evan, tell him."

Evan stared at the floor, tracing the pattern of ivy that bordered the plush rug with his eyes. He had hoped staying silent they might forget he was there. His ears flamed red as he felt their stares on him.

"Evan?" His mother's voice fell in pitch, her anger peeking through her icy facade.

He didn't respond.

"I claim the boy." Herne was firm and didn't brook disagreement.

The Queen sniffed. "What do you want with him? Your filthy shack is barely large enough for you, as I recall."

She'd visited him? What history did Herne and his mother have? She'd barely mentioned Herne in passing, and only as a warning not to wander too far into the forest and never as a real person.

"You mistake me, I claim him for the gates. He has shown that the Courts can't be trusted to monitor the gates between faery and the other realms themselves, so we need a dedicated Guardian. He can be responsible for them as recompense for his past actions."

The Queen's eyes glittered as she moved her gaze from Herne to Evan.

Evan's heart raced as he tried to consider what that would mean for him. Would this help him escape the court, or would it tie him closer in?

The Queen nodded. "I can see how that would work. He could be the Gate Guardian, though what would be his responsibilities?"

Herne laughed. "Well, now. That I'd have to discuss with him. Once he's instated. I'm sure we'll work something out agreeable to both of us." He smiled at Evan.

Evan looked up at Herne, meeting his friendly eyes. He winked and Evan relaxed. This wasn't really a punishment. But then his gaze crossed the circle to his mother. Her face was plotting, working out how she could use this to her advantage. His sister sat silent, the perfect witness to everything that happened in the Moonlight Court.

“We are agreed then?” Herne confirmed, he stood and walked two steps towards the Queen. There he spat on his hand and held it out to her.

She nodded and stood, joining him to reciprocate his actions. Her pale, smooth, white hand dwarfed in his brown, wrinkly one.

He held her hand while he continued speaking. “As punishment for his actions the boy will leave your Court and swear to the Forest as the Guardian of the Gates.”

The Queen’s face blanched. “Leave my Court? What do you mean? That was never part of the agreement?” She pulled at her hand, trying to wrench it from the Huntsman’s grip.

“Careful there now. You let go before we’re agreed and I’ll have to go to the other Courts.” He nodded his head towards her. “Better to sort it out now, just the two of us, without getting all of them involved.”

She glared. “How can he leave my Court? He is the heir! He should be here, learning how to rule, not dallying around the forest looking after gates.”

“Oh, that’s it is it?” Herne chortled. He turned his head to Eloisa. “Looks like you have a fine heir there. What’s your name, dearie?”

Eloisa blinked, unaccustomed to being noticed. “I...I’m Eloisa.”

He winked at her. “Put a bit of backbone into it and I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“How could you do this to me?” The Queen hissed. “I thought... I thought... I thought you cared.”

Herne’s smile left his face and his head sagged. “If you don’t see that I do, then more fool me.” He shook his head. “Let them be who they are meant to be. Let your Eloisa walk in her mother’s footsteps and let the boy go. He deserves better than being forced into a role he doesn’t fit.”

“And you know all about that, do you? Speak from experience with saplings of your own?” Their hands remained clasped between them, sagging now as they stood there in the centre of the room.

“That was not my choice, as you should remember.” The two of them stared into the other’s face, rage and tenderness mixed.

Evan glanced towards Eloisa, feeling uncomfortable. Her eyes shone. If only the two standing could agree then both siblings would get what they wanted. But was that too much to ask? His chest was full of pixies, all flying around inside while they waited.

In the end his mother broke the silence. “Fine. You can have the boy, for what good it will do you. In seven suns from now I will swear him to you.”

Herne nodded, but Evan frowned. Seven suns? Why would that make any difference? What was she planning in that time? He tried to think of any loophole for her to exploit, but found none.

Their two hands fell to their sides, and the Queen flexed her fingers as she returned to her seat.

Herne did not sit. He towered over the other three of them. "I will return after seven suns, and we will exchange his vows then." He frowned at the Queen. "But I expect him to be in the same state as he is now, mind. No punishing him." He kept her gaze til she nodded.

Evan shrunk further into his chair. This was not the sort of conversation he was normally part of. The huntsman obviously knew more about his mother than he had anticipated. So far he seemed to be on Evan's side, but was he really? What would happen in seven suns when this deal was finalised? He would be free of responsibilities to Moonlight, but he would also be free of its protection. Did he really care? Wouldn't being free of the yoke of heirdom be worth the possible dangers of his new role? His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he tried to swallow.

Herne patted Evan on the head as he passed. "Til seven suns, laddie." Then he was gone, just the scent of pine needles and leaf mulch remained to remind them that he had been there.

The room was quiet for some time. Evan didn't dare look at his mother. Would she be angry with him, or irate at the Huntsman? He took a deep breath and dared a peek at his mother in the corner of his eye. She was smiling, her eyes looking out the door where Herne had left.

His sister sat straight-backed staring at him, shaking her head. He caught her gaze and gestured with his eyes from his sister to their mother, but before Eloisa reacted the Queen shook herself and frowned.

"What are we to do with you Uvanli?" She stared at him as if she could see inside his head. No doubt to understand what made him so difficult. Not that he intended to be difficult, it just happened. But he figured that question was better left unanswered.

She sighed, then her eyes hardened. "Why do you have to do this, right at this time?"

Evan blinked. "What time? What's going on?"

The Queen put her hand up to her forehead and massaged her temples. "Of course, you are completely oblivious to what's going on in your own Court."

Evan looked at Eloisa, but she looked down her nose at him. He slouched deeper into the seat. He didn't think he'd get away with putting his feet up on the table between them, but he stared at it considering.

"Evan, you are not getting away with this." the Queen crossed her arms.

He looked at her, wide-eyed, but didn't speak.

"Guardian of the Gates? You wouldn't last a moon outside of this Court." She leant towards him. "When he comes back, you will beg his forgiveness, but refuse to be released from Moonlight. We can't do without you."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "You can't do without me? The layabout, the disappointment, who is oblivious to what's happening in his own Court? Come on, Mother. This is a blessing in disguise for all of us." He pointed at his sister. "We all know Eloisa will make a much better heir than I ever would. She wants it, if nothing else." He looked at them both. "Don't take this away from her now it's been offered."

The Queen frowned at him. "Don't make this conversation about your sister. We are talking about you."

Evan sighed. This wasn't going to be easy. And he couldn't count on Eloisa as she would sit there like the rabbit he'd always called her, waiting to be asked to input into the conversation. However much she wanted this, she wouldn't say anything against their mother.

"If you want me to go ahead with this farce of you becoming the Guardian of the Gates, I can. But then don't come back here asking for my help when you make a hash of it."

"Always good to know I have your full support and expectations, mother, as always." He shrugged. "If I'm that hopeless, it makes me wonder why you insist that I have to be the next ruler of your beloved Moonlight Court."

The Queen's eyes narrowed. "I'm trying to look out for what is best for you, that's all." She spoke through gritted teeth. "But you throw it back in my face."

Evan looked at her. "The situation is what it is. For the good of the Court, so the Huntsman won't go to the other Courts, let's just..."

"Should have thought of that when you started playing with the gates. What were you thinking, Uvanli? Bringing humans over here? For the boggarts?" She shook her head. "I thought I'd taught you better than that."

Evan bit down the retort his heart wanted to respond with, that she hadn't taught them anything as she had always been too busy and had palmed them off on lower fae. They'd gone moons without seeing her as seedlings, and then only been presented to her so she could

sniff at them and send them off again. But he knew rehashing old wounds wouldn't get this conversation any further.

“Mother, you agreed to it. You shook on it, sealed with spittle. That is not easily broken.”

Her eyes sparked at him. “You made no agreement. What I said did not bind you, if you choose not to follow his path for you.” She moved closer and took his hand. “Stay here. Let us look after you. Keep your comforts, rather than being thrown out to the forest where you'll have to find your own way.”

To Evan, the forest sounded more appealing than the stifling atmosphere in the Court. The forest had never frightened him, though he knew many of the creatures that lived there were worthy of fearing. The Huntsman needed to have some sort of plan for keeping him safe in the forest, didn't he? Evan refused to worry about that. First, he had to survive seven suns without agreeing to stay. That appeared more difficult than he had anticipated.

“And then what? What sort of leader will I be if I hide behind you for the rest of your life, long may it be.” He added the last bit as a sop to her disgust at the thought of getting older.

Fae didn't age as humans did, but they gradually thinned over time. Eventually they had the choice to release their physical form and their spirit would drift on the aether to the next world, or they hung on to their spirit long after their physical form had disappeared and became wisps or phantasms unable to move on. Neither of these possibilities suited the Moonlight Queen, so any discussion of her leaving the realm was forbidden. Though he hadn't worked out how he was supposed to discuss his position as her heir without talking about the possibility of a time she was no longer around.

She sniffed. “You're determined to go ahead with this foolish plan?” She searched his eyes for the truth. “In which case I have one final job for you.”



3: CHAPTER THREE

Here it came. The job he needed to do before she would agree to release him. This was what his mother had been angling for, no doubt, through the whole conversation about him leaving the Court.

“While you have been playing around and getting into trouble, we have been worrying about the future of our realm.” She made that sound like a threat. “Valorie’s latest vision shows a great danger, and we need to avert the change that is coming.”

Evan sat, waiting for the big reveal. Moonlight was renowned for their visions of the future, and Valorie was the most respected seer in the Court. What danger had she seen and how could he circumvent that?

She drew in a breath. “But in order to do that, we need the new royal fae sproutlings of both the Starlight and the Sunlight Courts.”

Evan’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t mean you want me to steal them?” The Courts of Starlight and Sunlight were currently at peace, though there was a history of tensions between them. News that both Queens were expecting had brought the two royal families closer over the last few moons. Evan knew that both sproutlings had been due within the last few suns.

She nodded. “That is the only solution we can see within the vision.” She sat up straight. “Do this and I will not stand in your way.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You promised you would release me, mother. There’s nothing you can do to stop that.” Breaking a promise of that magnitude would have repercussions for her, especially one sealed with spittle.

She smiled like a cat with its prey between its paws. “There are many things I could do to stop that agreement without breaking my promise, dear boy. Herne never has learnt the importance of wording and specificity.” She shrugged one shoulder. “If you are not here in seven sun’s time then the promise is invalid. Or I could ask someone else to swear you into service to them and they could refuse to release you. So many possibilities.”

Evan sighed. Was this opportunity going to be lost to him too? He could never do what he wanted, forced into the image his mother wanted him to be.

“So, I will promise you now that I will stand aside as you condemn yourself to this unfulfilling future tramping around the forest looking after the gates, on condition that you bring me those sproutlings.”

Could he do it? “What will happen to the sproutlings, if I did this?”

She smiled. “We would bring them up in the human realm until it was time for them to return and thwart this vision. There they will be hidden from anyone who might want to harm them.”

He frowned and looked at his sister. She watched them both, her face showing no expression. No outrage or hope. No disappointment or collusion.

“They’ll be changelings?” Brought up as a human child without knowing your own heritage had always struck Evan as one of the cruelest things a fae parent could do to their offspring, and those that did return were twisted, unable to perform the most basic magic.

The Queen shook her head. “No, we have a pair of fae who are willing to bring them up as fae, just in the human realm. They will know their heritage so they will be able to return at full strength in the future.”

Evan narrowed his eyes. Something didn’t add up. “Tell me the prophecy.”

“Is that really necessary?” The Queen gestured to Eloisa. “We and the other prophetesses have been studying the vision since it occurred and have come to the conclusion this is the only way to save the realm.”

“Then why don’t one of you do it?” Evan still couldn’t contemplate the idea of stealing sproutlings. They were few in the fae Courts, especially in the royal families, so stealing two of them was no small feat. Twins, like he and Eloisa, were almost unheard of. If they caught him, he would be subject to punishment by the combined Courts and forfeit his friendships in the two affected.

The Queen sniffed. “My movements are tracked closely whenever I leave the mound. Your sister’s too. No, it has to be you, as you frequently tramp around and visit the other courts anyway. Your visit wouldn’t be seen as such a big deal, unlike any other fae from my Court. No one would suspect you. It has to be you.”

That was true. Evan was a frequent visitor at all the other Courts, except Dusklight. But could he do it? Could he take these sproutlings from their cribs and hand them over to his mother?

“If I do this, you promise that you will do everything you can to help me become Guardian of the Gates and to support me in that role. To bring the sproutlings up in full knowledge of their fae heritage and with all honour accorded to them as royal fae?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

He stood, spat on his hand and put it out in front of him. “Swear it.”

She moved her head back. “Really! I don’t think that is necessary, Uvanli.”

He remained still. “I do.” When she didn’t move he continued. “How important is this to you?”

She scowled. “All right then.” She stood, spat on her own hand and they shook. “I agree. Bring me the sproutlings, and I will have them raised as befits their status and will ensure you become successful in this new role.”

When they released hands he smiled. “Thank you, Mother.”

She said nothing more to him, but swept towards the door. “Come Eloisa. We have work to do.”

Eloisa stood, her face glowing. She beamed at Evan before she followed the Queen through the tapestry and away.

Evan sat again. How could he pull this off without being caught? He had only seven suns to sneak into both mounds and steal a sproutling from each, without being noticed, bring them back to Moonlight and hand them over to his mother. He shivered at that thought, but he couldn’t let that stop him. Once this was finished he’d be free of her, free of trying to be something he wasn’t, free of the Court he had never fitted into. That was what he had to keep in mind. Otherwise he would start to doubt the agreement he had made.

He stood and made his way through the tapestried corridors back to his room, considering what he knew about the two Courts and how he could succeed at this task.

Each Court was housed within an earthen mound in the forest, five of them circling around the central Fair. But as he couldn’t be seen, especially once he had the sproutlings, he would have to avoid the Fair. Which meant, he had to forge his own path through the forest

to each mound and back again. Stealing a sproutling was hard enough, but stealing a second sproutling while carrying the first one? That would be impossible. And given the different natures of the two courts he would need to have a different strategy for each.

Once the news was out that the first sproutling was missing, the other courts would keep a closer watch. And, as it was the end of the moon's cycle, he would be doing this when his magic was at its dimmest.

He passed through the opening into his room and slumped on his bed.

Seedlings were such a rare gift to the fae. His heart-wrenched to think what the loss of these sproutlings would do to the royal families of their Courts. But he had to trust the vision that worried his mother was clear, and that there was no other way to avoid whatever disaster Valorie had seen. And he had to trust that she would support him if he were caught. Fae Royals were unpredictable and vindictive when crossed. He shuddered. At least it wasn't Dusklight, where they experimented on fae animal hybrids as punishments for the slightest of infractions.

He decided to go to Sunlight first. Prince Florian was only a few tens of moons younger than him, and Evan had often visited their Court when he was avoiding his own. The doors were always kept wide open, so it would be easy to go in. Yes, he would start there. And he would arrive at dusk as the sunlight dimmed, so their powers would be weaker. He looked round his room considering what he would need to take with him.



4: CHAPTER FOUR

Three suns later Evan set out, his plan honed and his preparations completed. Three guards stood by the oak trees that framed the doorway to the Sunlight mound. Evan nodded at them, and they allowed him to pass. He swallowed hard. Anyone could enter the Court, leaving would be trickier. In the colonnaded passageway inside, a brownie approached him and led him straight to a guest room to freshen up. He smoothed down his shirt and spiked up his hair again, using copious amounts of glitter dust to add sparkle to his dull brown hair. Impressions were vital in the Sunlight Court after all. He stowed his pack under the bed and adjusted his cape before heading out with a deep breath to join the Court for their evening gathering.

He walked through the colonnades to the central chamber, where he bowed to the King of Sunlight seated by the antler thrones. Those had always looked uncomfortable, so Evan understood why they preferred not to use them.

With a flourish he produced the arrangement of moonflowers he had persuaded his mother to provide. The large trumpet-shaped silver flowers with purple veins grew only around the moonlight mound. His mother tended them herself and imbued them with her magic.

“A gift from the Moonlight Court at your auspicious time.” Evan bowed his head as he offered the flowers.

The King frowned at him. “Your mother is consideration herself. This gesture shall be remembered.” He waved at one of the fae to take the flowers from Evan and then continued his conversation that had been interrupted.

Evan was confused. The King didn’t look as happy as a new father should, but having been dismissed, Evan couldn’t continue the conversation to find out why. He backed away from the group and mingled with the other fae for a time. It was remarkably sombre with low-key music that sounded more like a dirge than fitting a celebratory birth. The chatter babbled on unabated. Evan kept his eye out for the new sproutling to be presented to the group, but it was nowhere to be seen. In Moonlight, sproutlings and their mothers were confined to their quarters for the first moons. Maybe Sunlight kept their sproutlings close until they were older too.

Evan looked around for Prince Florian, as a way to pass the time, but couldn’t spot him either. So Evan meandered to one side of the hall and tried his best to ignore the other fae who stood in groups commenting on everyone else’s appearance. He had always loathed the constant judgement in Sunlight, and because of that while he visited it frequently, he never stayed for long.

When the food was served, Evan ate without tasting. His appetite stifled by the impending start of his mission. He left the gathering as soon as possible and returned to his room. There he paced, waiting for the sounds from outside to die down. After an indeterminable length of time they did. It was still light in the colonnaded passageways as he left his room and, following his memories of escapades with Florian, he found his way to the royal quarters.

As a child of Moonlight, he wrapped himself in an obfuscation, which made him less obvious and, he hoped, more able to explore without being spotted. Enveloped in that, he stepped through the entranceway into the royal sleeping quarters. There were no guards here, as none were thought to be needed so deep into the mound. The king and queen slept in the room on one side and Prince Florian across the hall. Evan scanned the other door, a nursery and playroom he remembered being invited to a few times as a sapling while the adults talked.

The new sproutling with an attendant were inside, both deep in sleep. So, this was the new Prince of Sunlight. He looked chubby, all pudgy and crumpled. His head was bald and a spot on the top pulsed with his heart beat. His ears had a hint of a point and he licked his lips in his sleep.

Evan took a deep breath. This was it, the moment of no return. He stretched his arms and cradling the boy’s head lifted him out of his crib. With a glimpse around to check that he

hadn't woken the attendant, he settled the sproutling within the crook of his arm, covered by his magic where no one would spot him. Evan sprinted back to his room, heart pounding.

When he arrived, he spent long minutes studying everything he could about the sproutling, so the details of his form were imprinted on Evan's mind. Then he wrapped the sproutling in a large hornbeam leaf he had brought with him and glamoured the swaddled sproutling to look like a sleeping wolf cub. He lay them on the floor by his bed, and tried to sleep.

He lay awake for a long time, waiting for the loss to be discovered. When, at last, there were running feet and shouting it felt like he had only closed his eyes for a second. He checked under his bed, the sproutling still lay sleeping, and still appeared like a wolf cub. Good. He took a sponge full of milk from his bundle and shook the sproutling gently. Resting the end of the sponge on the sproutling's lip he encouraged him to drink. The sproutling did with gusto, falling asleep again once the sponge was empty. Evan hoped that the sproutling would sleep for long enough to get them both out of Sunlight.

Now was the tricky part - acting nonchalant and leaving without raising suspicion. He dressed with care, spiking his hair and using more glitter, before venturing out into the passageways to be told what the fuss was.

He had to press himself to the side of the colonnades to avoid the brownies who ran back and forth chattering to each other. In the central room there was uproar. The king sat on his antler throne shouting and threatening everyone. Evan sidled up to the Prince, who he hadn't seen the evening before.

"Florian, what's all the fuss?" Evan whispered.

The Prince snorted. "The sproutling is missing."

Evan gasped and covered his mouth.

"He'll turn up. It can't have gone far." Florian shrugged. "They're searching the whole mound as we speak. By the thorns, if anyone has taken it they will know my father's wrath."

"You're not worried about it?" Evan looked at his friend.

He stuck out his bottom lip. "As I said, he'll turn up."

"But isn't he your brother?"

Florian narrowed his eyes. "I guess."

Before they said anything more, a fae guard pushed his way through the crowd and bowed before the King. "Your majesty, the envoys from the Courts of Starlight and Duskligh are missing."

Murmurs from the other fae rose in volume, but the King quieted them with a hand. “You are sure?” When the guard nodded he continued. “We mustn’t jump to hasty opinions.”

Evan and Prince Florian stood and watched as fae of all sorts came and went, delivering messages to the King and being sent on errands.

After some time Evan nudged Florian again. “Any chance I can get out of here? You know how my mother is...”

The Prince smiled, nodded and approached his father.

The King came over to Evan. “Of course you may take your leave of us, but we would appreciate it if you allowed us to check what you take with you.”

Evan inclined his head. “Most certainly. I would not have it any other way.”

The King half-smiled. “In which case, farewell. And with our appreciation for your understanding.” He nodded at the two saplings and returned to his discussions.

Evan drew Florian off to one side. “I’ll be back to visit again soon. I need to talk to you.”

The Prince raised his eyebrows. “I await it with anticipation. Take care.”

“You too. Try to keep your father from doing anything too crazy, OK?” The anger and upset in the Court was more than Evan had anticipated. He had misgivings about the possible consequences, but he couldn’t back down now. “I’ll be back soon.”

Florian nodded and with that Evan left the throne room. A guard followed him back to the rooms he had been given.

Evan breathed a sigh of relief to see his things hadn’t been disturbed. He showed the guard his meagre pack, then pointed under his bed. “I found him yesterday, and I’m taking him back to Moonlight to recover.” He bent down and pulled out the glamoured sproutling and held it to his chest. “Poor thing. He’s been sleeping nearly all the time since I found him.”

The guard looked down at the cub and nodded. Evan had previously turned up at Sunlight with creatures he was nursing back to health, so he was glad the guard accepted this and didn’t inspect the cub more deeply. It was one thing to have glamoured the sproutling to look like a wolf cub, but he didn’t want to mess with the actuality of his physical make-up so a touch would reveal the deception. Transforming living things into another was advanced and prone to instability. You needed to have an in-depth understanding of all the bits that made up what you were changing it into, and then the same of the original creature to change it back again. And messing with the Prince of a different Court - that was not something Evan wanted to risk.

With a tight smile Evan collected his pack, and with the wolf cub tucked into his left arm he followed the guard out of the mound. When he saw the sky through the open doorway,

he breathed a sigh of relief, though part of him only relaxed once he had been waved past the guards stationed there and made his way back along the straight stone path between an avenue of trees into the forest.

When he was out of sight of the mound, he stepped off the path and into the forest. The stones at the edge of the fair refused entry to anyone or anything covered in a glamour. Removing the glamour to travel through the fair from Sunlight with a sproutling would be noticed. He would most certainly be remembered. So the long way through the forest it had to be.

Once deep into the woods he stopped and, putting the wolf cub on the ground, he set his hands on his knees and panted. He had made it out of Sunlight with their sproutling. When his breathing and heart rate had calmed, he picked up the sproutling and set off through the forest back to Moonlight.

The shadows moved around him as he continued between the trees and shrubs. The air filled with rustling and tweeting from animals he had disturbed. Evan searched ahead of them, watching out for dangers on their route.

Along with the higher fae, that lived in the Courts or claimed their own territory from the forest, there were the wilder, lower fae, which dwelt in the trees like the boggarts he had been consorting with before. Though that wouldn't give him any favours if he ran into one now. He picked his way over the tree stumps, watching out for his feet, while also sensing where things were in the forest.

The sproutling in his arms stirred and he removed the glamour. The sproutling held tight to the sponge and sucked at it, dribbles escaping from the side of his mouth. His eyes moved from Evan's face to his chest and back again. Evan smiled down at him.

"Who's a good boy then?" He tickled the sproutling under his chin. "Let's get you back to Moonlight and then I can go back out for the next sproutling." He sighed. "How did I get sucked into this!"

He set off again, making his way between the trees, and soon he approached the path to the Dusklight Court. He had to cross the path undetected to reach Moonlight, as he knew Dusklight monitored their path when most of the other Courts didn't. It would take too long to go round through the forest, and expose him to more of the dangers there. He couldn't risk missing his deadline and not fulfilling his mother's ultimatum within the timescales she had set for Herne.

At the edge of the trees he paused and checked both ways to see if there was anyone else around. The way was clear, so he stepped over the raised wooden planks, careful not to touch

them. Dusklight fae were twisted and explored the darker uses of glamour and fae magic. Only their King could control them, and he rarely did as he enjoyed the sport and terror. Theirs was a Court where only the strong survived. Evan had only visited once and had no desire to return, especially not as the subject of their entertainment as he would be if he was caught.

With a deep breath he was back under the trees on the opposite side of the path. And soon back at the entrance to the Moonlight Court. The doors were closed when he approached, so he walked three times widdershins around the mound humming the Ballad of the Moon. A creaking and groaning shattered the calm of the clearing as he returned to the pair of birch trees for the fourth time, and the mound opened revealing a sandy slope down into the interior.

He entered and hummed the ballad again so that the mound re-closed itself behind him. Then he found the third tapestry on the left and ducked behind it. As a child he had found the secret of navigating around inside the Moonlight mound without following the main passageways. He used this now to get to his mother's rooms without being seen. He didn't trust any of the Court members to keep his secret, even if he was doing it on the Queen's orders.

He ducked back through the tapestry wall behind the throne room and snuck into the drawing room they had sat in with Herne, only a few suns before. His mother was there with Raven, her most trusted advisor. They both looked up as he crossed the threshold. Raven had spiked black hair and a black denim waistcoat buttoned tight overflowing grey knee-length culottes. They were one of the few in the Moonlight Court to eschew the Queen's favoured white.

The Queen smiled and sagged slightly in her chair. "Uvanli."

Evan held out the sproutling. "From Sunlight."

The Queen stood and caressed a finger over the sproutling's face. She looked almost maternal.

Evan passed her the sproutling, and she passed it straight away to Raven. They stood with stiff arms, their whole body tense and trembling.

Evan nodded and started back towards the door. "Now for number two."

The Queen frowned. "Off so soon?"

Evan turned his head back to her. "No reason to wait is there? The huntsman returns in two suns." And with that he disappeared through the door and into the Moonlight passages.



The Court of Starlight would be more difficult to get into, as the doors to their mound were normally kept closed. Only those who had a token from the Court could enter.

The King and Queen of Starlight had been blessed with a fourth sproutling and had opened the whole mound for celebrations. Evan had heard they planned to revel for ten suns and ten darkness to share their blessings with the rest of their Court, so he was glad when he arrived to see this was still ongoing.

The gates to the mound were open, and the festivities had spilled out to the forest edge. All the Starlight fae wore their finest lace gauze dresses and the dancing was wild and exuberant. Musicians sat atop the mound and played til the sweat dripped onto their strings and they could play no longer. Then another player took over to keep the music swirling through the trees.

Evan joined in and drank a cup of wine to bless the sproutling's head. A daughter, as beautiful as her mother the rumours said. But he avoided joining the dancing. Fae music was be-spelled to keep the dancers dancing, and he had no wish to be lost in the music and the partners whirling around. As a royal fae, it would have a weaker grip on him than on others, but even so he stepped between the ash trees and down the steps into the mound before he was tempted to participate. The joy in every sound and on every face cut him, as he knew that his actions would cause them great despair and pain. But he held onto his mother's insistence that he acted for the best of the realm as a whole. He hardened his heart and wove further into the mound.

It was dark inside, with pinpricks of light scattered across the ceiling far above his head. The walls were made of woven reeds, forming a twisting pathway to the main chamber. The passage was narrow enough he could stretch out his arms and brush the sides with his fingertips. This was only his third visit inside the starlight mound, and every time the path through the screens was different. Sounds and lights from other fae deeper in the mound teased him, but he walked alone.

After a few more twists he came to the edge of the throne room. In the starlight mound it was rectangular. He had, this time, entered in a corner and the thrones stood on the opposite side. The king and queen sat on their matching tree thrones with roots that curled and twined into the floor at their feet and branches that spread as a canopy over their heads. The

music here was calmer, and the fae swayed with it as they chatted, rather than the exuberant dancing of outside.

Evan ducked behind some other fae, staying out of sight of the royal pair. His last visit had not ended well. The fewer fae who knew he was there the better.

However, that would be difficult. He recognised many fae from the wider Starlight family, as well as envoys from other courts including one from Moonlight. Cypress was a haughty woodland fae who thought too much of herself. She spotted him across the room and her eyes questioned him, but with a shake of his head he ordered her to ignore him. At least he hoped she would. From her open mouth and wide eyes he guessed she hadn't been told about his mission. By the thorns, he hoped she wouldn't be a problem.

The queen kissed the bundle of blankets in her arms and passed it off to another, shorter fae with a crumpled green top hat and a shaggy beard. He took the sproutling, as that must be what it was, through an opening behind the thrones and into the darkness beyond. Evan clutched his shadows and crept around the edge of the room to follow, his back against the wall. Cypress followed him with her eyes, but made no other sign that she'd noticed him.

The leprechaun carried the sproutling through the woven screen corridors to the communal seedling's area where they also slept. Hyperactive seedlings filled the space, all refusing their elders' insistence they should sleep. As soon as they saw the sproutling they all crowded around, stroking, poking and cooing over it. The leprechaun held it lower so they could see her for a short while, before he ushered them away and took the sproutling into her sleeping area.

Evan crouched in the shadows by the entranceway and waited for the seedlings to snuggle down and quiet on their mats tucked into the alcoves around the edge of the room. His leg was numb before the caretakers left for their sleeping spaces and the light dimmed further. Snores and groans whispered around the area.

Evan stood and stretched. Then he tiptoed across the central area to the sproutling. He lifted her up, grabbed a fabric sling from the table next to her and wrapped it around himself to carry her. She had a beautiful oval face with dark brown eyes, which gazed deep into him. She made no noise, just observed everything.

As he settled the sproutling in the sling around his chest a bleary-eyed seedling appeared in the door opening.

"I'm thirsty." She stated, rubbing her eyes.

He pointed to the water butt in the centre of the room. His control of the shadows must be slipping if he'd been seen.

She nodded and toddled off to get a cup and drink before returning to her sleeping area.

He stood unmoving, his eyes flashing around the rest of the seedlings, but none moved and the girl returned to her sleeping area without another glance at him. He concentrated on his obfuscation and moved back into the central area of the Starlight Court. His heart raced and sweat ran down between his shoulder blades. He took a deep breath and drew on his dwindling resources. He had to get out before his magic ran dry.



5: CHAPTER FIVE

He looked down at the sproutling in his arms. She was a princess of the Starlight Court. Her birthright would be within this mound. Wouldn't she need something as a token, so when she returned she could reenter? He paused, torn. To leave the mound without something to give her access to return seemed like a second act of aggression against her. Yet every moment he wasted looking for something was one which would use up his dwindling supply of magic and make discovery of his actions more likely. He rocked on his feet and scanned the chamber.

There! On the cabinet was an ornate carved wooden brooch in the shape of the sigil of starlight. He would take that and, in time, when she returned to the faery realm she would be able to enter her family's mound. He tucked it in next to the sproutling, and part of his worries lifted. Now it was time to make his way out of the mound. There would be no glamour here, no pretending the sproutling was an animal, just his obfuscation and a reliance on everyone else being distracted by the celebrations.

His gaze darted at each intersection as he tried to return the way he had come. After a few tense moments passing other fae in the corridors, he made it back to the mound entrance. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the sky with the first kiss of sunrise through the opening in the mound and heard the music still playing on the outside. Just the entranceway to go and he was out.

With the party still going on, he sidled out of the mound. Most of the Starlight fae were addled on fae wine, or the be-spelled music, and had no eyes for anyone outside their glow.

Two dancing fae spiralled out of the group and barrelled into him, giggling as they fell to the floor at his feet. Evan paused, strengthening his obfuscation, watching for any sign that he'd been spotted. He trembled as other fae helped the two off the floor and drew them back into the dance without a glance in his direction. That had been too close.

He escaped into the forest. As soon as he was deep within the trees, he stepped off the path and wended his way through the forest back towards Moonlight.

He moved cautiously through the trees, staying away from any of the other creatures that lived there. Travelling like this had become almost second nature to him during his time dallying in the forest. But he'd never had such a precious cargo. Stealing the sproutling was bad enough, but to be the cause of anything else happening to her was unthinkable.

He had to believe they would be well looked after and, when the time was right, they would return. Still, with the sproutling now awake and looking around at him he couldn't help but think that she was the cutest sproutling he had ever seen. She sucked her thumb and stared at him. Black hair just a fuzz around her head stuck out at all angles. Her heartbeat was a counterpoint to his, faster and softer.

All too soon he was back at the Moonlight mound. He ducked through the tapestried corridors, using the hidden paths behind them as before, and found his mother's private rooms and Raven waiting for him. The sproutling from Sunlight lay on the rug in the centre of the room while Raven made lights dance around above him. Evan had to suppress a smile to see the domestic scene showing their parental side. The sproutling in his arms squealed and Raven looked around.

"Ah, your highness." Their face lit up. "Is that...? You really did it."

Evan inclined his head. "As you see. Now, please inform the Queen that I have fulfilled my side of the bargain and things can proceed."

Raven started towards the door behind Evan, but was stopped by a voice.

"No need." The Queen herself stepped into the room. "May I?" She reached out her hands for the sproutling Evan held.

He tightened his arms around her, a reflex from childhood when he had to protect those things he loved from his mother. With an exhalation he forced his arms to relax and he untied the wrap to release the sproutling. Raven hovered next to him. Their face stressed and their hands out ready under the sproutling. But it was not needed.

The princess of Starlight gurgled at him as he forced himself to hand her over. Somehow he felt more responsible for her than he had for the Sunlight boy.

The Queen laid her on the rug beside the other sproutling. The princess seemed slighter than the chubby boy, though longer.

The Queen smiled down at them both and sighed. “Well done, my son. You have succeeded in what I set you.” She patted him on the shoulder and turned to Raven. “Organise those who will look after them and we can move on with this.”

Raven inclined their head and left.

Evan hovered, unsure whether to go too, but unwilling to leave the sproutlings with his mother. Concern for them won out. He settled himself into one of the wingback chairs and waved one hand towards her. “You go, mother. I’m sure there are a plentitude of tasks awaiting your attention. I’ll stop them...rolling off the rug, or whatever they may get into.”

She frowned, but left.

She had used that excuse to leave Evan and his sister so many times over the moons they’d been growing up. He felt smug being able to use it as a dismissal now.

He had barely settled back into the chair when Raven returned with two fae. Evan studied them. A dowdy woman slouched over accompanied a man with torn clothes and straw in his hair. Were these really the fae his mother trusted the two royal sproutlings with?

The Queen returned soon after. “Welcome, welcome. You must be Xander and Soria?” She nodded at them and holding her elbows raised her arms towards them, inclined her head slightly.

The two new fae flushed and nodded.

“Well, we are very grateful for your help.” The Queen smiled her insincere smile. “Uvanli dear, make yourself useful and pass over the sproutlings.”

Evan stood slowly, assessing the situation. Could he refuse? But then what would happen to him? No, he had trusted his mother this far. He had to continue to now, with her choice of these two fae. She must have her reasons for selecting them. He picked up the boy first and approached the group inside the door.

The Queen pushed him forward. “Now, they are to be taken to the human realm and brought up with all the comforts you can provide for them.”

Raven lifted a satchel that clinked as he passed it to the male fae. “This should provide you with the means to set up somewhere close to the gate. But you will need to live as humans once you arrive, so bear that in mind when you choose your dwelling as you will need to maintain it.”

The two fae looked at each other and nodded profusely. The lady put out her arms for the sproutling. “Don’t you fear. We’ll blend right in with those humans, and the babes will be right at home with us.” Her smile was crooked and showed missing teeth.

“Good.” The Queen turned back to Evan. “Well, get the second one then.”

Evan returned to where the Princess of Starlight lay and lifted her up, stroking her hair. The brooch was next to her, so he picked that up too and walked back to the others. He handed the sproutling over to the male fae, giving him both the girl and the brooch.

“She will need this when she returns, so do not lose it, sell it, or give it away. It is not yours and she must keep it.”

The man nodded, his fingers tightening over it.

“Swear it.” Evan insisted.

His eyes widened. “I swear.”

Evan nodded.

The Queen’s cruel smile lit her face. “Good then. We will send further instructions, but until we do settle in and look after the sproutlings.” She turned to her aide. “Raven, take them through the gate to the human realm and point them in the right direction.”

Raven bowed and ushered the four out of the room and away from the Moonlight Court.

The Queen turned to Evan. “Uvanli, I am pleased with you.” She turned her charm on him. “Won’t you reconsider and remain here? With us? Actions like these show how much of an asset you would be to our Court.”

Evan stared, unable to form a denial.

“We can forget about all your youthful exuberance and start over at my side. A team, just the two of us.” She laid a hand on his shoulder.

Evan shuddered and shrugged the hand off. “You wish to break a promise and have me be the cause of breaking yours?” He shook his head. “Even if it was something I wanted, which it is not, I couldn’t do that to Eloisa. She’s always wanted to be your heir, and now she has the chance to follow her dream. Yet you wish me to steal that away from her.”

The Queen froze, her eyes hardening. “Eloisa is unimportant right now. We are talking about you.”

He raised one eyebrow and stepped back. “How dare you say that? She is far more qualified to be your heir, you just don’t see that. Let her show you. I know Moonlight is in far better hands with her than it would be with me.” And he shuddered. “And if this is the type of actions I’d be expected to do as your heir, to prove my worthiness, then no thank you.”

She spread her arms wide. "Uvanli -"

He held up one hand between them. "Stop. I have completed my side of the bargain. Now it is on you to complete your side." He stepped back again. "Or I will go and find Herne and between us we will tell everyone how much your word is worth."

She snorted. "As if you would publicise your own wrongdoings in that way. No, we work far better together. Join me."

Evan walked out of the room, his last words over his shoulder. "The time is up when the sun next rises, mother, resign yourself to keeping your promises. Both of them." The crumpled fabric wrap he'd carried the Starlight sprouting in still hung from his waist.

He knew she wouldn't stop, but he hoped he could stay out of her way until Herne arrived. Then he would be rid of his responsibilities here.



Evan hid in his room for the rest of that sun, waiting for the next when Herne would return and change his life. He didn't even allow Eloisa past his tapestry door. He couldn't face her after what their mother had said. His stomach couldn't tolerate food, so he tried to meditate and find his awareness of the world around him. Even within the mound he was able to sense the forest beyond. He tried to separate the trees and creatures and other fae travelling through it. He had some success, but struggled to hold his awareness from within the mound with his magic so dry. Yet he dared not go out in case his mother tried to break his resolve.

At times his mind wandered to the gates, and what exactly he would need to do as their guardian. He took this as an opportunity to be rid of a role he had never fitted, but what if looking after the gates was equally tedious? What if he was unable to survive in the forest? Where would he be based? Would he continue to live in Moonlight, or would his mother make that impossible once he was no longer part of her Court. She wouldn't throw him out, would she? Surely she couldn't?

Evan shook his head. Dwelling on these thoughts would drive him crazy. He had to take this step into the unknown and trust it would work out. He loved the forest, the dark, dank shadows there, and the wildness of the creatures. He had always been intrigued by the gates and the idea of different realms. The human realm was easy to find ways through to, but he had caught glimpses before of other realms, deeper realms where other creatures ruled.

Maybe he would be able to explore those. He promised himself he would explore those realms, when he knew what he needed to do in this one.

His thoughts returned to the sproutlings, those seedlings condemned to grow up in the human realm. He must be here when they returned. He would do everything possible to ease their transition back into the fae realm and their roles within it.

Evan smiled. Once they returned, he would explore the other realms. He swore to himself that until then, he would work on their behalf in faery and be the first to their side when they returned.

That evening was the full moon, the high point of the Moonlight Court's power. He knew there would be dancing and celebrations on the top of the mound, but he didn't join in. He knew he could take the moonlight's power, as the other fae from the Court would be doing, but he stayed inside. He knew he needed to restore his magic, but he waited. He waited in his rooms for the Huntsman to return and transform his life.

Running feet disturbed him and he walked to the door opening and drew the tapestry back.

"Prince Uvanli. You are requested." A hob panted, his gnarled legs not made for running.

Evan sighed. "My mother knows I am not to be disturbed." He turned back into his room.

"The Huntsman is here and requests you attend him and the Queen."

Evan's heart rate picked up. He followed the hob back through the mound and out into the evening air.

"Ah, here he is now." The Huntsman's voice echoed around the clearing atop the mound. "Good to see you, laddie."

The Queen stood there, tall and regal dressed in cream. But the usual dancing and drinking in of the moonlight was absent. The Court stood, watching the Huntsman. The players had put down their instruments and nobody spoke.

"Good plan to do this at the full moon. Adds to the power of our binding." Herne was dressed the same as before. His beard was just as wild and the furs just as haphazardly wrapped around him. His black eyes glittered in the moonlight. "Now, let's get on with it."

The Queen did not move. Her eyes raged at the Huntsman.

"Now, Ysult. Don't force me to invoke our agreement. You sealed it with your own spittle." Herne's voice pitched low, so only the closest fae could hear him.

She turned to Evan, entreating him without words.

He stepped forward to face Herne and squared his shoulders. "I am ready." His stomach tried to make that a lie, but he forced his body to relax.

The Queen pursed her lips together, but held out her hands, palms up.

Evan put his hands on top of hers, and she wound their joined hands in streams of moonlight.

“Uvanli ter Egreou, child of my loins and son of Moonlight, I release you from your vows joining you to the Court of Moonlight. All here may witness. You have served us well and move on to higher tasks. Know you are always welcome in our Court.” This last she said through gritted teeth.

The bands of light dissolved, and as they dissipated Evan felt freer. The Queen dropped her hands from under his. Herne stepped up to face him, lifting his hands to take the place of the Queen’s.

“Uvanli ter Egreou, son of Moonlight, I swear you to the custodianship of the gates. From this moment forward you will guard them, watch over them, and renew them. You will also bear the responsibility for all of those beings that cross over into our realm through them. The Treaty of the Yews between the Courts is now binding on you. When needed, you will report to the Courts on activity through the gates and their condition.” Green light forming leaves bound their hands together as Herne spoke.

Evan felt his connection to the forest strengthening and his awareness of the activity and inconsistencies within it deepening. He looked up at Herne, feeling his ancient core through their joined hands. There was something familiar about him, but Evan couldn’t work out what.

Whispers around them broke Evan’s concentration, and he looked at the other fae gathered in the clearing on top of the Moonlight mound. They looked back and forth between him, the Huntsman and the Queen.

Herne dropped his hands, nodded at the Queen, turned and shuffled back to the forest. With a whistle he was joined by his hounds at the edge of the clearing. Soon they were nothing but an echo of growls from deeper into the trees.



6: CHAPTER SIX

Evan stared into the dark trees. He had achieved his wish and was no longer beholden to his mother's Court, but what did he do now? Where did he go? In the corner of his eye he saw his mother gesturing.

The festivities began again, though Evan could tell the other fae still watched the royal circle. The Queen called for Raven, who approached them both.

"Arrange for pixies to be sent to the other Courts informing them of Uvanli's new role. They are to follow the forms in the Treaty of the Yews too, and allow him access when he is in the area." The Queen's voice was tight and severe, higher in tone than normal.

Raven inclined their head to one side. "Right away or after sunrise?"

The Queen sniffed. "Do it now. I won't have it be said that we have shirked our obligations." She turned to Evan. "Will you be staying to receive those, or are you heading off immediately to do your new duties?"

Evan had been so focused on reaching this point that he hadn't thought about what he would do once it was achieved. "I'll, um, stay for those and put my things here in order." He needed to find Herne and learn more about what he had to do. But it would be helpful to be assured of his access to the other Courts first. Just in case he needed to shelter in one.

All the Courts had a collection of pixies who were bound to the Court for a predetermined length of time depending on the bargain they had made with the ruler of each Court. One of their tasks was to deliver messages. Raven returned with four dressed in matching livery to show their allegiance to Moonlight.

The Queen addressed them. “I need messages to the four other Courts. The same to each. As follows: ‘For the rulers of the Court. Uvanli ter Egreou has been released from his allegiance to the Court of Moonlight and has been instituted as the Guardian of the Gates. He will work across the forest and have responsibility for all the gates to other realms and those who pass through into our realm from any of them. The Treaty of the Yews is now binding on him and as such he has a right to board and sustenance when requested. Please confirm you have received this message and that you accept and understand your responsibilities.’ Stop.” She looked around at the four pixies. “I expect you to report back to me before the end of the sun with their replies.”

The pixies nodded and flew off into the trees. The Queen sniffed and nodded at Evan, then returned her attention to the rest of her Court. She clapped her hands, and the music recommenced. The other fae were drawn into the dance and they continued their revels in the moonlight that strengthened their abilities.

Evan wandered to the edge of the clearing and sat. Would he still need moonlight to recharge himself, or now that he was no longer a member of the Court was he cut off from that? He had lived all of his life with the phases of the moon dictating the limits of what he was able to do. It would be strange if he now had a more consistent well of magic, rather than the continual decrease over the moon’s cycle followed by refilling to overflowing every full moon. Every Court was bound to the light of its name and that’s what gave their members power. But what was he now he had left the Court?

He closed his eyes and focused on his other senses. The moonlight streamed across his body, and it nourished him as always. He relaxed, as it answered one question about his future. As he recharged, he broadened his awareness beyond himself to the wider clearing and the forest beyond. All the figures in the clearing were visible to him as wisps of power, brighter or dimmer depending on their strength. Now that he wasn’t allied with the Court he was prevented from probing too far. So he turned his attention to the forest. There he felt the power in the ground and how it swirled and eddied between the trees and plants. He could feel the conglomerations which indicated gates and the sparks of different creatures and wild fae that inhabited the forest.

He ran his fingers through the leaf mulch on the ground and brushed the fern leaves next to him. Faint swirls of power drew from them and were absorbed into himself as he did so. He froze and stared at his hand. Had he just drawn power from the forest? What did this mean? He needed to talk to the Huntsman, and soon. Once the other Courts had confirmed

his appointment he would search Herne out and learn from him what it means to be tied to the forest.



Evan remained on the edge of the forest long after the rest of the Moonlight Court had returned into the mound, and long after the sun had risen. He wasn't sure if it was still home, and he had no desire to move. He knew further upheaval was coming, but he was content to wait for it. There was no use rushing it, or running from it. So he sat and waited, admiring the purple and pinks of the sun as it first peeped over the treetops and then emerged further.

A flitter in the corner of his eye drew his attention. A pixie swooped into the mound. He jumped up to follow it, wanting to be there when the message was delivered. They found the Queen in the throne room sitting on her giant stone throne engaging with three of her advisors in a heated discussion. Eloisa sat on the side, observing everything, as always. As Evan and the pixie entered, they stopped and the room fell into silence.

The pixie bowed to the Queen and settled on the arm of the throne. "The Queen of Dawnlight accepts the new Guardian and requests that he visits their Court soon to apprise them of his role and to discuss how that can be mutually beneficial." The pixie's voice was high and squeaky but audible. Wild pixies were unable to speak at a pitch that the other fae could hear, but part of taking service with a Court was a binding that lowered the pitch of their voices so they could deliver messages.

One down, three more responses to come.

The Queen sniffed. "Typical. She's always looking out for ways to take advantage of every situation." She pointed at Evan. "I forbid you to go there."

He raised one eyebrow, but any further response was stopped as two more pixies arrived.

The first of these repeated the movements of the other pixie. "The Court of Dusklight is displeased that the decision was made by Moonlight alone. If they had been made aware of the position beforehand, then they would have offered an alternative candidate. They feel Uvanli is barely out of his seedling years and still has many years to go as a sapling before he should settle down and choose his future role within the fae community. But as they have only been informed after the fact they will abide by the Treaty as required of them."

The Queen sniffed. "As if this was my choice."

The bow the next pixie made was much deeper, and she quivered as she returned upright. “Starlight was closed and the mound was not opened for me to enter and deliver my message.”

The Queen frowned, as did many of her advisors. “You know how to ring the bell. Return and they will let you in.”

The pixie bowed again. “I did ring, but no answer. Many footprints on ground and smell of blood. I not go back.” She crossed her arms and stared at the Queen.

The Queen stood and stared down at the pixie. “You will return and get a response from them. Or I will extend your term of contract with our Court.”

The pixies all twittered, their voices returning to their normal squeak as they were agitated. All three of them swooped together, joined by some of their brethren who had been lighting the room, and stood against the Queen.

Evan stepped forward. “Mother, let’s wait and see what the message from Sunlight is. If necessary I can go to the Starlight Court myself with the news. But the pixie has done as you asked.” His mind raced with speculations about what had happened at Starlight. It was just a misunderstanding. Maybe they were all sleeping off the ten suns of revels they’d had for the celebration of the royal sproutling’s birth. Maybe they had gone into seclusion for its loss.

Further discussion on this point halted when the last pixie returned. It flew low and laboriously, stopping in the middle of the group with a sigh. Its livery was ragged and smeared with dirt.

“Sunlight in mourning.” The pixie said. “I tried to deliver message, but King wounded in battle. Prince Florian in charge. He says fine.”

Evan stumbled backwards, knocking against a stool and going down with a bump on it. The other fae all started asking questions of the pixie, but none were comprehensible over the others.

The Queen put up her hand. “Stop.” Everyone quieted, and she turned to the pixie. “What battle?”

“Sunlight King go to Starlight to get sproutling back. Didn’t get it. They forced mound open and tried to take it back. Starlight now in ruins. King of Sunlight dying.”

The Queen blanched. The other fae stared at each other. The noise of those around him muffled in Evan’s ears. He felt nauseous. He was responsible for all those deaths. The end of the Starlight Court. No wonder the other pixie couldn’t get in - there wasn’t a Court to get into any more.

“Was this the better future you envisioned?” He snorted. “I really am glad we don’t see the worse alternative. That would have been too much to bear.”

“Don’t meddle in things you don’t understand, Uvanli.” The Queen snapped back.

“Don’t meddle? Don’t meddle? You’re the one that insisted I had to - ”

“Not now.” She cut him off frowning. “We need to face the future and not dwell on what has happened, regrettable as it is.”

Starlight had been a Court of wonder, of delights and secrets. A place you only gained entrance to by invitation, and to have that be ripped apart and lost was more than Evan could bear. He walked away from the group.

“Uvanli, return here. We need to discuss what we do now.” The Queen’s voice rose, almost shrieking.

He stopped and looked back at them. “No mother, you need to decide what to do now. I know what I’m doing next.” With that he turned on his heel and returned to his chambers.



7: CHAPTER SEVEN

Everything was scattered across his room, a big jumbled heap of clothes and books and leaves and anything and everything else. He grabbed a pack and sorted through for what he would find useful. The formal clothes and moonlight regalia he tossed to one side. The set of hunting knives and river stones he packed. He also packed his scrying bowl and a pestle and mortar - just in case he needed to do any potion making. Any ingredients he might need were in the forest, or available from one of the sellers at the fair. Not that he anticipated doing much potion making, it had never been a particularly strong point of his, but it was better to take the tools just in case.

One book in each hand he considered them. How long was he going to be gone for? How frequently would he return to the Court where he had grown up? He knew he had to spend most of his time in the forest, but where would he sleep? With a sigh he pushed both books into his pack, as he hoped he would find somewhere safe to read.

He took a couple of sets of loose linen shirts, the ones his mother hated him wearing but he found too comfortable to give up. And his spare boots. Those would be vital if he spent his time in the forest. He wrapped his panpipes carefully in their leaf wrappings and slid down the side of his pack. Then he gathered his acorn collection and split them between all his different pockets. He picked up the wrap he had carried the sproutling out of Starlight in and, with a sigh, packed that too.

Eloisa came by. "I wanted to give you this." She sniffed and held out a thick copper chain bracelet with a rabbit charm hanging from it. "I won't forget that you've done this for me."

Evan grabbed her into a hug. “It wasn’t just for you, you know. This way is better for both of us.” He released her, as it was too much like a final goodbye. He took the bracelet and clasped it around his right wrist. “My little rabbit.”

Metal was uncommon in Faery as it didn’t occur there naturally and couldn’t be glamour-ed into something else, as it wasn’t living material. So for her to gift him this much of it was a significant present. Especially as she must have arranged for the rabbit to remind him of the nickname he’d always called her when they were younger. This just proved she was more capable than their mother gave her credit for.

Eloisa’s smile was forced. “To remember me by.”

“Part of me will remain here with you, sis. Moonlight will always be home, however much I may dislike the place!”

Eloisa shook her head. “Look after yourself. Whatever happens.”

“Sure thing.” He hugged her again. “You too. Don’t let her wear you down.”

She nodded and disappeared behind the tapestry in the door, wiping her tears as she left.



Evan had just about gathered his things together when a hob pulled the tapestry to his rooms back.

“Your presence is requested in the throne room, young Prince.” The wizened, bow-legged creature wore just a white loin cloth, and his eyes were jet black as he stared at Evan.

Evan sighed. She wasn’t just going to let him go, was she?

He groaned and, stretching out his neck, he turned and followed the hob through the tapestried entrance. On an unexplained sense he picked up his pack and took it with him. He had all the important things anyway.

Their path led them to the throne room where his mother sat on the giant stone throne surveying all before her. Evan smirked when he saw she not only had her crown on, but also had her sceptre in hand. But the rest of the room was empty, which unnerved him. Normally there were at least two or three fae hanging about, dancing or chatting in the corners of the great chamber. But for this they had been sent away. His stomach churned, and he clung to the fact that he was no longer a member of her Court and no longer subject to any retribution from her.

The Queen stared down at him as he approached, but made no movement. Only Raven stood at the bottom of the dais, and Evan looked around for Eloisa without finding her.

He stood there, looking up at her, waiting for her to explain why she had summoned him, determined to force her to speak first.

“Further reports have been received of the attack by Sunlight on Starlight.” She intoned. Evan’s ears pricked. His guilt for that outrage would last a lifetime.

“It seems that little of Starlight remains, but no-one is able to enter the mound to verify this.”

Evan gaped. Nothing? All destroyed? The Court that had been full of life and joy just a few suns ago, now decimated and in ruins. He staggered backwards. This was all his fault. Why had he allowed her to persuade him to do what he knew was wrong? Was his freedom really worth so many innocent fae lives?

“I commission you, Uvanli ter Egreou, child of my loins and son of Moonlight, to investigate this further.” She pointed her sceptre at him.

He paused then laughed. “Mother, you forgot my new title. You should add Guardian of the Gates to that invocation. Though I am no longer yours to command.” As he spoke the rightness of his statement reverberated through him. He was part of the forest now, bonded to all of Faery, rather than just the Moonlight Court. “You no longer have the right to all of my name, and so I am not bound to you any more.” As each fae grew they took on new names, and so the power of holding one of them diminished.

The Queen gaped, then stood and jabbed the sceptre towards him. “No.” She clenched her fists and articulated every word. “Do as I say.”

A clear stream of power erupted from the end of the sceptre and shot directly at his chest. Evan raised his hands to protect his face, closed his eyes and braced his stance against the hard Earth floor. He waited for the impact, but none came. Instead a burning smell surprised him, so he opened one eye a slit. The jet of power split before it touched him, breaking into half passing either side and singing holes in the tapestries at the other end of the hall.

Raven coughed. “Ma’am.”

The Queen stopped her attack, and stood scowling at Evan. “This is not over.”

Evan raised one eyebrow. “No?” He paused. “You’re right. It isn’t. I want to know what was so drastic that I had to steal two royal fae sproutlings, which has now resulted in the destruction of one of their Courts and the likely death of the ruler of another.” He waved his arms wide. “Tell me that what I’ve done was worth it.”

The Queen stood there, pursed her lips and stared at him.

“I insist on knowing the vision.”

The Queen turned, returned to her throne and sat straight-backed on it. After a long moment she spoke. "It was a vision of fire and destruction, where the whole realm was in danger of splitting apart. It showed that the Daughter of Starlight and Son of Sunlight together, were needed to protect the realm."

Evan waited, expecting more. He blinked, trying to understand. "That was it? Just that they would protect the realm? Why did we need to abduct them for that?" He threw his hands down.

"The King of Sunlight refused to betrothe his new son to Starlight. We couldn't take the chance that they would never meet. We had to take drastic measures to ensure they could learn about each other and fall in love away from here. Now they will be able to return when the time is right, as a couple, to face the dangers in the vision."

"And for that I have the blood of countless fae on my hands? No, your hands - I did it under your bidding. It is your responsibility now to find out what is left and restore it."

The Queen stiffened. "I will do no such thing. They are not my responsibility. Fact finding, that is what you need to do."

Evan shook his head. "No, I can't do that, mother. I have other responsibilities that I must take up." He sketched a bow that was barely more than inclining his head to her. "I must leave Moonlight."

The Queen sat open-mouthed. "And when will you return?"

Evan smiled cruelly, "When Starlight is restored."

"I can't do that." The Queen shouted.

His grin widened. "Why not? You have the Princess. Bring her back and admit what you made me do and she can gather those of her people who remain."

She spluttered. "I refuse. That is not your role to tell me what to do. I order you to -"

"Goodbye, mother." He turned and walked towards the door at the back of the throne room.

"Come back Uvanli." Her voice was hard and bitter. "You'll never survive out there without my help. Turn your back on me and you turn your back on all the fae of the Courts. No one will help you. You'll be on your own."

Evan refused to remind her that at her request all the Courts had agreed to aid him, when necessary. So he shouldered his pack and went straight to the door to the mound. Nothing like making a clean break of it. The door to the outside was closed, so he hummed the Ballad of Moonlight and left. To the awaiting forest and the gates between realms that had always fascinated him.



8: CHAPTER EIGHT

Evan's first goal was to find Herne and learn what he had to do as Guardian of the Gates. He stood on the wood chip path, halfway to the Fair, and faced into the forest. With one step he was over the white stones along the edge of the path and under the first trees. He stood for a moment listening to the leaves in the wind and feeling the forest move around him. A sense of calm enveloped him. This was where he was meant to be. Whatever mess he had been the cause of in the other Courts, that was a problem he could think about another time. For now he pushed that worry down and relished the sense of freedom from the constraints he had grown up in. He was part of the forest now, and the forest was part of him.

He closed his eyes and focused his inner sight on his surroundings, searching for the abnormalities that represented an area that had been taken as a territory by an individual or small collection of creatures. The five Courts had their mounds, and the vast underground networks that those gave access to, while other fae had claimed smaller areas and lived in those within the forest. Herne the Huntsman was one of them. But where was his shack, as his mother had described it?

Evan found two possible places in this section of forest, and he set off towards them. One eye open to the world, so he didn't walk into anything, and the other open to the connections and web surrounding them.

As he approached the first, he was nearly overcome by the stench of rotting matter and mould. Peering through the trees the smell emanated from a shallow burrow in the ground

covered with branches and drying leaves. Bones and chunks of fur lay scattered around what he assumed was the entrance. A goblin hole. Goblins stayed out of the sun and only came out in the dark, so they would be asleep right now. They lived in small groups and scavenged for creatures in the forest to eat. They weren't a big threat to high fae, but too many of them could overpower an unlucky individual.

Evan backed into the safety of the trees out of view of their hole. That wasn't where the Huntsman lived and there was no need to disturb them, so he continued deeper into the forest.

The second place he found was a wild pixie nest. High in the trees they flew at him as he approached, spears out and squeaking their outrage that he came so close. He skirted around them and continued on.

The next abnormality he found was a gate. Standing before it, Evan surveyed the forest trying to sense where it led. He was almost certain it went to the human realm, but where within that realm he didn't know. He closed his eyes and switched to his inner vision. The gate appeared like any other gate he had used. What was he meant to do with it? He had to find the Huntsman.

Evan clenched his jaw and screwed his hands into fists. With a wrench he dragged his attention back to the real world. With a shock he saw that the shadows stretched across the forest floor and the temperature had dropped considerably. Dark was falling. The reality of his situation - out alone in the forest as the dark fell - overtook any other worries. Had he really spent half a sun studying the hypnotic movements of the gate? He would have to be more aware of that in the future.

A wail split the forest and the scuttlings and scrabblings around him paused.

He turned away from the gate, closed his eyes and searched again for any sign of Herne. But he struggled to send his awareness far from his body that also strained to stay alert to any threats.

Another wail, closer this time. Evan flicked his eyes open to search for the banshee. He flexed his fingers and exhaled. Where would he stay til the sun returned? Where would he be safe? Or safeish at least? His gaze rested on a tree and he swung himself up into it. With his pack under his head he sat on one branch and leant against another.

As the darkness fell, and he could no longer distinguish the other trees from each other, a series of twinkling lights appeared out of the gloom. The merry dancers floated head high between the tree trunks and brought a sense of peace and curiosity with them. Evan reached out as they danced around his head, almost landing before floating away. He stretched out

his hand to reach one and his weight slipped. He grabbed his pack and caught himself as it wedged between the branches. His heart raced. He clawed his way back into his seat in the tree, crossed his arms and refused to engage further with the merry dancers. They soon left to seek other prey.

His eyelids drooped, and he rested against the tree trunk to sleep. The branch beneath him stretched and rolled. He patted its bark, trying to reassure the tree he was no threat. The tree stilled, though the forest itself continued to groan as it rearranged itself. This was why no paths existed through the forest, and he couldn't rely on landmarks to navigate through the trees. Everything moved. More during the dark than during the sun.

Grunts and shouts disturbed his slumber. Footsteps through the leaf mulch and the stench meant a pack of goblins had found his trail. They circled around the tree, jabbering at each other and waving swords and sharpened sticks. Evan drew himself higher in the tree and clutched his knees into his chest, making himself as small as he could.

The goblins threw the sticks, stones, and whatever else they could find at Evan. Most went wide, or clattered to the forest floor after colliding with overhanging branches. One stone drew blood on his cheek, and the scent droze the goblins into a frenzy. They renewed their attack and one or two attempted to climb the tree. But without opposable thumbs this was impossible and when they fell on top of the other goblins, half of them ended up fighting each other.

Evan looked at the sky through the leaves, trying to discern how long it was til sunrise. He spotted the moon low on the horizon and breathed out a sigh of relief. Not long now. He just had to hang on a little while longer.

As the sky started to lighten the goblins retreated, presumably back to their burrow to sleep for the sun, and Evan could breathe again. He had survived his first darkness in the forest. It was safer during the sun, though not completely so. The next few suns and darks followed the same pattern - endless searching and a lack of sleep perched in one tree or another. Evan found a handful of gates in this time, as well as the hiding places of different lower fae in the forest.

The search took its toll on him. He was covered in twigs and dried leaves, and his once clean shift was stained and crumpled. One success was that he could glamour the leaves into any sort of food he desired. He had feasted on moon berries and water fruit, the juice dripping off his chin til he wiped it with fresh baked acorn bread and devoured that too.

He had shown himself he could survive in the forest, though not comfortably, but he was no closer to understanding his new role, or to finding Herne. Which way should he go?

Continue to search for gates and try to work out what he was meant to do with them? Go to the fair and ask there if anyone could help him find Herne? Keep wandering aimlessly through the forest and hope he came across the Huntsman by himself? He turned to the closest tree and kicked it, and then hopped around grabbing his bruised toes.

When the throbbing receded, he set his shoulders and stared farther into the forest. Herne had to help him, so where was he? Evan closed his eyes and let his senses range. One benefit of the suns spent tramping around the forest was that he was learning how the different lower fae felt, so he could distinguish between them without stumbling too close to their territories.

Right on the edge of his senses he felt a disturbance that he didn't recognise. A gathering of the fabric of the forest that resonated differently to the gates or the boggart stumps or the goblin holes or the pixie nests. Could that be it? Had he found Herne's house at last?

Stifling his expectations he made his way through the forest. There in a clearing, a wooden post and rail fence staked out a yard. In the centre stood a wooden cottage with a window and a door. Outside the building ran seven or eight of the large hunting dogs that Evan had seen with the Huntsman before. He approached the fence, and they started barking and snarling. Evan hesitated, uncertain where the entrance to the compound was, whether he really wanted to brave those dogs, and how much he trusted that they wouldn't jump the fence and come for him.

Before he could decide whether to try his luck or to run away, the door to the building slammed open.

"Hello, laddie. What are you doing here?" Herne walked toward Evan. "Quiet boys."

The dogs quieted.

"Come and say hello. Once they know you they're like lambs." He gestured for Evan to approach the fence.

Evan swallowed and stepped forward bringing his hand up to each dog's nose. His heart raced as he held his hand stiffly, ready to pull it back at any sign they would bite. One dog sniffed and covered his palm in warm drool, and the others followed suit.

Evan released the breath he held. "What am I meant to be doing? You've created this role for me, but I have no idea what it means."

Herne frowned and stared at him. "Come in and we can talk."

Before his eyes the solid fence transformed into a gate and opened for him to walk through. Once on the other side it swung shut and returned to the fence again.

"Tea?" Herne entered his cottage.

Evan followed and was presented with a vat of steaming liquid containing unidentifiable leaves and greenery. “Um, thanks.” He looked around for a place to sit.

One side of the interior was taken up by a wooden frame covered in furs and rugs, where he supposed Herne slept, and on which he now sat. In the centre opposite the door stood a small cast-iron stove with a cooking pot on top. That was where the tea had come from.

With no other furniture, Evan sat cross-legged on the floor, cupping his drink in both hands. He sniffed and decided it was still too warm to drink, so he set it on the floor beside him and looked up at the Huntsman.

Under Herne’s gaze, he pulled his fingers through his hair dislodging twigs and leaves.

“You have more forest in you than you know, laddie.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighed. “Some stories aren’t mine to share. When you are older, you will understand. I hope.” He sipped his own drink. The bowl didn’t look so big in his hands. “Now, I would advise you to create a place to live and store your stuff, then explore the gates.”

Evan blinked. “But what exactly am I to do? With the gates I mean.”

Herne scratched his chin. “Keep them in working order, smooth out any bumps in their flow, and keep an eye on what comes through. Other than that you’ll be free to do whatever you like.” He leant forward, his eyes drilling into Evan. “But not to tempt humans through. You are even more bound by the rules of the Gates now.”

Evan nodded. “How many gates are there?”

“I’ve found thirty-eight, though there might be more deeper into the forest.” He narrowed his eyes. “I wouldn’t go too deep, not too soon.”

“Thirty-eight?” Evan had anticipated one for each Court, maybe a handful more, but that number was much higher. “To how many realms?”

Herne snorted. “The human one is the only one you need to worry about. No one crosses over from the others.” He gulped down more tea. “Get used to the forest and how it flexes around you before you travel too far from the Courts. Create a place of your own and claim it. Then the other creatures will recognise the forest in you too.”

Evan nodded. Somewhere of his very own. That was what he needed. He sipped the spicy drink and it warmed him from inside. He lent forward. “But I could explore the other realms?”

“Worry about this realm first. And the human one. The others aren’t a bother and they have their own dangers, laddie.”

Evan’s eyes widened. “But you’ve visited them?”

Herne slurped down the rest of his tea and stood. “Nice to chat, time for you to be going.”

Evan looked down at his tea, still too hot to drink comfortably.

Herne frowned at him and waved his hand towards the bowl. “Drink. Now, I’ve got things to do.” He left the cabin and there were clattering and barking sounds from outside.

Evan found his tea had cooled, and he gulped down enough to sate his thirst. He set the dish on the side by the stove. On a shelf above the stove was a faded picture of his mother, Yseult, Queen of Moonlight, in a simple wooden frame. Next to it was a large pot of dog biscuits and a stack of wooden blocks with a knife stuck in the top.

Evan shook his head, trying to clear the questions crowding it, and returned to the yard. Herne stood crouched over the woodpile on one side of the yard, muttering what sounded like “Never go back. Should have never gone back.”

“Thanks for the tea.” Evan hesitated. “How will we work together, now that I am ...”

He broke off as Herne turned to face him.

The huntsman glared. “We don’t. You do your job. I do mine.” He pointed at Evan. “Now be off.”

“But I don’t know what I am to do.”

Herne took one step closer towards him. “Find the gates, keep them working, take care of anything that comes through.” He ticked off the different tasks on his fingers. “What more is there to know?”

Evan swallowed. He had assumed he’d get help from the Huntsman, but he was left on his own.

“Fine. Be seeing you then.” He walked back towards the edge of the compound, where a section of fence became a gate again and opened for him. The dogs watched him go, only startling slightly at the crash as the gate closed and then returned to being a fence again.