

GLIMMERS IN THE NIGHT

OCTOBER K SANTERELLI

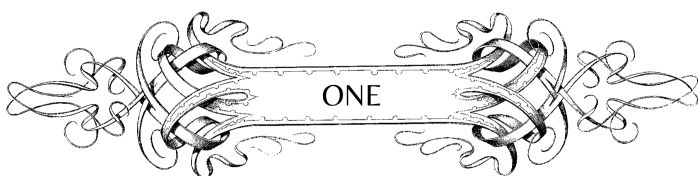
October K Santerelli

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THE WIND HOWLED AND knocked the naked tree branches together, rattling them like bones in a basket. Jeth would know - he'd seen his mother at work. She was dead now, dead and burned in a pyre that melted the snow around it and left behind nothing but ash and steam and mud. The cottage was empty. It was dark. The fire had died in the hearth while Jeth was at the funeral, leaving it bitterly cold.

He had been the last to leave, standing in the snow as the sun set. The villagers left long before the last ember had died. Jeth did not.

Faint moonlight struggled through the window, casting layers of shadow and revealing nothing. He knew this house like the back of his hand, but it was different now. It wasn't his. Tomorrow, the villagers would walk the winding path up the hill to his door and tell him he had to leave. This was, after all, the Witch's Cottage.

And now there was no witch.

They'd find one, fully trained and ready for a posting. They always did. Jeth would have to make room for them. Those were

the rules. He would have to leave, and he was not allowed to take any of his mother's jars and herbs and tools.

Jeth stood in the open doorway facing the darkness, the cold wind at his back urging him inside. He couldn't get his feet to move.

I don't want to go home without you, Mother.

"I'm here," she seemed to whisper behind him. When he turned, however, there was nothing but the woods.

She's gone.

There wasn't much time. The villagers would come to oust him at first light. Jeth had this one night to pack a satchel with a few essentials and some food, and then he would have to leave. Alone, and at just fourteen. No one in the village had the means to take on an extra mouth this late in the winter, even if Jeth weren't so...strange.

Where will I go?

It was one of a litany of thoughts that kept circling in his mind like vultures over a carcass. None of them would change what was going to happen. None of them would bring his mother back. Yet there they went, over and over and over again.

Where will I go? What will I do? Can I do this, set out on my own? What would Mother say? What would Mother want for me? What should I take? Where do I even start? Where will I go?

He stepped inside and let the door swing closed, sinking onto a worn wooden stool by the worktable that dominated the center of the small room. His breath curled away as he sat, mired in his racing thoughts. His heart was racing. His chest was

tight. Watching the barely visible clouds of white that dissipated into nothing was the only thing keeping his breathing steady. It was almost impossible to truly hold the mounting panic at bay. There was a lump in his throat that he couldn't swallow, that threatened to choke him.

Breathe. In, he reminded himself. *Out. In again. Out.*

Jeth fought the urge to scream. He wanted to tear through the cottage and destroy it. He wanted to sweep the jars with all their spells and ingredients off their shelves and let them shatter on the cobbled floor. He wanted to shred the bundles of drying herbs hung in the eaves. He wanted to crush every crystal and stone his mother had collected with a hammer until there was nothing left but dust. He wanted to ruin everything that reminded him of his mother, to take it away from *them*.

He did nothing. He just breathed.

The villagers needed this cottage. They needed their next witch. The kingdom of Hallanor needed magic like it needed water, even if most of its people feared and despised it. Every town had at least a hedge witch. They were necessary to bespell the fields and the livestock. They were needed to bless the people and the buildings. They were important guardians, managing the deep rivers of magic that flowed, invisible, all around them. Most importantly, the witches were needed to protect their homes from the fickle, wonderful, terrible, and dangerous faeries.

Destroying the supplies would doom over a hundred people in this small, almost meaningless village to terrible fates. No

witch would come without a place to stay and supplies to use. With no witch the faerie's woods would creep closer and closer to the village, until one day it would swallow them whole. It wouldn't survive a turn of the year.

Mother would hate that.

After all, she had spent fifteen years as the witch of this nameless little hamlet at the edge of this small kingdom, doing all she could to keep it safe. So, Jeth did nothing. Not for the villagers, but for her.

Jeth was not a witch himself. Not yet. The plan had always been to be made his mother's apprentice once he came of age, at fifteen. Not that a barrier so flimsy as age had stopped his mother from teaching him everything she knew. She was always fond of breaking rules she thought were useless. He had grown up here. He had spent hours grinding herbs that were sharp in his nose for a sore throat potion at the workbench, days learning the meaning of the deck of oracle cards to tell love fortunes, weeks reading about all the plants in the kingdom and what they could be used for. He knew salves and spell sachets for fever and sleep, he foraged for roots and mushrooms at her side, and he learned some of the secrets of the faerie forest.

She taught Jeth how to use his magic, too. She guided him through tracing invisible fingers along the unseen leylines, on stirring just enough power to do something small. He could light a candle, stir a breeze into being, and sing a bird out of a tree. Anything more was beyond his reach for now, but she had

promised him that as soon as he turned fifteen, she would teach him spellcraft in earnest.

Except now she was gone, snuffed out like a candle. One moment she had been walking in the village market, swinging her basket and greeting everyone who called out to her with a smile. The next, she crumpled to the ground. Jeth had been there at her side as she was wracked with spasms, as her ears had bled and her breath caught in her chest. Then she fell still, sightless eyes looking up at the falling snow, lips parted in the barest hint of surprise.

No one knew what happened to her. The villagers whispered of strange illnesses, dark curses, and bad luck. The only part that really seemed to matter to them was that *they* were at risk now, without her. They had lost their witch.

Jeth had lost everything.

The heat of his anger faltered, then died. The chill set in to his skin. He could hardly see through the tears he refused to shed. They made the shadowed gloom around him waver. His chest was tight, as if a barrel band had been fastened around it. His hands were curled into fists. Even if he couldn't feel his fingertips in the frigid winter cold, he could feel his nails biting into his palms. The lump in his throat grew larger.

I wonder if it will be like a dam. If I open the floodgates and let it out, what will happen? It felt dangerous, bottomless and wild – like he might cry for a hundred years like a boy in a faerie's tale. What if it swept him away forever?

No, he couldn't risk it. Jeth forced himself to his feet, fighting the sting in his eyes. He hunted blindly across the table for the satchel he'd laid out before they had come for his mother's body. He had washed and dressed her himself, right on this very table, in preparation for her journey to the beyond. It was customary for the family. It was supposed to help.

It hadn't helped Jeth at all. He still had not let a single tear fall over the loss of his mother, afraid that if he started to, his grief would overwhelm him. He just felt as though he were walking through deep water. Everything was so much harder. It took all his strength just to keep moving.

His fingers brushed over the heavy cloth of the bag at last. Tonight, he decided, everything would be done in darkness. It suited his black mood. Forgoing the candle he had left out, Jeth turned instead to feel his way through the only home he had ever known in shadow. Silently, he tucked away the pieces of his life he hoped they would let him keep.

Three shirts. Two pairs of trews. Three pairs of thick socks his mother had knit. A book on edible plants, though he wasn't certain if the villagers would approve of him keeping the birthing day gift if they knew about it. He buried it beneath the clothes, and for good measure added a loaf of bread wrapped in cloth, a sack of apples, a small round of hard cheese, and two sachets of salt. Wire next, for snares and fishing. A paper packet of needles and fish hooks. A spool of thread. He didn't know what color it was. It didn't matter.

When the pack was finally full, he buckled it closed, leaving it on the table.

Jeth, himself, was next. He didn't change out of the black-dyed funeral clothes. They were well-made and warm. He merely changed his shoes for sturdy boots. Jeth pulled on his blue cape-sleeved jacket, running his fingers down the front of the soft, warm cloth.

"This will keep you warm enough. There. It looks quite handsome on you!" His mother had said as she wrapped him in the fanciful garment. The billowing cape sleeves ended just below his elbows. The sturdy rows of buttons on the front were hand-carved by his mother and him, polished until they gleamed.

"They'll think I'm putting on airs in the village," Jeth had said, turning this way and that.

"Let them. You and I know the world is wider than this place. Stranger things exist in this world than a boy in a handsome jacket."

The memory faded, sunlight and joy swallowed by darkness once more. He swallowed. Twice. Then, he started to move again. Belt, next. Into his belt went his knife and a small hand ax, his only weapons. He tucked a thick pair of fleece-lined leather gloves into his belt as well.

There. I'm... He had nearly thought the word 'ready', but he wasn't.

Instead, he turned to tidy up. It felt good to be moving, to be doing. The distraction was more than welcome. He felt his way

across the table and counters, tucking things back where they belonged. He brushed over the jars and bottles on the shelves, making sure every neat label, written in his mother's hand, was turned out. He tucked his wooden stool beneath the table, so it wouldn't be in the way. What else? What else could he do?

His fingers brushed against something soft and plush. A velvet cushion, black as ink, blacker still in the shadows of the night. Resting nestled in the safe embrace of that fabric was—
Mother's scrying crystal.

It was the clearest orb anyone had ever seen. The whole village admired it, when they came for their spells and fortunes. His mother used it for divining, and to peer at the leylines around the village. She had told him how it worked a time or two, but never let him try it. Other than that, however, she was strangely silent.

"All you need to know is that it was a gift, just like you." She had said. *"No, no! No more questions. I'll tell you when you're older."*

Now she never would.

I should take it.

It was a gamble. On the one hand, his mother had brought it with her when they came to this place. It didn't technically belong to the village or the cottage, just to her. On the other, the villagers knew about the orb. They would notice it was gone immediately. It was a rare treasure, and a powerful magical artifact. If they wanted a way to lure in a new witch, nothing

would be better than a pristine crystal ball. There was absolutely no way Jeth would get away with taking it.

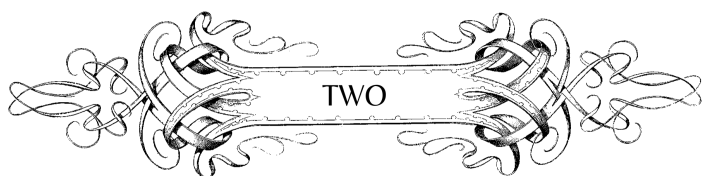
He picked it up from its cushion, cradling it in both hands. The cool stone warmed quickly. For just a moment, Jeth thought he saw a glimmer of light in its depths, like the flicker of a fish's scales beneath the water. *I think it likes me.*

That settled it. Jeth turned, shoving the orb into a leather pouch and tucking it away in his pack. The villagers might notice in the morning –

But Jeth wouldn't be there. He refused to let them take this, too. If they wanted the orb, they'd have to take it from him by force – and in order to do that, they'd have to find him first. He wouldn't let them chase him out of his home. He wouldn't wait for them to force him to go.

He shouldered his bag and flung open the door, leaving it ajar as he crunched through the snow toward the twisted, skeletal trees of the forest. With a whisper to the night sky and a ringing in his ears, Jeth commanded the wind to hiss, to howl, to sweep away all signs of his passage.

It listened.



THE STORM JETH HAD accidentally breathed to life raged through the night. The wind had listened too well. Jeth's will had been stronger than he had intended. Above him, the bare branches of the trees whipped back and forth, rattling together in a cackling frenzy. More than once, entire limbs ripped free and crashed to the ground around him. The wind picked up snow and turned it into daggers, flinging little pinpricks of ice that bit into Jeth's cheeks and ears. He fought his way through the woods with one arm holding fast to his pack and the other raised to protect his eyes. Tree trunks loomed out of the fog and snow with little warning, forcing him to thread his way back and forth.

It was a nightmare. The night stretched on and on, not that Jeth would have been able to tell when the sun rose again with how thick the clouds were overhead. The only good thing about it was that he couldn't think beyond lifting his feet one after the other.

Don't stop moving. Don't give up.

He couldn't tell if it was his own thoughts or his mother's voice that whispered the words in his mind.

Eventually, Jeth tried to wrangle the storm he had created, lifting his hands into the wind and reaching for a leyline. The stinging needles of swirling ice and snow broke his concentration every time he stretched his consciousness out, fumbling for the magic he knew was somewhere around him, somewhere nearby. He gave up, shouting his frustration into the wind. He couldn't hear himself.

Hours later, the wind suddenly just...stilled. As quickly as he had summoned the storm, it vanished. Jeth stopped in his tracks, dropping his arm and staring at the clear, bright forest around him. The sun had broken through the clouds, though it offered little in the way of warmth. The sky was clearing, spreading pale blue sky overhead. The snow glittered and sparkled like a thousand tiny diamonds, as if it hadn't been trying to kill him only moments ago. The only sound in the sudden calm was Jeth's breath coming in pants.

It's over? As the thought struck him, so did overwhelming exhaustion. His knees buckled. He sat down abruptly, staring at his snow-caked gloves and arms. For a while, that was all he could manage to do. Slowly, his breath calmed. The fog of fatigue lifted.

What now?

Jeth needed a plan. Wandering aimlessly away from his village was only a beginning. It wouldn't be enough.

If you run away, you will always be running away. If you run toward something, eventually you will get there. His mother's encouragement had been about learning to ride Farmer Hugo's horse, but it was no less true in this circumstance.

But what was there to run toward? He had no other family, no grandparents or cousins or aunts and uncles. He knew nothing about his father or his father's side of things except that he was gone. That was all his mother would say. He didn't know much about anything but witchery, about herbs and spells and magic. How many options did that really leave?

"I didn't think," he said aloud, "that I would have to know what I wanted to do with my life this soon."

A twig snapped. A hare took off through the snow, a gray shadow breaking up the pristine white until it vanished in a bush with a rattle of dry branches.

Jeth held his breath for a moment, then breathed out.

I thought it was one of the villagers.

His heart still raced in his chest as he pulled the small leather pouch from his bag. He had never done scrying magic before, but now might be the time to try. Jeth pulled his gloves off. The orb was warm when it rolled into his hand, as if he had left it lying in the sun.

Jeth cradled it in both hands. He took a deep breath. He closed his eyes.

When he reached for the leylines, he was surprised to feel one directly under his feet that was as broad as a river. He felt it like a

roll of thunder in his chest and shoulders, heard it like a rushing waterfall, tasted it like copper on the tip of his tongue.

His mother had taught him how to touch a leyline safely, how to dip in one finger at a time until you held enough power to do what you wanted. He pulled the narrowest thread he could, her warnings ringing in his ears.

“Too much magic will kill a person. It hollows out their body to make room for itself and leaves nothing behind.”

Pulling magic into himself made his whole body feel like it was full of lightning that would arc from his skin if he didn't hold it tight. Quickly, worried he might lose his grip, he directed the flow of power up to his head.

“Show me...Silas.”

Silas the woodcutter was the unspoken leader of the tiny village Jeth had grown up in. If anyone were after him, it would be him.

Jeth opened his eyes and released the magic at the same time, staring down at the orb in his hands. Ghostly images flickered in its depths, outlined with the barest hint of gold. There was nothing distinct, no background or detail. Two broad-shouldered shadows mounted two horses. He couldn't tell if either of them were Silas as the horses began to trot. He didn't know where they were, what their expressions looked like. Nothing.

With a gasp, he lost his hold on the magic. The images vanished in the blink of an eye.

They *were* coming for him.

“It isn't fair. I had a plan.”

Whatever else happened, he would not grow up in his remote village, learning magic at his mother's side and taking over her duties when she grew old. That plan had been dashed to pieces, shattered beyond all saving by his theft, and her death. It was too soon. She was taken *too soon*.

The lump was back in Jeth's throat. He dusted the snow off of his coat and hands.

Don't cry. Just think. What will I do instead?

Any choice he made now would only drive him further into the unknown. He had never left his home. He never thought he would have to. Jeth shook his head, letting out a frustrated huff. He tucked the orb away.

Focus. Just think!

He had powerful magic for a child, and more control over his abilities than many his age. He could still be a witch's apprentice somewhere else, if he wanted. Maybe he could find a different village, or a town, or even a bustling city. He could lie and say he was fifteen already whenever he found a place that suited him. Well, if he found one in the next ten months. Otherwise, he wouldn't have to lie.

It was enough of a plan, at least, to get started.

The nearest town to his own was called Last Stop, and apart from his own village – it was. The rest of the kingdom of Hal-lanor lay beyond it, every clear inch of it won from the forest that covered the whole country. The same forest he was in right now. It was a few day's walk from Jeth's home, to the north and east. Jeth had never been that far from home, but he knew where

it was. Twice a year, the farmers took three wagons full of crops and goods to Last Stop to sell and trade.

The world seemed very vast to Jeth, now. He had thought everything was closer, smaller. Hallanor might have been a small kingdom, but it would still take weeks on horseback to cross it from end to end.

The same trees marched across the entire thing, one great faerie forest that the humans had carved little holes into. Jeth couldn't tell if that made him feel connected to everything, or smaller still.

"Stop that," he said, an edge to his words. "You won't figure anything out just sitting here."

Jeth pushed himself to his feet, dusting the last of the snow off. Last Stop would be his next, and from there – who knew? Besides, he was not yet far enough away from his village – and the villagers – for his comfort.

Invisible deer trails wove through the woods, barely discernible in the way bushes curved, the way the trees leaned, the way the snow drifted. Jeth had followed them a hundred times in his life. Even if the snow was hiding the paths, he knew how to see. Jeth followed them, ducking under branches and threading through the underbrush.

When he lost the path, he would stop. If he closed his eyes, he could *feel* the forest around him. Not just the leylines – he could sense the trees, the bushes, the burrows with rabbits and foxes and badgers inside. The forest teemed with life, all of it sleeping, waiting.

Jeth could picture it in spring. Sunlight dappled through the leaves instead of pouring through bare branches. The paths were made of little runnels in the grass and creeping ground-cover. Herbs and flowers and mushrooms grew everywhere, just opening their first buds. It was a riot of life. His mother would be just ahead, her head bent to scan the ground and her basket over her arm. He could *see* her. She felt so real, like he could just reach out and touch her—

Jeth opened his eyes, staring at his outstretched fingers. There was nothing there. It twisted his heart in his chest to see the empty space where he had pictured her. The warmth of a remembered spring faded. The chill crept back into Jeth's very bones. He dropped his hand.

"Why did you leave me?" he asked the air.

I didn't want to, his mother's voice whispered.

He turned, hoping to see her again – but of course she was gone.

"How long will you be with me?" he asked the last remnant of her in his heart.

This time, she didn't answer.



FOUR DAYS HAD PASSED. Four days where every snapping twig and soft thud of snow falling from a branch above made Jeth's heart race. Four days of nightmares, where shadowy figures moved through the wood and surrounded him, then tore him apart. He was looking constantly over his shoulder, waiting for the villagers to appear behind him. At night, he dreamed of waking to a mob with torches and pitchforks, furious with him for robbing them. No one had ever stolen anything more than pastries there. Would they make an example of him if they caught him?

I don't want to find out.

The moments in between those heart-pounding seconds were worse, when silence and peace threatened to let his grief claw its way out of his chest. He almost preferred the fear. It filled his body and his mind and left little room for thoughts of his life before.

Maybe the villagers aren't following you at all.

Jeth didn't know them well enough to know if the thought was true. He knew their names, their faces, the broad strokes of

their daily lives – but he didn't know any of them as individuals. None of them really bothered to speak much with him or his mother. Jeth was the son of the witch, and the villagers had always thought them strange.

It's because of the faeries. They can't understand faerie magic, and our magic pulls from the same sources. That's all they know. Even if they need it to protect them, they think every magical thing is strange and dangerous.

They weren't entirely wrong.

Jeth didn't know if they would be angry at all, let alone angry enough to come after him and the stolen orb.

Maybe they'll lop off my hand and call me a thief – like Silas said they do in the cities.

Silas the woodcutter was one of the only three people who ever left the village, riding in a wagon to Last Stop to trade. He would know what they did to thieves. Silas was leading the mob, small as it was, if the vision in the orb had worked.

But maybe they won't. Maybe they'll think I vanished like a faerie spell, and the orb is the price they paid. I just have to stay hidden.

Neither option made him feel much better. He would still be strange, still other, still alone.

Four days had passed in near silence, unless Jeth spoke to himself. They were uneventful. The weather held fair, even if it was cold enough to numb his ears and nose. He walked all night and well into each morning. He slept when the day was at its warmest, tucked into hollows made from the roots of trees or

under thick evergreen bushes. Twice, he had tried to start a fire with his magic to keep himself warm while he rested. Twice, he had managed little else but smoke, and blamed the sticks being wet for his failure even though he wasn't sure that was true. Every day before he went to sleep, he tried to scry through the orb again and saw nothing but brief flickers of shadows.

Jeth woke when the cold seeped deep into his skin, until it was painful enough that it was impossible to rest any longer. The sun would be sinking, painting the sky with muted oranges and purples. After he had eaten, tucked into whatever safe little burrow he had found, Jeth rose and walked again.

He wasn't used to walking so much, or so far, or so often. His feet were sore. His legs ached. The heavy pack's straps dug into his shoulders.

Jeth reveled in the distraction of his pain. It was a relief to have his thoughts overwhelmed with mind-numbing discomfort, to have his only thoughts lean toward: *how much further?*

Last Stop *must* be nearby.

Once I get there, everything will sort itself out.

The thought was soothing. Last Stop might be the end of Hallanor, but it would be the beginning for Jeth. He didn't know where he was going to go or what he was going to do, but that would change when he arrived. He'd avoid Silas and Hugo easily, if Last Stop were as large as they had claimed. There would be trader caravans or solitary merchants, or maybe travelers. He would find some way to book passage or work, and

then he would go east. Just east, to start. As they passed through towns and villages and cities, somewhere would call to him.

I'll know where I belong when I see it. I'll recognize my place.

He hoped.

Briefly, Jeth considered pulling out the orb again, asking it for guidance. He wasn't sure it worked that way. He never saw his mother use it to guide herself. *Some magics, she said, aren't meant for us.*

Was this one of them?

Jeth considered turning west instead, passing from Hallanor to Olmiven. After all, Silas and Hugo would never look for him there. Their neighbor-kingdom, however, had laws against magic. Olmiven had heard many tales of Hallanor and their encounters with the faeries. They feared the woods, and did their best to ensure such tales never happened to them. If Jeth went west, he would have to hide his powers.

I would rather stay somewhere I can at least be myself.

His mother had told him stories about magicians who tried to smother their powers, and instead were devoured by them. No, Jeth would find somewhere to go where he could be just as he was – magical, and a little bit strange.

The hardest part of these decisions, he decided as he struggled up a small hill made slick with snow and ice, is that I can do anything.

Anything he wanted. Anything at all. He could decide to take up in the woods like a hermit, or travel with a wagon and pass out blessings and spells in each place he came to. He could

apprentice, as he planned, and set down roots of his own in a cottage on the edge of a different village. He could, he could, he could—

It made his stomach turn in knots, and set his heart to racing. He felt small, and vulnerable, like an insect scuttling about beneath the bare trees. The world was so very wide, and he was just one boy. How was he supposed to know what to do?

What would mother say?

Though the thought made his heart clench in his chest and his eyes grow hot and damp, it also summoned her voice in the back of his mind. She sounded so real, so close, that he slowed to a stop.

“Chin up, my lovely. Deep breath. We fall down, it’s true – but then we get back up. Do you know what you do then?”

Jeth shook his head.

“No? I’ll tell you. All you have to do is pick up your foot. Take one step, just one. Another will always follow. One little step. Ready?”

She faded from his mind. Jeth’s eyes stung. He swallowed down his misery before it could swallow him whole, tipping his head back toward the sky. The midday sun was drifting in and out of sight as gray clouds built up.

One step, that’s what she would have said.

Jeth hefted his pack, wading through the calf-deep snow. As he climbed, the scent of crisp, cold air was cut with the warm, welcoming spice of woodsmoke.

Woodsmoke!

Jeth lurched into a run, floundering up the last length of the hill as quick as he could. Woodsmoke could only mean –

He crested the rise, looking down on Last Stop. The town's two gates stood open, with mud-and-slush runnels leading in to roughly cobbled streets. The buildings were all packed close together, as though huddling for warmth against the winter cold. A single large town square was visible even from here, flanked with two towering inns.

I made it!

He felt his mother's presence behind him, leaning in with a smile. *One step. And the next would be...?*

Jeth's stomach rumbled. The thought of eating another chilled apple or gnawing at the heel of his loaf of bread were equally unappealing.

My next step is going to be a hot meal.

He could almost hear her laughing as she faded away again.

Down the hill he went, toward the western road that would lead him into Last Stop. He walked a weaving pattern back and forth so as not to slip and fall. He kept his gaze on his feet and his hands on the trees the whole way down.

When the ground beneath his feet abruptly gave way to frozen mud instead of snow, he stopped and turned toward the gate.

A single gatekeeper stood there, a wizened old man with a scraggly beard, leaning on a spear with a rusted tip like it was a walking staff. His eyes were wide, nearly bugging out of his head.

Jeth froze, staring back. What must he look like? His hair was wild and dark as a raven's wing, with waves that curled the tips up all on their own. No doubt there were at least a few twigs tangled in it. His skin was a perfect peach, neither ruddy nor weathered, free of any freckles or moles. His eyes were large and dark, with lashes so thick it looked like he had drawn around them with kohl like the women and girls of his village liked to do.

I must look like a faerie.

In fact, the only difference between Jeth and a faerie creature was that Jeth had plain human ears, round and smooth.

To the gatekeeper, Jeth had just appeared out of the forest, the *faerie* forest, in a handsome cape-sleeved coat with fey features. It was no wonder the man looked as though he wanted nothing more than to bolt – even if it might curse Last Stop forever. If Jeth *were* a faerie, a slight in hospitality might bring his ire.

Faeries had strict rules about such things. One must always be invited in, one must never lie, one must always be polite. If one strikes a deal with a faerie, both sides must always honor every word of it – so phrase your bargains carefully. To break these rules was to risk being turned into a beast or a toad or a tree, or taken away to the faerie lands forever.

Not wanting to startle the poor gatekeeper, Jeth moved slowly toward the gate. He tried to school his features into something cheery, but he could feel that it wasn't quite right. It was

hard to smile, still, with his mother just buried. He gave up trying.

Jeth came to a stop a dozen paces away from the man.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello. Be you a faerie?”

“No, I’m just a boy.”

The gatekeeper scoffed, brow furrowing. Jeth reached up to pull his ears forward, showing the roundness of them. Only then did the gatekeeper relax again. The reassurance did not stop the old man from shifting his hold on his weathered old spear, as if he hadn’t quite decided Jeth was safe. As if he thought he might need to use it.

“Where are you coming from then, lad? We don’t get many children passing through.”

“From a village nearby. I’m not a child, I’m off to find an apprenticeship.”

“Oh, aye? From that village two day’s ride? Not the first to arrive the past few days. Go on, then. Best chance for you finding an apprenticeship is somewhere else – so the folks at the inns or the market will be your best bet, eh?” The old man smiled and wagged the tip of his spear at the gate, entirely unaware of how his words had sent a chill down Jeth’s spine.

They’re already here?

Jeth felt as if the orb in his satchel were growing heavier and heavier, threatening to weigh him down like a mill stone instead of a tiny crystal ball. He tried to force a smile, but his lips barely moved.

The gatekeep didn't notice. His business done, he tucked himself back into a little alcove in the crooked stone wall that surrounded Last Stop, warming his hands at a small brazier.

They've come for me.

Jeth's first instinct was to turn away, to circle the town through the woods and keep going. The villagers had never traveled far before. He could avoid them entirely. The promise of a warm meal was what swayed him.

It's a whole town. I can avoid them long enough to get something to eat, and then I'll leave. I'm only passing through.

Just take a step.

Through the gate he went. Jeth rounded the first corner he came to, weaving through crooked alleyways and crossing streets, working his way toward the town center. If he stayed off the main thoroughfares, they'd never find him.

The alleyways were like tributaries feeding into rivers feeding into that single central hub of a bustling marketplace in the broad, open square between the inns. The inns themselves loomed over the buildings around them, three and four floors tall to every other's two.

Jeth stopped in the shadows before stepping into the market, eyes wide. There were so many people! No doubt every room at both inns were full more often than not. Shoppers bustled back and forth with baskets over their arms. Merchants and tradesmen mingled to swap stories and goods alike. Craftsmen sat beside their work at wooden stalls with colorful awnings that fluttered in the breeze. Errant flakes of snow drifted down

from the sky, melting when they met braziers and torches that provided light and warmth.

This is more people than I've ever seen in my entire life!

The talking, the clatter of wagon wheels, the whinny of horses, the slap of boots on cobblestones, the screech of a crate being pried open – all of it set Jeth's ears to ringing and his heart to pounding.

If there are this many people here, how many are there...everywhere else?

Suddenly his plan seemed more than daunting. Part of him wanted to turn back, to leave, to figure out something else, something smaller.

Then he thought of his mother. This time, she was not alive, not urging him on. No, this time she was wrapped in her burial shroud on a gray winter's morning, waiting for the torch to send her on her way. There was nothing for him behind.

One step at a time. One step, he urged himself.

I'll find an odd job to do for a shop or a stall. That might earn me enough for a hot meal. Then I'll go.

It would be safest to move on. Once he was on the road again, no doubt he could find a caravan of some sort. He was young, and his small stature could be used to feign that he was younger still. He wasn't above playing on the heart-strings of traveling merchants to get where he needed to go.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he felt his mother's faint disapproval and pushed it aside. This was about survival until

he was safely away with her orb. She would simply have to understand.

The taller of the two inns was across the square. It was more likely that the villagers were staying at the smaller inn. It was closer to the gate they had come through, and looked a little cheaper. That meant that he might be able to circle around the back of the larger one and find work in the kitchens without drawing any notice. He would gladly wash a sink full of dishes in exchange for some stew and a fresh roll of bread. He'd wash two to fill his pack with traveling food before he left!

Jeth wrapped his hands tight around the straps of his pack and set off, weaving his way through the crowd. He hoped the hustle and bustle would hide him.

"--name is Jeth. He's got dark hair, bit of a wan creature. Real small, belike."

Jeth ducked behind a market stall, heart pounding in his chest. He forced himself to relax his shoulders and straighten up. Skulking around would get him noticed. Being unremarkable would not. Slow as he could, he leaned against the wooden back of the booth and eased his head around the edge.

One row over stood a broad-backed man with sandy hair sticking out from under a knitted cap. It was Silas, the woodcutter. He was talking to a carpenter, gesturing.

"Never you mind that, we just need to find him."

Jeth quickly pulled back behind the booth again. His grip tightened on the straps of his pack until the fabric bit into his hands.

I won't let them take the orb. I won't!

It was the last piece of his mother he had left. He couldn't let them have it. Yet he didn't want to be arrested as a thief, either. He wondered if they would even let him explain. His stomach sank.

I never should have come in here.

Coming to Last Stop had put him right in the path of the people he was trying to avoid. He could have kicked himself. He *knew* he should have just gone around!

Enough of that, the voice of his mother chided softly, what's done is done. All that matters is what's next.

Jeth took off as quick as he could without attracting unwanted attention, hampered by the crowd around him. He had to weave around men and women with baskets and crates, around children running between legs, under a horse's head as it pulled a small cart sluggishly through a gap between two stalls. Everything became a blur around him, and yet somehow it was all sharpened into focus. He noticed little details in a flash, and forgot them just as quickly.

I just have to get across the square, and to the eastern gate. Then I'm free and clear. It's just a little further.

"Jeth!" A deep voice called.

Before he could even turn, Jeth felt a tug on his pack. He twisted, eyes wide, to find himself face to face with Farmer Hugo and his bushy black beard, all shot through with gray. The farmer seemed just as surprised to see him, holding fast to the bag.

“Jeth. I can’t believe we found you.” The words were tinged...with relief?

I’m not a thief! It was only ever ours!

He couldn’t get the words out. His mouth was too dry. Hugo’s eyes searched his face, brow furrowing. Jeth didn’t want to hear what he had to say.

You can’t take it.

There was only one thing he could do. With a twist of his shoulders, Jeth slipped his arms free of the pack. His fist closed around one strap, pulling with all his might even as the other hand plunged inside the bag.

The orb was right there, right on top where he had left it.

“Stop it, boy! Stop!” Hugo was much stronger than Jeth. He very easily wrested the pack back toward himself. “Stay still.”

Jeth pulled the orb free and let his pack go. He backpedaled several steps, darting glances at the crowd that had pulled back around them. They wanted to see the show, to watch the little thief get arrested! Well, he didn’t plan on going back.

Jeth turned and dove into the crowd, worming his way between one man’s legs and taking off like a hare on the other side. He cradled the leather pouch that held the orb close to his chest.

“Jeth! Someone stop him, stop that boy!”

The residents of Last Stop began to search the crowd with interest, but by the time any of them saw Jeth, he passed right beneath their noses. Like a fox running ahead of the hounds, he wove his way through the last of the market and into an

alleyway. Refuse bins and empty crates and barrels made an obstacle course of the already narrow path.

At least it will slow them down, too.

The men and women after him were all grown, and indeed the junk hindered them enough that they quickly disappeared behind him.

Jeth didn't slow down. He couldn't stop until he was out of Last Stop entirely. They'd close the gates come dark, and he'd be trapped. They'd find him, and take the orb, and drag him back, and then...who knew?

His heart hammered in his chest, beating double time to his footsteps. He didn't dare look back. He could hear the distant shouts as people began to hunt for him.

Which way is the gate?

Jeth skidded to a stop at a narrow crossroads, gasping for breath and looking at the buildings on every side. He hadn't kept track of which way he had been turning, and he couldn't see the sun in the narrow strips of sky above.

I just need to find the gate. Then I can run right out of here and back to the woods.

It was a simple plan, an easy plan. He hoped he could carry it out. Picking one of the alleyways at random, Jeth began to run once more.

Just get to the woods. They'll never find me out there. Not with what Mother taught me, and my magic, and –

Magic! As if struck by lightning, Jeth remembered his powers. He could use the wind to push himself up onto a rooftop,

and then he'd be able to see everything. Even better, no one would be able to see *him*.

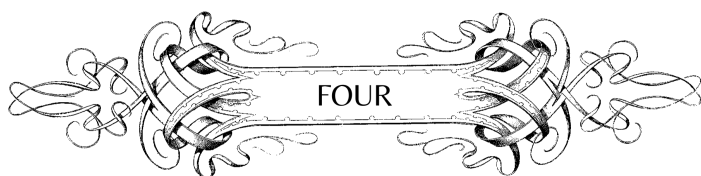
He began to gather in his power, stretching his senses out to feel for the leylines. To him, they felt like a rumble in the earth, the stir of something sluggish and powerful at rest. Jeth only needed to borrow a bit of that might, just a trickle. He pulled a little here, and a little there, gathering the power into his chest, then guiding it down toward his feet and—

Jeth rounded a corner, running face first into a man's back. The breath was knocked out of him, and his concentration fell apart. The magic fizzled away into the air like static, shocking him as it went.

“Ow!” Jeth looked up at the man.

Not a man. He stared blankly, taking in the stranger's features. The planes of his face were angular and long. His eyes were a brilliant ruddy orange, verging on red. His hair was black as pitch and braided into a single tail that trailed halfway down his chest – which left his pointed ears plainly on display, even beneath his hood.

Jeth had run into a faerie.



WHAT IS A FAERIE doing in a town?

That was the first thought that crossed Jeth's mind. Swathed in dark clothes that seemed to be made more of supple bark than of any fabric he had ever seen or heard of, the faerie studied him in turn. Jeth watched a flicker of something pass over the creature's face – too quickly for him to make out just what expression it was.

"Anyone see him?" came a woman's shout. She was no more than one or two streets away.

Jeth felt his stomach drop as he scrambled back to his feet. Whatever reason there was for a faerie to be in town, it wasn't *his* problem.

"Ah. You need to hide."

It wasn't a question. The words stopped Jeth from bolting away again. The faerie's voice was smooth and melodic, like a river running over stones. A hint of amusement played at the edges of his words.

"Allow me to assist."

No-!

With a sweep of his arm, the faerie's cloak enveloped him in a cascade of warm and heavy fabric. He pulled Jeth against his side, pinning him there with his arm and towing him along. Jeth writhed, trying to squirm his way free – until he heard voices all around him.

“Anyone seen him?”

“He can't have gone far.”

“Don't worry, sir, we have the gates being watched.”

“Thank you,” Silas said, relief clear in every word.

Jeth stopped struggling, heart pounding so hard that he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. The cloak covered him entirely, woven so tight that he couldn't see anything. It was pitch black. The fabric just barely swept the ground, which meant that it would hide his feet. No one in their right minds would stop a faerie, if they even looked beneath the creature's hood at all.

This might be his only chance, even if it would no doubt come with strings. Faeries never did anything for free. He couldn't help but feel like a fly, choosing the spider to save him from the frog.

Jeth pressed the orb tight against his side, listening to the town around them. Footsteps, a squeak and clatter that must have been a cart. The bray of a mule in the distance. A door slamming closed. Every step they managed to go undetected was one step closer to his freedom.

If the faerie will let me go.

The thought rose in Jeth's chest until he felt like he couldn't breathe. He choked down the urge to fight his way free of the folds of the cloak and run back to Silas and Hugo.

Whatever else is happening, in this moment the faerie is protecting me.

Cobbles turned to mud beneath his boots, then to grass dusted with snow, and finally to snow a few inches deep. The faerie lifted his cloak.

Jeth lifted his arm to cover his eyes as they adjusted to the field of white. They were in a meadow in the forest, or what would become one come spring. Last Stop was still visible, barely, through the trees.

I'm safe. I'm free.

He stepped away from the faerie, still cradling the leather bag that held the orb. Reluctantly, he turned to face the creature.

His mother's voice whispered in his ear as his lips parted.
Never, ever, thank a faerie.

"You helped me," he said instead.

The faerie nodded. "I did."

Silence fell. The creature watched Jeth with eyes that glittered in the way serpent's scales did when they moved.

If I do this right, I can still walk away.

All he had to do was dance the steps correctly. What exactly had his mother told him? He searched his mind for every word of advice she had ever said about faeries.

If only I were older. If he were older and wiser than fourteen, he'd know all these things on his own. He'd have a better chance.

Then again, the faerie was an immortal creature who could be hundreds or thousands of years old. Maybe he'd never have had a chance, even if he were old and gray.

"What do I call you?" That was safe enough.

The corner of the faerie's lips turned up in faint amusement – though whether that was because of Jeth's careful phrasing and furrowed brow or his knowledge of faerie customs at all, Jeth couldn't tell. The silence stretched on between them as the faerie tipped his head to one side, weighing his options.

Maybe he won't answer at all.

Jeth had just decided that was the case when the creature spoke.

"Aneirin. May I have *your* name?"

"No," Jeth said firmly. It was the oldest trick in the book to steal someone's name away, making them and anyone who knew them forget it forever. He wasn't so wet behind the ears as to fall for it.

"Then perhaps you can tell me what to call you."

Jeth took a deep breath. He hadn't expected Aneirin to relent so quickly. There didn't appear to be any trick to the faerie's words this time. That only made the hairs on the back of Jeth's neck stand up.

Don't let your guard down.

"You may call me Jeth, for now."

"Jeth," Aneirin said, tasting the name. "Very well. You wish to leave this place, yes?"

Jeth didn't answer. Not for the first time, he wished his mother were there. She would know what to do. She'd met a faerie once, she said. He should have asked her more about them. The entire kingdom was carved out of a faerie forest! They co-existed with powerful magical beings that would tease and toy with someone before letting them starve to death or go mad or worse things still – and he didn't know enough to face one down!

Still, the rules of hospitality demanded an answer to a direct question before he could leave. He didn't know what would happen if he didn't. Jeth paced in the snow, carving out a packed trail. As he thought, he tied the orb's pouch securely to his belt.

I have no supplies, they took my pack. How long can I survive by myself with nothing to eat, in the winter, in the woods? How far is it to the next town?

His knowledge of Hallanor ended at Last Stop. He was no crafty woodsman, able to find squirrel caches or hunt rabbits without a snare. Was it worth trading food and directions for whatever a faerie might ask for? Aneirin could take his memories, or his ability to laugh. He could insist on Jeth serving as his page until he was old and hunch-backed.

He stopped pacing. Aneirin stood still as a stone, watching him. He hadn't moved at all.

"I will be leaving this place on my own. I don't wish for any help."

Aneirin's laugh was strange and brittle, like icicles falling to the ground. "Very well. I shall not offer aid."

Relief undid the knots between Jeth's shoulders. He hadn't even realized how tense he was. Jeth glanced up at the sky, taking a moment to find the sun and determine which way was east. No doubt he would come upon a village at *some* point. Or a road. Or anything. He'd be just fine.

"Well, goodbye then," he said, starting toward the trees.

"Jeth."

Don't stop. Don't turn.

He did both.

Aneirin gestured vaguely to a small rise to his left. "A trading caravan is just beyond that rise. I have been traveling with them for some time. Their business has concluded, and they are packing their wares to leave. Their path goes east from here. Perhaps they might need an extra pair of hands around their encampment?"

It was everything Jeth had wanted to find, offered on a silver platter.

This has to be a trap.

Why would a faerie offer so much, so freely? Aneirin hadn't even asked for payment or a favor for helping Jeth in his escape, and now he was offering – everything? Jeth's heart was racing.

Don't, his mother whispered.

"I hope they find the help they need. Goodbye."

Aneirin laughed again. Jeth's hands curled into fists as he turned and marched toward the trees. It was time to leave. This was too dangerous. He was no match for a faerie in a battle of

wits and he knew it. As he stepped beneath the bare boughs of the trees, he breathed a sigh of relief.

That was when the trap snapped shut.

"About my favor..." Aneirin said, studying his fingernails. The words hung in the chill air.

Jeth froze. A wave of cold swept over him, followed by a flush of anger.

I'm a fool, falling for that. I knew it, I knew he wouldn't just let me go!

He had let his guard down, which was exactly what he told himself not to do. Slowly, he turned back around. He glared at the creature.

"What favor?"

"I rescued you, and one good turn begets another. You would agree, yes?" Aneirin smiled, but it was little more than a curl of the lips. His orange eyes never wavered in their stare, and the smile never reached them.

"What is it you want?"

Jeth's mind conjured all sorts of terrible answers. What if the faerie wanted his memories of his mother? What if he wiped Jeth's mind entirely? What if he took something more tangible – like the orb. Maybe he would want a limb. A leg!

"Do not worry so much. I don't want anything you own. Meager as your physical belongings are, now, you have nothing that particularly interests me. Not even that bauble on your hip. Where *did* you get such an artefact?"

Jeth didn't answer as the faerie walked over to him, footsteps making no sound and hardly an indentation in the snow.

"That wasn't an answer to my question," he said instead, trying not to sound cross and failing.

"I could ask for anything, and you would give it – for your freedom. For your very survival."

Aneirin circled Jeth, stride smooth and measured like a hunting cat. Jeth felt his eyes studying him from every angle. Jeth lifted his chin.

I am not afraid. Except, of course, that was a lie.

"You will travel with me, boy. That is what I want. The road is long and the humans I travel with are dull. Your presence amuses me, so you will come."

As simple as the request was, he knew it might come with hidden strings. He didn't dare agree too soon. What if he accidentally bound himself to the faerie for centuries? He didn't want that.

"How long? How far?" Jeth demanded.

"Clever," Aneirin said, still circling his prey. "Forever?"

"No."

"Fifty years."

"No!"

Aneirin stopped, heaving a great sigh. "Fine. Why don't you suggest your own terms?"

Careful! His mother's warning made him shiver.

Jeth whirled to face the faerie. "To the next town." His answer, he hoped, was vague enough that he could wriggle out of it if he had to.

Aneirin raised a brow. There was no sound beyond their breathing for several moments. A lone bird whistled a little tune in the trees nearby. A squirrel skittered across some branches, chittering as it went. Jeth's heart never slowed its racing.

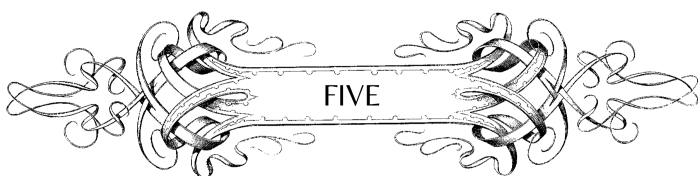
"Agreed." Aneirin offered his hand at last.

Jeth didn't take it. He had never heard that it was necessary to seal a deal with a handshake. What if it were another trap? "Agreed," he echoed. "This way?"

Aneirin smiled again as he followed Jeth through the trees and up the rise, trailing after him silently. The space between Jeth's shoulder blades prickled. He fought the urge to fall back or look behind. They had a bargain. He would be safe.

I am not afraid.

He was.



THE TRADER'S CAMP WAS quiet. There were only six of them, three men and three women, all travel-stained and weathered no matter their age. Some few looked positively ancient, with gray hair and deeply lined faces. Three carts stacked high with crates and barrels and sacks, all fastened with ropes, were lined up between the traders and the thickest part of the forest. It was meager protection, but still better than nothing. There were plenty of horses, however, all picketed in a line. There were six for the wagons, broad shouldered draft horses taller than any steed Jeth had ever seen, and three more besides. He assumed the smaller horses were for riding alongside.

Then there was the large black steed, standing alone on the other side of the camp. She wasn't tethered at all, and bore no bit, bridle, or saddle. Aneirin swept to the mare's side and put his hand fondly to her cheek.

Jeth had never seen a faerie horse before. He approached slowly, struggling to keep his eyes on her hooves and her face at the same time. The tales he had heard involved such horses appearing meek and docile before stealing someone away for a

ride that would kill them, take them to the faerie lands, or never end at all.

“This is Shadowstep.”

“Hello, Shadowstep.” Jeth bowed slightly and made no move to touch the horse.

If she even is a horse. What if she's a Nightmare?

His wariness seemed to amuse Aneirin. His lips curled at the corners before his features went blank once more. He turned to the traders nearby.

Jeth had never seen a group of people more determined to ignore someone in his life. They spoke to one another in low voices, passing the last of the tents and bedrolls up and starting the process of harnessing the horses. Only one of them would even *look* at Aneirin.

A tall woman dressed in trousers and a thick jacket met the faerie's gaze. With a heavy sigh, she turned from the wagons to walk over. Her shoulders were broad, and her hair dark brown and bound at the nape of her neck. She lifted her hand in greeting.

“Ho, Aneirin. You're back. Who is this, then? Another stray?”

“An acquisition.” Aneirin gestured at the wagons. “Are you satisfied, Burne?”

Burne folded her arms over her chest, studying their haul. The wagons groaned beneath the weight of so many goods. She shook her head. “You're keeping up your end of the bargain,

and that's all I'll say on the matter. How much longer will you be with us?"

"Is three years not enough?"

"We're finished, then?"

"At the next town, I shall leave."

At the next town, when he's alone, Jeth thought. He couldn't wait to be free of his own bargain, and he wondered if Burne felt the same.

Burne nodded. "And the luck?"

"As you wished, your luck will hold for three generations."

"So this is it, then." Burne's gaze slid to Jeth.

"It is."

"Well, alright. I'll get this one settled in. You, boy. What's your name?"

"Jeth."

Burne leaned in a bit, brow furrowing. "Jeth?" She shot a glance at Aneirin, who had turned away to tend to his steed. "Jeth. I'm Burne Calder, and this is my team. Since you're with our...friend, here, you won't get much talk out of them. Not much point in trying. You can just talk to me, eh?"

Jeth liked how she grinned, and how she clasped his shoulder in a large, strong hand. He smiled back at her. "That sounds nice."

"You're going to ride with me in the lead wagon. Where's your things?"

Jeth spread his hands and shrugged helplessly. How could he tell her that he left them with the people hunting him for theft?

“Nothing but the clothes on your back? I’ve been there. Go on, get up in the seat there. We’ll take care of the horses.”

Aneirin cleared his throat delicately. “We leave within the bell.”

Burne nodded at the faerie, then turned to help lift Jeth onto the wagon’s tall seat and left him to settle in. Jeth couldn’t help but lean around the side of the wagon to watch her and her crew. She moved among them, lending a hand where needed, doing jobs herself when everyone else was busy, and offering encouragement when she could.

Jeth liked Burne Calder. She had him smiling again, all because she was bright and cheery herself, even in the dismal gray weather.

In short order, the horses were fastened, the traders were mounted or seated, and rolling down to the road. Aneirin and Shadowstep rode in the lead, far enough away they disappeared if the road bent.

Burne watched the faerie’s back with clear distaste, twitching the reins.

“You don’t like him?” Jeth asked.

“No one likes or dislikes faeries, little Jeth. We make our deals and get on with our lives if we survive them. Aneirin is powerful. I don’t know what deal you struck, but you’d do well to finish it quickly.”

“You’ve been in a deal with him for years.”

Burne laughed, low and bitter. “I have. I struck the deal when I first started out. He’d travel with my company and we’d go

wherever he said, but in exchange? Riches. Luck. Safety. Not just for the duration of the bargain, but for the rest of my life. All because he wanted to find...something."

Jeth's brow furrowed. He had the strangest feeling that she nearly said something else.

What's so important that a faerie would travel the length and breadth of Hallanor to find it? Why won't she tell me? Is that part of their deal?

"Enough of that," Burne said, interrupting his thoughts. "What puts a boy like you out in the world alone? Why aren't you safe at home?"

He could tell she knew she had misspoken as soon as his expression fell. The guilt flashed across her face even as grief passed over his.

"You don't have to answer if—"

"My mother died. I haven't got anyone else."

"Damn. And damn me, too." Burne chewed on the inside of her cheek for a moment, gaze drifting to the faerie riding ahead of them.

"You didn't know," Jeth said softly.

"Doesn't mean it didn't hurt you. Look, are you hungry? There's cold meat pies in that chest behind you, fresh from one of the inns. Tuck in."

His mood lifted as he dug through the chest for his first real breakfast in days.

"How did you meet him?" Burne asked.

Jeth's paused, a meat pie wrapped in paper in his hand. He lowered the lid of the chest slowly, brow furrowing. *Does she suspect that I'm a thief?*

Aloud, all he said was: "I ran into him in an alleyway." None of it was a lie.

Burne cleared her throat. She scanned the trees on either side as if they were listening before crooking a finger. Jeth leaned in.

"Careful with Aneirin. I survive by doing exactly as he says, when he says it. He's in charge, and he knows it. You'd do well to do the same."

Jeth shivered. The paper in his hands crinkled as his grip tightened. "Why...why are you telling me this?"

Burne cupped his cheek in her calloused hand, gaze softening. "Because you're just a boy still, no matter that everyone else thinks you're a man. You're alone, and you're young, and I don't want to see that faerie chew you up and spit you out like he did me."

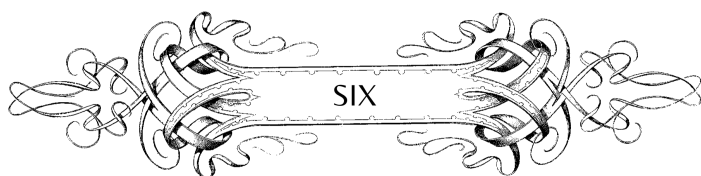
"But you got everything you wanted."

"The thing with faerie deals, Jeth, is that you get what you want but it's never how you wanted it. Now eat. No." She held up a hand, and Jeth closed his mouth again slowly. "Just eat."

They sat in silence Jeth couldn't interpret as companionable or awkward as the sun began to sink, and the cold meat pie settled in the pit of his stomach like a stone. Jeth couldn't help but stare at Aneirin's back as the faerie came into view around a bend. As if he could sense the gaze boring into him, Aneirin turned in the saddle to glance back at Jeth.

Did he imagine the faerie smiled at him? Did he imagine that the smile was somehow taut as a bowstring, ready to fire an arrow into his heart? He couldn't tell. Dread built up like a weight on his back, heavier than his pack had ever been.

What have I done?



JETH FROWNED AT THE length of rope in his hands, struggling to knot it the way Burne had showed him a dozen times. Three days had passed uneventfully. Aneirin had insisted that Jeth learn to ride, and Jeth had spent a few bells each day uneasily astride a horse. Burne taught him knots and ways to tell a good inn from a bad one before even seeing a room. True to her predictions, none of the other traders spoke to Jeth at all. The trader who loaned Jeth the horse simply handed the reins over without looking at him, and the rest pretended he wasn't there at all. Even when he spoke directly to them.

His only company was Burne Calder or Aneirin. Aneirin insisted on riding ahead of the wagons in silence, interrupted only by small observances of flora and fauna. Of the two, Jeth preferred Burne Calder. She was boisterous and warm, a balm to his lonely heart.

"Give it another go," she encouraged him. "Here, over. Now twist. Pull. Aha, you've got it!"

Jeth held the rope up, admiring the clumsy knot.

"Now do it again," Burne said, a playful grin on her face.

“Again?”

“Again.”

The wagons rolled around a curve in the road as Jeth worked the knot free. Ahead, a dark shape caught his eye. He lowered the rope, watching the still form of Aneirin aside Shadowstep as the faerie waited for the wagons. Once they caught up, he fell in beside Burne Calder’s wagon.

Burne’s smile was gone. “What is it?”

“Trouble ahead. In keeping with our bargain, I shall handle it. No need to stop or change course,” he said, as calmly as if he were discussing a walk to market.

Burne swept her arm toward the road ahead. “Well, after you, then.”

Aneirin tucked his heels against Shadowstep’s side and the mare practically flew, barreling down the road so quickly they were soon gone. Jeth shuddered at the quiet reminder that what appeared to be a horse...wasn’t.

“Alright, Jeth, I don’t know how much time we have.” Burne pulled the rope from Jeth’s hands.

“For what?” Jeth asked, feeling his heart beat harder at the urgency in her voice.

“You come from a small village outside of Last Stop, don’t you?”

His heart was now hammering at his ribs, and a chill washed over him. *If I have to, I can run. I can make it into the trees and vanish.*

He didn't know what would happen if he broke a faerie bargain, but he wasn't about to find out. He braced himself against the wagon's seat.

"Why do you ask?"

"When we were in Last Stop, a man named Silas came to speak to us. He was looking for a boy named Jeth."

Jeth felt a flush of anger creeping over his cheeks and up to his ears. He considered defending himself, explaining everything – but what would be the point? He stood, prepared to throw himself off the wagon and flee.

Burne Calder was faster than he'd thought. She caught his arm, holding him fast. "They were worried about you, boy."

All of his anger vanished abruptly. The wagon rocked, tipping him back into his seat. "What?"

"Silas told us quite the tale. They went to your cottage to move you to some little house on the other side of the village, and you were gone."

Jeth remembered the empty shepherd's house, smaller than his and his mother's and long abandoned, with the crooked little fence falling to pieces at the side. "They wanted to move me?"

The villagers hadn't planned to abandon him at all.

"When they went to your cottage, though, someone else was there. A man was looking for you by name. When the villagers couldn't turn you over to him, he set three houses on fire before he decided they were telling the truth."

"I don't understand." Jeth felt as if someone had put a handful of snow down the back of his coat. He shivered. "I don't believe you!"

If Burne Calder was right, that meant Jeth was wrong. That meant that Hugo *was* relieved. That meant...that he didn't have to leave home in the first place.

"I don't know how to convince you. I swear, I spoke to Silas myself in Last Stop. There were others with him."

"Hugo," Jeth murmured.

Burne shrugged, glancing up the road. There was still no sign of Aneirin. "Now, I don't know what deal you struck with the faerie, but if it doesn't include protection from whatever's hunting you—"

The villagers aren't after me, but someone else is. And now I don't know why.

He shook his head. "No, you have to be wrong."

"We can argue all day and all night, Jeth. I can't turn around and show you proof. You have to take me at my word." She took a deep breath, closing her eyes as if her next words physically hurt. "You might need another deal with Aneirin."

"No, no more deals. One was bad enough!" Jeth's mother wouldn't want him indebted to a faerie forever. His hand fell to the pouch at his side, feeling the comforting shape of the orb through the leather.

The orb! Jeth had seen his mother use it a hundred times to scry for the villagers, to bring them news of washed out roads or

when to expect the tax collector. He managed to use it himself once before, even if it were brief and indistinct.

His fledgling powers were mostly used to stir the air or light candles. He had never perfected much more than that.

"I know how to see if it's true." Jeth said, fingers fumbling with the ties of the pouch. With a huff he bit the fingertip of a glove and pulled his hand free, untying the orb at last. It rolled into his hands, catching the late afternoon sunlight and glowing soft and gold. It was warmer than he expected it to be.

Burne leaned over to study it. "Well, that's a mighty fine bauble. How exactly is it going to help us?"

"It's a crystal ball. My mother—"

"Was the village witch, yes, Silas told me."

"Well, this was hers. Not the village's, but hers," he said, a challenge creeping into his voice.

Burne met his eyes and gave a solemn nod. "I understand."

"I can scry with it."

A breeze rose and stirred Jeth's hair, making him shiver. His fingers closed over the orb. *Spoken like a prophecy, but can I even do it?*

"Huh! With magic that powerful, it's no wonder Aneirin took an interest in you. He likes collecting things, that one."

"I'm not a thing, and I'm not collected." Every word was firm.

Burne shrugged, turning back to the road ahead. "Cast your spells, Jeth. Before Aneirin comes back."

Jeth held the orb in both of his hands, studying the depths intently. He summoned his will, feeling it build up like electric-

ity in his chest. When he had enough that he felt like his teeth were rattling in his skull and his hair was standing on end, he pushed it down his arms and into the crystal.

The depths flashed a brighter gold, winking in and out of existence like a firefly.

It faded.

Jeth frowned, holding the crystal up higher. *What had mother said? What did she tell me to do?* He closed his eyes.

Her ghost didn't come. He frowned, straining to summon her, willing her to appear. *Don't be gone!*

I'm not, she seemed to whisper in his ear. You can do this. For a scrying spell, you must let your mind drift. Draw in the power slowly. Through your chest and into your fingers. Do you remember how?

"I remember," he murmured. He hadn't before.

"What was that?" Burne asked.

"Nothing." When Jeth opened his eyes, his mother's presence was gone again. She was growing fainter every day.

I don't have time to think about that. I have to figure out what's going on.

He held the orb aloft once more, staring into the depths. As branches passed overhead, the shadows flickered and rolled across the crystal. Jeth watched the play of light, of gold and darkness, relaxing until he felt everything else drift away piece by piece. The wagon stopped creaking. The horse's tack stopped jingling. The cold bite of winter began to fade.

It was then he pulled at the power again, reaching out to the leyline that ran parallel to the road. He imagined himself as a sluice gate, opening the link between the power of the forest and the orb just enough to let a trickle through.

It took a moment, but then he felt the magic *catch*, like a fish at the end of a line. He opened the conduit a little more, feeling the power build up, watching the golden gleam in the center as it began to glow. It was captivating – quite literally. Jeth found he couldn't tear his gaze away from heart of the orb.

It must be ready.

My village, he willed.

He felt as if he were falling, as if the wagon rocked forward and threw him from his seat and he were plummeting to the ground. His breath caught and he tried to brace himself.

He couldn't move.

Instead, he seemed to be flying. So quickly it made his stomach roil, Jeth was flung into the sky and over the undulating ocean of the forest, speeding faster than a thought to his home. He closed his eyes, relieved to find he could.

Everything stilled. He could hear the clatter of a spinning wheel. The petulant bleat of a goat. He cracked one eye open – and gasped.

Jeth was standing in the center of his village, still holding the orb cradled in his hands. The image was so vivid, so *real*. The scent of burnt wood and snow filled the air, nearly overpowering the aroma of bread and stew from the nearest house.

The tiny one-room tavern was gone, replaced with a black pit of ash and charred wood. A few beams still stood in stark contrast against the snow behind. Hugo's house was gone as well, now just a ring of soot-covered stones with a pile of debris inside. Jeth recoiled, turning his gaze toward the cottage. He knew he wouldn't be able to see it from here, but he had to know if it was...

The house nearest the little path that wound to his home used to be bordered on one side by Silas's house, and on the other by the home of the baker and her sister. The baker's house was gone. Only the two massive stone ovens still stood, painted with fire residue until they looked like two holes in the very air itself.

Jeth swallowed. *Burne Calder wasn't lying. The village was attacked.*

He willed himself to the nearest lit window at Silas's house, peering through the bubbled glass. When he walked, he left no footprints and made no sound.

Inside Silas's house, the barkeep, his wife, and his two children were settling in on straw pallets that covered every inch of available floor. Hugo's wife, heavily pregnant, was settled into a rocking chair by the hearth, her pallet stacked double.

Silas's wife, Maeve, was pouring mugs of tea for everyone at the table, speaking soothingly to her stunned neighbors.

"When the men get back, they'll put it all to rights. You'll see."

Jeth didn't know how he had stepped through the wall, but now he was in the cramped cottage's living space, beside the door.

"And don't fret, they'll be back any day now. Them and young Jeth." Maeve gave a firm nod, pressing a mug into Hugo's wife's hands. *What was her name...?*

No one responded to Maeve. They took their mugs in near silence, even the children. A few tried to smile at her, but the attempts ended quickly.

"They'll be back," Maeve repeated. "Any minute. You'll see."

They lost everything, too. Not over a misunderstanding, but over me.

Jeth's heart sank, and the bottom of his stomach with it. A cold pit was left inside him. He knew how awful it was to lose your home.

I want to leave.

It felt as if a rope around his waist were given a sudden tug, yanking him back a step. He dropped his gaze to his boots, then back up to the window. For a moment, his eyes met Maeve's wistful gaze. Could she see him? He lifted his hand –

The rope tugged again, harder than before. He stumbled and fell backwards...onto the wagon seat beside Burne Calder. The light in the center of the orb flickered and died. Slack jawed, Jeth scanned the woods rolling by on either side of the wagon.

He'd gone there and back again in the space of a thought.

"Are you alright?" Burne asked, her hand clasping his shoulder. "It was like you went to sleep sitting up. You couldn't hear a thing."

"I'm fine. I'm alright," he assured her, even as a wave of exhaustion washed over him. His voice sounded far away. "You were right. Half the village is gone."

If Burne was right about the village, then she was right about something else, too. Someone was after Jeth. What could one boy do against an unknown man who was powerful enough to set three buildings aflame before anyone could stop him? Who could escape a half dozen men and twice as many women unscathed?

What if I have to make another bargain to protect myself?

He shuddered. Any more bargains might come at a higher cost. Could he take such a risk? What would Aneirin ask for?

As if the thought summoned him, the wagon rolled around a corner and the faerie and his horse stood waiting in the center of the road. Parts of his cloak and doublet gleamed strangely in the fading light. A strong coppery smell floated in the air, covering even the scent of snow.

Jeth quickly tucked the orb away. Aneirin's eyes seemed to follow the gesture.

"Just look straight ahead, boy, don't look around. You hear me?" Burne said, voice taut. She didn't slow or stop the wagon.

Jeth froze, keeping his eyes on the road ahead. "Why? What is it?"

"Just do as I say."

As they drew up alongside Aneirin, the creature mounted Shadowstep and fell in beside them. "In another league there will be a nice clearing. We can make camp there."

"Good to know," Burne said, keeping her voice light. Jeth could hear the barest waver to the words, though.

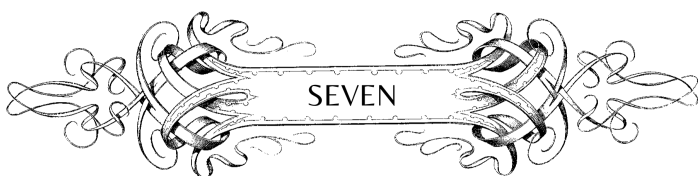
His eyes slid slowly to one side.

An arm lay limp on the ground. At the top, where the rest of a body would be, there wasn't. A small pool of crimson stained the grass and snow beneath it.

Jeth looked ahead again. His stomach tied itself into a knot. He knew what that smell on the air was, now.

Blood.

They rode on in silence.



"IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS." Jeth was starting to get suspicious. Even if his time with the caravan had taught him how to start a fire, how to set up a tent, how to hitch and groom a horse, how to ride, how to tie knots – his intention was to strike out on his own.

They hadn't reached a town, a village, or even a little hamlet yet. They made camp in clearings Aneirin directed them to and found roots beside them. Three times they stayed at a waystation along the road, little more than a roof and walls with a massive hearth and a pantry full of flour, oats, and beans. One evening had been spent with their wagons parked in a field and the traders in the barn of a farmer in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes they ran into merchants on the road and bought or traded for fresh provisions. None of that took them to a town.

Every night, Jeth had nightmares about a man following him, a man made of shadows. Every day, shadows that flitted past beneath the trees on either side of the road made Jeth jump, made his heart race, made his spine go cold. How far behind him was the man who burned the village?

Jeth was keenly aware of his bargain with Aneirin. It chafed to know he might have to make another.

He's trying to keep me here with him. I can't trust him.

Jeth held the reins of his horse tight in his hands. It was quiet apart from the jingle of the bridle and the dull thud of the horses' hooves. Aneirin sat astride Shadowstep, leading the way as usual. The wagons rolled along a few lengths behind them.

"Two," Jeth repeated.

"Yes," the faerie affirmed, as though agreeing there might be snow later.

"We should have reached somewhere by now, and we haven't. Why?"

Aneirin's brows drew down. He didn't like questions. "The goods that Burne Calder has obtained will sell better at one specific market than they will anywhere else. I am keeping up my end of her bargain."

Jeth sighed. *Another half-truth. Why do faeries always do that?* He knew they couldn't tell lies, but it was frustrating how they were so obvious about omitting important information. Aneirin was avoiding the subject of his own bargain with Jeth on purpose.

If they never reached the next town, the deal would stand forever.

"You are displeased." It wasn't a question.

Jeth shrugged. "I'm just not sure what you want from me. When we ride, we hardly talk. When we talk, it's about plants or animals. Everything else has been...normal things."

“Normal things or human things?” Aneirin gave a small, brief smile. “Things such as learning to make camp, care for horses, and speak of likes and dislikes? Plain things, not magical faerie things. Yes?”

“Well, yes.” Jeth heaved another sigh. Aneirin patrolled the edge of camp every evening, listening to Burne Calder and Jeth. They discussed what food he liked, what books he had read, what kind of music he liked, what weather he preferred. Over the weeks spent with the caravan, Jeth’s answers had gone from curt, one-word answers to lengthy explanations and stories.

He tried to resist. It just felt so good to have someone to talk to like that again. Burne always listened, always laughed at his jests, always had something clever to say. Once his deal with Aneirin was complete, Jeth hoped Burne would let him go with her until he found an apprenticeship.

Part of him wondered if his mother felt betrayed to see him smiling again so soon. Did she hate him for being comfortable in his bedroll, tucked into one of the wagons? Surrounded by crates and burlap bags, Jeth was warm and safe. Did she hate him for that? He couldn’t summon her at will anymore. She came less and less frequently, and said fewer words in his ear before she left.

Someday, she wouldn’t come at all.

Jeth twitched the reins, guiding his horse toward the opposite side of the road from the faerie. “I just don’t understand what you’re playing at.”

“Playing? I am not playing,” Aneirin said, a firm finality to his words.

“Then what—”

“How did you sleep?” the faerie interrupted.

Horribly, Jeth thought. Every night, tucked in his bedroll away from everyone else, he wrapped around the aching hole in his chest and let the hurt swallow him until he fell asleep. He cried silently long into the night, trying to process his mother’s passing, trying not to drown in his own grief.

Then, all night long he had nightmares of fire, of reaching hands out of the darkness, of someone breathing behind him that he could never turn fast enough to see.

Yet every morning when the sun rose, he was back on his feet as if nothing had happened at all. Jeth didn’t feel safe enough to let Aneirin know how he felt, but he suspected Burne Calder knew. She never said anything about it, just passed him a water skin every morning before sending him to do his chores.

It was an unexpected gift to find a friend in Burne – or perhaps an unintended side effect of his bargain with the faerie.

“I slept as well as I always do,” Jeth answered at last.

Aneirin smiled. Could he tell that Jeth had given his own faerie lie? They rode in silence for several minutes.

“I expected something different,” Jeth blurted.

“Oh?”

“I grew up hearing stories about faeries that dragged mortals below the hills for a hundred years to live in their courts, or

about great revels where humans danced until their feet wore away entirely or they starved to death.”

“Those stories are not entirely false,” Aneirin said with an elegant shrug of one shoulder.

“What about the ones where you put mortals under spells that erase who they are, or disguise them from all their loved ones?”

“Also true.”

Jeth leaned forward. “Can you cast a spell so that someone doesn’t know where they are, and instead sees somewhere different?”

“I can.”

“Have you cast that spell on me?”

Aneirin paused, brows lifting in faint surprise. “Very astute, Jeth, but no. I have cast no spells upon you.”

Jeth turned to watch the trees pass on the side of the road. Faeries couldn’t lie, no one knew why. He was safe. Well, as safe as one could be when traveling with a faerie.

Every story he had ever heard about faeries ended in tragedy. *I hope I can escape my own story unscathed.*

All he had to do was get to the next city or town, and then he would be free.

“You asked me why we did plain things,” Aneirin’s words cut through Jeth’s musings.

Jeth nodded.

“I am training you. To be companionable, one must be able to keep up with me.”

"I don't need to keep up with you. I'm leaving at the next town."

"You will change your mind."

"You don't know that," Jeth said heatedly.

"Would you like to learn a spell?"

The change of subject left Jeth floundering. "What? A...a spell? What makes you think..."

"You were gathering magic when you ran into me. I felt you fumble with it when I rode away to kill the bandits as well. I know about the focus you have in that little bag on your hip. I can see it. I can feel it."

Jeth's breath caught. *I didn't know faeries could feel magic.* No one had ever mentioned that in any of the tales or written it in any of the grimoires his mother had let him read. *How...?*

"We faeries have an innate ability we call True Sight. It's easy enough to learn to use it, for some. It sees through glamours, and clings to those who use magic. When magic is pulled from the leylines, one can see it, like a little thread of starlight tying the caster to the deep pools of this world.

"Would you like to learn to do it?" Aneirin's sidelong look was smug. He knew Jeth's answer.

"I can learn it, too? I can see all that?" Jeth tried to imagine a life with that sort of power. He could go to the Royal Court of Hallanor and offer his services, spying out magic-users that might threaten the Queen. He could track new witches for villages that didn't have one. He could take to the hills and fight the faeries themselves! The possibilities were overwhelming.

He could go back to his village and help them rebuild, and they would welcome him. Even untrained, with an ability like True Sight, he could become a witch for the home he never wanted to leave.

“You can do quite a lot with that focus of yours. It amplifies one’s natural abilities. I have seen its like before.”

Jeth’s hand fell to the orb at his hip. “What? You have? Where?”

“In a town called River’s Tor.”

“Do you know anything about it?” Jeth might not have another chance to learn about his crystal ball. They *had* to be close to a town, now. Who would he ask when he and the faerie parted ways?

For a moment, Aneirin tipped his head to one side. Jeth’s heart picked up to a gallop in his chest. *Is he going to ask for a trade for the answer?*

“It is a conduit for power, something like a mirror and a cup in one. Power pools within it and reflects back to the user, allowing them to push their will further than they could on their own. Did you think it merely a pretty bauble to tell fortunes with?”

A flush crept over Jeth’s cheeks. “No.”

“You planned to use it to predict harvests? Find lost little pigs? Tell people who their one true love is?” Aneirin mocked. There was a disdain dripping from the words that Jeth didn’t like.

“What’s wrong with small magics?”

“Mortal magics are barely worthy of the word. Humans are like children playing with candle flames and calling it a bonfire.”

He hates humans.

“Why did you ask me to accompany you, then?” Jeth asked.

Aneirin didn’t answer. Silence fell over them again. After a few minutes, Jeth sighed and turned back to the trees.

Why did he make a deal with a trading caravan of mortals if he hates us? Why make a deal with me? Why come to Last Stop at all?

All Jeth had found on his journey so far was more and more questions. There was so much to learn!

“Pull out the focus,” Aneirin said, gesturing to the pouch on Jeth’s hip.

Brow furrowed, Jeth did as he was bid, pulling his gloves off and tucking them into his belt before pulling the orb free. He cradled it in one hand, though it barely fit.

“Reach out for the magic, and pull it through your chest and into your fingertips.”

For a single heartbeat, Jeth thought his mother had spoken. The advice was the same as her lessons, even if it came from the faerie’s lips. He swallowed his surprise; he didn’t want to give Aneirin anything to interrogate him about later.

Jeth stretched his consciousness out to the nearest leyline, which ran several lengths back in the woods. Once he had his ‘fingers’ in it, he opened the barrier in his chest and let it flow through him, down to his fingertips.

“Feed the power into the focus.”

Jeth pushed the magic from his hands. Just as it had when Jeth used it to scry, the orb drank up the steady trickle of power until the center of it flickered to life with a golden glow. The glow grew brighter the more he fed it.

“Good. Now, close your eyes and will it to open them again. Will it to show you the leylines.” Aneirin’s instructions sounded far away.

Mother showed me the leylines, once. When he first began learning magic, his mother had sat him down and shown him the rivers of silver power that flowed through the world, using the crystal ball as a lens. Jeth remembered staring through it in awe, turning this way and that to see every inch of the magic he might use.

No, Jeth, you can’t. Too much magic will burn right through you and leave you an empty shell. Drink sparingly from those rivers, or you’ll drown. His mother’s warning nearly shattered his concentration. He felt the power waver.

No, don’t go! Show me the leylines, show me the magic.

The orb warmed in his hand. With a deep breath, Jeth opened his eyes.

The deep river of a leyline ran through the woods to his left, fed by tributaries of smaller magic. The smaller magics split off further or pooled into little knots of power before continuing on their way. The bright silver radiance of the lines themselves nearly overpowered the softer glow of the sleeping trees and shrubs along the road. When he looked back, the tradesmen

and Burne Calder on her wagon had the same barely perceptible sheen.

Aneirin and Shadowstep glowed nearly as bright as the ley-lines above. *Do all faeries glow that way?*

Jeth looked down at his own hands. His own light was stronger than the tradesmen, but far softer than Aneirin's. The orb, however, shone gold, even to this other sight. Jeth twisted in the saddle, tracing the paths of magic. His jaw hung open in awe.

Could you see like this, Mother?

She didn't answer.

"Now, reach for the magic you put in the focus," Aneirin said after giving Jeth plenty of time to gawk.

We aren't finished yet? Jeth dipped his senses into the golden pool of power at the heart of the crystal ball. The hair on his arms stood up. Every inch of him tingled from the top of his scalp to his toes. His eyes widened. *This is much more than I gave it!*

"Good," Aneirin said. "Now pull the power free and stretch it into a mask. Place the mask over your eyes."

Jeth concentrated, teeth clenched as he wrestled the magic free of the focus and into the air. Holding that much magic was overwhelming, and letting his attention wander even for an instant could spark a backlash that would leave him senseless for the rest of his life, hollowing out his mind until nothing remained. It was like trying to hold a lightning bolt. It twined and writhed in his grasp, trying to escape.

That's enough! He forced it flat, pulling it into the shape of a mask he had worn one Hellsfire Night a few years ago. Strangely, giving it shape seemed to soothe the wild power. Magic, it seemed, liked to be molded.

Jeth imagined putting the mask on.

The golden light within the focus flickered out, but the silver shimmer of magic all around them did not. Jeth's skin was warm where the magical mask touched it. He tucked the orb into its pouch.

"There. You've done it. You now have True Sight," Aneirin said, a bloom of pride rising in the words.

"Will I see this way forever?" Jeth couldn't feel the strain of maintaining the spell any longer. How would he diffuse power he wasn't really using? The silver overlay to the world would very quickly lose its charm if he had to see this way day in and day out.

"Simply take the mask off." Aneirin waved a hand.

Jeth imagined reaching up and pulling the mask from his face. It took a moment, but the glow of magic slowly faded away, like a sunset rather than a snuffed candle. He put the mask back on, just to make sure he could activate his new power again, then turned his True Sight off. It hardly took a moment of concentration.

"You will not need to cast the spell again."

"Why? How?"

Aneirin tipped his head to one side in thought. "You've not opened a door, which will swing closed behind you. You've removed a wall."

Jeth had never heard of spells one never had to cast again. His heart pounded. *Am I the most powerful witch in Hallanor?*

What would that mean for his plans, for his future?

"Why doesn't everyone learn to do this?" Jeth asked.

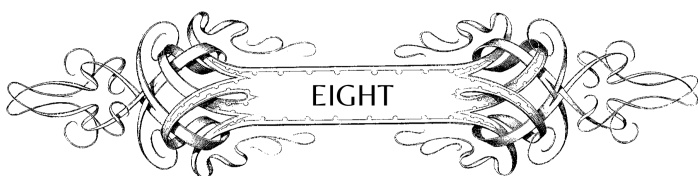
"Because not everyone is like you."

His brow furrowed. The vague answer left him uneasy. Aneirin answered the question without answering it at all. Jeth was getting tired of faerie games. He opened his mouth.

"There. Through the trees. Do you see it?" Aneirin pointed.

The interruption worked, which frustrated Jeth to no end. The road curved to the right, and behind a stand of birch trees he could just see...a wall. A building? The sky was pale and blue and clear today, and twining columns of smoke rose from dozens of chimneys.

They had made it to town.



“WE MADE IT!” JETH tapped his heels against his horse’s sides, urging it into a canter toward his freedom.

Shadowstep easily fell in beside him as they rode around the bend. A simple wooden wall with a base of stones surrounded the small town. Rooftops huddled behind it. The gate stood open, and unattended.

None of it mattered so much as being free of the faerie.

A hand snaked out of the corner of his eye, grabbing the horse’s bridle and reigning the creature in. Jeth tore his gaze from the road, staring at Aneirin as the faerie pulled them both to a walk, then a stop.

What’s going on?

“Let go,” Jeth said.

“A moment.” Aneirin calmly guided them to the wayside.

Jeth eased a foot back in the stirrup, ready to fling himself off the side and run to the safety of the village. Chances were they were simply waiting for the wagons, but there was always the possibility of worse with a faerie. His fears prickled down his back and spread over his entire body. What if his earlier

suspicious were true? What if Aneirin was going to keep him? He wasn't going to go any further with the creature, not for all the gold, luck, and protection in the world.

The caravan trundled into view, with Burne in the seat of the lead wagon. Jeth lifted his hand to wave to her, but she was avoiding his gaze. Her jaw was set.

"Burne," Jeth called.

She didn't turn, she flinched. Her face twisted with guilt instead of a smile.

Confusion congealed into cold dread in the bottom of Jeth's stomach as the first wagon rolled past. He twisted in the saddle. "Aneirin, what are you doing?"

"Holding your horse."

"I want to go in. Let go."

"No."

"Why?" Jeth cried.

Aneirin fixed Jeth in a cold, distant stare that was strangely hypnotic. His orange eyes glinted like a dagger catching the light. "Because I will never let you set foot in a village, town, or city again. You are mine."

No. No, I knew it!

The time for questions was over. Nothing mattered now except getting away. Jeth swung off his horse, stumbling as he landed and catching himself on his bare hands. They stung, and he ignored it as he bolted for the town gate.

"Burne!" he shouted.

The wagons didn't stop. None of the traders jumped down to help. There would be no daring rescue. Jeth was on his own.

Hooves pounded on the road behind him.

That isn't fair! He could never outrun a faerie horse. Jeth flung himself sideways, landing hard on his shoulder as he tumbled off the road and into the trees with a crackle of branches. With a dozen new scrapes stinging all over his face and hands, Jeth scrambled between the tree trunks. The gate was so close. If he could just stay out of Aneirin's grasp for a minute longer—!

A normal horse might struggle to navigate its way between the trees, but Shadowstep was no normal horse. She plunged into the trees, threading between them like a needle through fabric. Bushes caught at Jeth's clothes and scratched at his face, but seemed to part around the faerie steed like water.

Aneirin was catching up.

Jeth burst out of the trees mere steps from the gate. Burne Calder stood by the gatepost, one hand on the wood.

"Burne, help me!" he cried.

Aneirin caught Jeth by the arm and yanked him off the ground, wrenching Jeth's shoulder. Jeth lashed out with fists and feet alike as he was hauled onto Shadowstep's back. Aneirin's arm locked around his waist like a vice, tightening until it hurt.

Panting, Jeth stilled. *I can't get away.* They stood only a few feet short of the gate, and yet his freedom was further away than ever. He turned an accusing glower to Burne Calder.

"I'm sorry, Jeth," she said, tears welling in her eyes.

“Why? Why won’t you help me?”

“My bargain was luck and good fortune, so long as he gets what he wants.”

“And Aneirin wants me.” Jeth said bitterly.

“Yes,” the faerie said.

“You knew!” he shouted at Burne. In the town beyond, a few townsfolk gathered to watch the scene at the gate, their eyes wide. How many of them had actually seen a faerie in their lifetime?

Burne hung her head. “I knew. I knew as soon as Silas told me the story of your village.”

But why would she know then?

Jeth’s mouth went dry. “Aneirin, did you burn their houses to find me?” His voice wavered, betraying him.

“I did.”

Jeth shouted, struggling anew. He writhed and punched and kicked and shouted, and none of it mattered. None of it helped. All he managed to do was pinch himself against Aneirin’s arm.

“Are you not yet finished with this tantrum?” the faerie asked coldly. There was a bite to his words that suggested the creature would end this himself if Jeth didn’t.

Jeth slumped, gasping for air. He glared at the faerie, willing every ounce of betrayal and hatred into his eyes in hopes that Aneirin would see it, would *feel* it. *You tricked me. You hunted me, and then you tricked me!*

Flinging a hand out toward the leylines nearby, Jeth began to pull in power. With a crack of magic like a whip, the faerie

shocked him, sending pain like static through his entire body. Jeth yelped.

“Stop that,” Aneirin commanded. “You have no right to be angry with me. You’ll understand. When we make camp, I will explain.”

“I don’t want to go with you! Let me go, please! Burne!”

Burne flinched again, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Our bargain is completed, Burne Calder. I am pleased. Your luck will pass to your children, and your children’s children.”

Burne’s eyes were wide, a tear falling down her cheek. “I sold a child to a faerie and got a blessing for a child I haven’t even got?” She gave a bitter laugh. “Some bargain.”

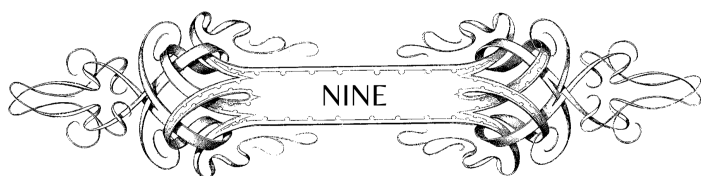
“You will have children, soon enough. After all, you have the good fortune of the faeries on your side.” Aneirin smiled.

Burne Calder turned away from the gate, passing her hand over her eyes. “I hope that good fortune means I’ll never see you again, Aneirin.”

“Burne!” Jeth wailed, feebly trying to pry the faerie’s arm off of his chest.

Aneirin turned Shadowstep away from the gate. A whistle summoned Jeth’s horse from where it stood up the road. It trotted up to Shadowstep’s side and matched her sedate pace as the faerie guided them into the woods.

Jeth craned his head to watch Burne walk away, rounding the corner and vanishing from view. The townsfolk pushed the gate shut. The booming echo of it closing followed Jeth like a death knell.



JETH SAT ACROSS FROM Aneirin, fingers curled against the bark of a fallen log doubling as a bench. He said nothing to the faerie, stewing in silence. Aneirin didn't seem to notice or mind. He added a log to the fire between them.

What am I going to do? What would Mother say? Where are we going to go? What is his plan? A welter of questions echoed in his mind, and he knew all of them would go unanswered. There was no way out of his contract with the faerie, unless...

Unless Jeth came up with a clever solution.

Maybe I will, in five years or ten or twenty.

His heart sank in his chest, vanishing into that yawning chasm within him and threatening to take all his will with it. What point was there in struggling? In trying again and again, year after year, to escape?

You must, his mother whispered, barely there and quickly gone. It was enough to pull Jeth from his misery. It was enough to let despair spark into something hot, and urgent, and *angry*. Jeth glared across the little fire between them.

Aneirin was patient. No doubt the faerie had lived for thousands of years, and would live a thousand more. Despite that, Jeth's stubborn refusal to engage seemed to be grating on the unflappable creature's nerves. Aneirin's frown grew more and more pronounced with every passing minute.

If there is to be war between us, I will win, Jeth vowed.

The fire crackled. A log popped and sank with a spray of embers. The horses shifted beyond the circle of firelight. One whickered. Jeth's glare never wavered.

Aneirin stood abruptly, abandoning the stone he used as a seat to pace, snow turning to slush beneath his boots. Another minute passed. Two.

Five.

Ten.

"I met your mother fifteen years ago," Aneirin said, coming to a stop and tipping his chin toward the night sky.

Of everything the faerie could have said, that was the last thing Jeth expected. His brows rose, lips parting in surprise. "You did? You...knew her?"

"Yes. Gleda was powerful, even then. She caught my attention. She caught my...fancy. I thought if I had her, the fervor I felt would wane. I offered her wish after wish, and she turned me down each time. As her disinterest continued, mine grew."

Jeth's nose wrinkled, and he looked away from Aneirin toward the trees. *I don't want to hear how this murderous, horrible thing pined after my mother.* His beautiful, magical mother who

had more kindness in a single fingernail than the faerie had in his entire body.

Aneirin laughed, a soft and melodic sound like a wind chime in a gentle breeze. “She became the first to discover who I was. Who I *am*. More than just a faerie, I told her, thinking it would impress her – or frighten her. It did not matter either way, so long as it made her mine.”

Shifting where he sat, Jeth contemplated making a run for it. Anything would be better than this story. The silence settled over them like a blanket.

Why isn't he saying anything?

Jeth peered at the faerie. Aneirin's eyes trailed over the glittering stars above. The moon was full, glowing silver and blue low in the sky, not yet clear of the forest's branches.

He wants me to ask who he is, Jeth realized. He scoffed. *I'm not playing this game.*

Aneirin sank back onto his seat, staring at Jeth through the flames. “I am the King of the Blackthorn Court, tucked beneath what you mortals call the Heartwood Hill, near the village of River Tor.”

Wait, I know that name. River Tor? Jeth's brow furrowed as he tried to remember.

“It lies near the heart of Hallanor, two day's ride from your Queen's great city.” Aneirin laughed. “She and I are neighbors of a sort.”

Jeth didn't think it was funny. He shuddered, realizing an entire court of faeries lay so close to people, to the palace, to

the heart of his homeland. *Isn't that dangerous? Didn't anyone notice?* In all the stories, a faerie court was a bustling hub of magic, full of creatures of all sorts. Some were better to meet than others, but none of them could be called 'good.' "Didn't people disappear? Didn't they fall prey to faerie curses, or get dragged into the water by nymphs or caught in the traps laid by sprites?" he asked in spite of himself, biting his lip as soon as the words were out.

"Yes, all that and more – despite the best efforts of the witch at the time. Gleda was her apprentice, nearly ready to set out on her own."

"My mother wouldn't have been impressed by you," Jeth said firmly.

Aneirin smirked. "She wasn't. She told me that if I truly cared for her, I would go back to my court, never to emerge again. It was unfortunate that I hadn't the time to do as she wished. I had a plan, you see. I was going to expand the borders of my court. Your Queen was newly crowned, young and supple. I would give her an heir, and the power of faerie magic in her bloodline...but in return, I would get the kingdom. The entire kingdom. I would become the power behind the throne, and run the mortals into the ground. Within a hundred years, the forest would have been ours again, only ours." Aneirin's words came faster and faster, his hand balled into a fist. "*If* I hadn't gotten...distracted."

Jeth shivered. The faerie's hatred of humanity was laid bare in the feral gleam of his eyes, in the bared teeth, in the way

Aneirin's nails dug into his palm. "You didn't. You couldn't have."

"I didn't," Aneirin agreed. His gaze drifted to the sky. "My court was a thing of beauty, Jeth. It was a place between reality and dreams, more dangerous than you can fathom. All the old covenants would shatter, once one of us sat on the throne, and I was going to be the hero to do it."

"Covenants?"

Aneirin waved a hand dismissively. "The magic built into your kingdom at the founding."

"I've never heard of them." Could these covenants help him escape?

"When the first King of this land lay the first stone of the castle, he bound a spell around it. All of his subjects would be safe, within reason, from our magics. We cannot stay in human dwellings. We cannot go where we are not invited. We may not make deals with the unwilling. We can only curse those who break the rules of hospitality. We may make our bargains – but are bound to honor them to the letter. If we break these covenants, our power vanishes forevermore."

Jeth's mind raced, but he couldn't see a way to twist that information to his benefit.

"With a child of mine on the throne, I could have bid them to undo the spell. I could have freed us all."

Unleashed, more like.

"Fate, perhaps, had me emerge from the Blackthorn Court right at the edge of that little village. I saw Gleda at a festival,

dancing with a young man. She distracted me from all my goals. The way she moved like the breeze itself, the way she laughed like chiming bells, the way her eyes shone in the bonfire's light. They can wait, I told myself. I have thousands of years yet to live. When she walked home that night, I introduced myself.

"I came to her again and again, but she danced around my traps with word and act alike. She bested all my efforts, until I went mad with need. She was the white hart in the woods, and I had to have her."

Jeth's hands balled into fists. He didn't like hearing his mother talked about like a prize to be won by this uncaring faerie.

"In the end, *she* tricked *me*, and I revealed my plan. That was when she offered a bargain of her own. Gleda saved your kingdom, for a time. A fascinating woman."

A chill crept down Jeth's spine. *I don't want to hear any more.* He fought the urge to cover his ears. "What did she bargain for?"

Aneirin smiled wistfully at the moon, as though it were Gleda herself. "Ah, our deal was so simple in the end. She offered to lie with me, to love me, to be beholden to me and only me for the rest of her days. In return, I would go back to Blackthorn Court for a decade...and give her a child."

What? Jeth's mouth went dry. His breath froze in his chest, ice spreading down to his fingertips. *My mother swore to never love another for the rest of her life, and in return she got...me.*

He sat facing his father. His *father!* His father was a faerie.

Jeth was a faerie.

"No," he breathed.

“Yes.”

My magic is strong because I'm the son of a witch and a faerie. Even a drop of faerie blood in someone's lineage gave them power and changed them from human to something more, something powerful and old. Jeth didn't have years to survive with Aneirin. He had *centuries*. As the years passed, would he turn as vile and callous as his father?

“She promised to be mine, and to return the babe to me when I came to her again. Imagine my surprise when I went to River Tor and Gleda wasn't there.”

She ran. Everyone in the village told me that she arrived already pregnant with me. She told them she was a widow, that her husband was gone – but he's a faerie!

“She thought to protect you by *hiding* from me,” Aneirin snarled. “You were meant to be mine by rights. You are the son of a king, a prince of the faerie realm, and my heir. You were meant to be *mine*.”

Jeth's ears rang. The world reeled around him. His mother had never told him about his father. He thought it was out of grief. Instead, it was out of...what? Shame? Fear?

How could she?

This was worse than anything he could have imagined.

“Our agreement lasted only until I left court. She told me before I left that she wanted to strike another deal when we met again, but she fled. The thing you will learn about faeries, Jeth, is that we can hold the flame of our anger for centuries if we must. It took me years to find her.”

“You burned Hugo’s house down, and the tavern, and–”

“That was after,” Aneirin interrupted.

After? Jeth closed his mouth with a click of his teeth.

“When I first saw you, it was in the market. She was swinging a basket and you were beside her, more handsome than I had imagined. I was filled with pride and fury. I regret striking her down. It seems to have...affected you more than I anticipated.”

Jeth’s eyes widened. He had thought his world couldn’t be rocked again, not after the revelation of who – what – he was. He was wrong. Horror crept through every inch of his skin with tingling fingers and a rush of blood as his heart raced.

“I thought giving you the time to grieve would make your transition to my realm...easier. I planned to explain, after you laid her to rest. You fled before I could, and I couldn’t track you in the storm. That was when I burned the houses in the village. You understand, of course.”

He killed her.

Aneirin killed her.

Fury ignited in his chest in a sudden inferno. It took every ounce of his will not to leap across the fire and strangle the monster on the other side.

“You murdered my mother?” Every word was taut as a bowstring.

“I lashed out in anger. It was, perhaps, hasty of me.”

Jeth laughed a high, shrill laugh. Once he started, he couldn’t stop until his stomach ached and his eyes watered, until he

wheezed. The laughter faded at last, but his ire did not. He scowled, hands balling into fists.

"We are united, now. We may return to Blackthorn Court. It is not a city, a town, or a village. Your contract with me shall never end."

"That's cheating. I'm not your property, and I don't want to go."

Aneirin frowned. "You are my son, and—"

"I am not, and never will be, your son!" Jeth shouted.

The silence that fell was deafening. Even the fire stopped making sound. It was as if the whole world had inhaled, bracing for the inevitable blow that would follow such reckless rebellion.

Aneirin rose from the stone, fluid grace replaced with the clipped movements of ice cold rage. The shadows gathered around him, huddling on his shoulders like a second cloak. Jeth could feel the build of magic in the air like the ozone before lightning struck, the sharp coppery scent of it filling his nose.

His anger was lost in the overwhelming *power* of it, building up like a mountain behind the faerie. His mouth went dry.

He felt his mother's hand on his shoulder. *Run.*

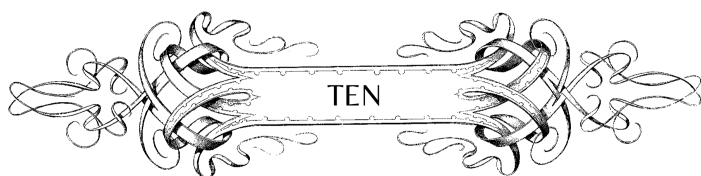
Jeth flung himself off the log and bolted for the trees.

The darkness behind Aneirin swelled, spreading through the air and sky and swallowing all light as it raced after him. Nothing stopped it, nothing slowed it. Trees and shrubs were consumed. The flickering fire vanished. The stars disappeared one by one.

Faster and faster it surged behind him, until Jeth could see fingers of it flashing in his periphery.

“No!” Jeth shouted as the shadows began to close, threatening to swallow him like the jaws of a massive beast. The moonlight vanished. He threw himself forward—

—and was enveloped in darkness.



JETH WOKE UP TO nothing.

Nothing stretched away from him in every direction. It was ink-black, but not dark. He could still see *himself*, his hands, his boots, his clothes. He felt a floor, cool and smooth as marble, leeching the heat from his body as he lay on it. There was nothing else, though. No walls, no corners, no lights. No windows, doors, or distinguishing features at all. All Jeth could see was...nothing.

Jeth pushed himself up. Every rustle of fabric and clunky step he took whispered off through the nothing until it faded away, soft echoes resonating like a chorus of ghosts. The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

Am I dead?

Had Aneirin killed him? Was this all there was in the beyond? He hunched his shoulders and wrapped his arms around himself even though he wasn't cold. It wasn't warm, either. It was nothing.

Jeth felt vulnerable, alone in the vast and empty space.

"One step," he whispered.

The ground rippled beneath his feet like water, the barest glimmers of gold curling away from him as he walked.

Gold? Like magic from the orb. Jeth closed his eyes and pulled on the mask of his True Sight, only to be blinded when he opened them. He gasped, doubling over with his hands over his face as he turned the ability off.

A cell built entirely of magic, he realized. He was imprisoned in power itself.

All magic has a source. Jeth straightened, hands curled into fists. *I may not be able to see it, but it must still exist. I just need to find it.*

He walked. He ran. He walked again, panting. The nothing around him never changed. Who knew how large it truly was?

“Damn!” he spat.

The echoes repeated. “-amn, -mn, -mn, -n.”

Jeth knew what Aneirin wanted. He grit his teeth and felt the bubble of anger rise in his stomach.

He tipped his head back, flinging his arms wide. “Hello?”

“Hello, -ello, -ello, -lo, -lo, -o?” His own voice called back.

“You’re awake.”

Jeth whirled as Aneirin’s voice echoed off into the dark, recoiling instinctively. The faerie stood just behind him. His black clothes were gone, replaced with glittering silver finery. When Aneirin paced around him, the ripples at his feet were silver, too. Jeth endured his scrutiny, glaring.

“How do you feel?” Aneirin asked, coming to a stop at last.

“Where are we? What did you do?”

"I have detained you in a faerie prison. A jar, if you must know. Perhaps a century in here will improve your mood."

A century! The prospect of an eternity trapped in this place, speaking to his own echoes or walking endlessly through the dark pressed on Jeth's shoulders, threatening to crush him to the ground with the sheer weight of it. His heart fluttered in his throat. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

I'll go mad.

Or he would give up, which was exactly what Aneirin wanted.

Some father.

"Shall we make a bargain? We can shorten the length of your stay if you agree to behave." Aneirin idly studied his nails.

Jeth's mind raced. What would his mother do? What had she done in the past? Aneirin had said she danced around his tricks. How could Jeth sidestep this?

I can't.

...but he could eliminate a different problem.

"I agree to make a bargain only if our previous agreement is rendered moot," Jeth said. *A deal to strike a deal.*

Aneirin's brows lifted, and he studied Jeth with renewed interest. "A clever turn. Very well, I agree. If you make a new deal with me, your previous deal will be moot."

The faerie extended his hand. Jeth clasped it. His mouth had gone dry.

He'd done it. He'd evaded Aneirin's trap. This was a deal, newly made. His old bargain was broken, the power it had to bind him to the faerie now shattered.

Had Aneirin noticed?

"About the new deal," Jeth burst out. "What do you propose?"

He needed time to figure out the next step.

Aneirin paced, the silver ripples at his feet painting him in a cold, distant glow. "Gleda promised you to me. The bargain I have is for you to honor that promise and travel with me, live with me, and learn magic at my side. One day, you will take my throne. In return, I shall free you from this place."

"That's hardly any sort of deal!"

"Propose a counter measure." Aneirin turned to face him, hands clasped behind his back.

Jeth didn't know what to say. He fumbled through option after option, brow furrowed. He only realized he was pacing when the golden glow around him grew brighter, painting him in its warm light.

I have my hunting knife, but that won't help me if Aneirin knows how to fight at all. If I were him, I would. I can't take that risk. It would be foolish to assume a faerie king *couldn't* fight. The only other thing Jeth had tucked into his belt was a pair of gloves.

And the orb.

The seed of a plan began to grow. He loosened the ties at the top of the pouch and thrust his hand in, feeling the crystal grow warm beneath his fingertips.

“When we leave here, you still plan to break the covenants.”

“Yes,” Aneirin affirmed. “I will bed the Queen of Hallanor, and in twenty or thirty years, faeries will be free. No time at all to us. A lifetime to the humans.”

“The bargain you made with my mother, tell me about it. The exact words,” Jeth said, hoping to buy more time.

Aneirin lifted a hand. “The deal shall be thus,” he intoned, fingers glowing. The magic around them thrummed like the plucked string of a lyre. “You shall lie with me and love me. You shall be beholden to me, enamored of me, bound to me and only me until the end of your days. In return, I shall grant you a child. I will return to the Blackthorn Court for one mortal decade, and then I shall come for my heir and take it back to my dark realm. Do you agree?”

Is that where we are? His realm, or some small corner of it?

If the jar they were in was considered part of faerie lands, Jeth would have as much power as Aneirin did.

“And she replied to me thus.” Power rippled through the air from Aneirin’s outstretched hand.

Gleda’s voice filled the air, the words slow and measured. Jeth felt a lump in his throat as he listened to her, for what he knew would be the last time.

“I shall lie with you, love you, be beholden to you, and enamored of you. I shall love no other until the end of my days.

In return, I shall be given a babe. I will return to you a babe. You will spare Hallanor for ten years, then come to me and take the babe to be your heir. When you come, you will offer me the chance to make another deal.”

Jeth bowed his head, clutching at his chest as the black pit of grief inside it swelled until he thought his ribs might split open, until he thought he would fall apart.

“Then I gave her a wedding gift, a focus that would grant her mortal self the power of a faerie, a beautiful crystal ball – and the deal was struck.”

The orb beneath Jeth’s fingers thrummed with power as he wrestled a trickle of Aneirin’s tightly woven spell free, opening himself up to channel it. *Just a little longer, just a minute more!*

Jeth froze, a rush of elation rushing up his spine that warmed him from head to toe. He stopped his spell. “She broke the deal.”

Aneirin sighed. “Don’t mumble, boy. Speak clearly.”

“She broke the deal, and you broke the covenants.” Jeth’s voice reverberated in the nothing. Though he wasn’t moving, shimmers of gold pooled around his feet.

“What? How? Liar!” Aneirin glanced at the darkness around them, as though he feared invisible hands were reaching out even now to rip his power away.

“My mother said she would return to you a babe, but I’m not.”

The faerie’s brows drew down. “That’s hardly–”

"I don't belong to you," Jeth said firmly. The gold at his feet glowed brighter. "You must follow your agreements to the letter. You had to take a *babe* from my mother. You killed the only chance you had."

"You had, -had, -had, -ad, -ad," the echoes chorused.

The whispers faded to silence. The guilt pool pushed back the darkness.

"A clever turn," Aneirin said at last, teeth grit. The silver glow of magic around him winked out of existence, never to return.

"A mistake, as well."

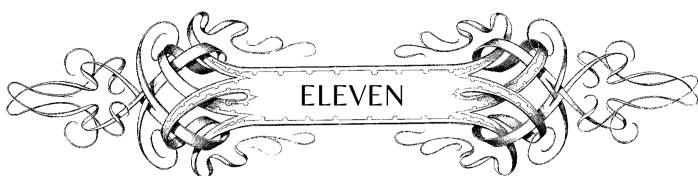
"How?" Jeth demanded.

"I was the only one who could release us. Now we are both trapped for the rest of our days." He laughed, a bitter edge to the sound.

The power around them squeezed in, the vast space suddenly claustrophobic. Jeth fought a rise of panic. *Trapped?*

"You—" Jeth looked up, the words dying on his lips.

Aneirin was gone.



“HOW LONG HAVE I been here?” Jeth asked the nothing.

The whispers murmured around him, but gave no answer. He couldn’t even summon up the ghost of his mother, not since he heard her strike her bargain with Aneirin all those years ago. That didn’t stop him from trying.

“Mother?” He willed her to come, sending a hum through the nothing around him along with the echo.

Nothing. She was gone.

She’s gone.

The bottomless well of pain bloomed in his chest, and this time there was no reason to stop it. He sank to his knees, burying his face in his hands as he sobbed. He let wave after wave of regret and shame and misery wash over him.

I should have told her I loved her more often.

She only died because Aneirin wanted me.

I’ll never see her again. I’ll never hear her again. Everything is different, now.

The world had fallen out of step long before Aneirin trapped him in this place. Jeth had ignored it, choosing instead to pre-

tend alongside everyone else that everything was fine. He remembered that the sky didn't seem as blue, the whinny of a horse seemed shrill and harsh, the cold seemed stronger – but who was to say that wasn't normal, now, in this strange new world where he was alone? Where she was gone?

Day by day, it grew more peculiar and fantastic. Jeth traveled with a faerie. He learned to cast powerful spells. He grew.

Maybe that's why I can't feel her anymore. Maybe I've changed so much she doesn't recognize me.

Maybe his faerie blood pushed her away.

There was nothing to be done about that. He couldn't imagine going back, even if he could. Not just because he now knew what he was, but because the world was wider than his nameless village on the edge of the kingdom. He wanted to *see* it. He wanted to be part of it.

The seemingly endless chasm of his grief had a bottom after all. Though he didn't know how long he cried, eventually the tears stopped coming. Jeth felt like a rag wrung dry, but there was a lightness to it, too. It made his head spin.

"Aneirin?" he asked the nothing, the words coming out in a petulant croak that he hated. The faerie had vanished, and no matter how Jeth stretched his senses, he could not find him again. Aneirin knew how his prison worked, and apparently he could do as he pleased within it, magic or no. Their cell was vast enough to avoid one another for as long as the faerie wished.

The last echo of his question faded, leaving Jeth in silence and darkness.

I don't want to see him again anyway.

The hole in his chest left by his mother's death began to fill with something hot, like he swallowed coals raked from a fire.

It was Aneirin's fault his mother was dead. He broke their bargain, and he *stole* her. Even after that, he tricked Jeth into an agreement that he never intended to honor.

He's sly and full of tricks. They all are. No faerie ever makes a good deal.

Even Burne Calder, who had gotten the best possible outcome in her deal, was left reeling. She looked like her heart was breaking when Aneirin took Jeth. Even with all the good fortune and wealth the faerie had given her, she was left with regrets.

No faerie ever makes a good deal.

And what about me?

The heat in his chest ebbed as Jeth studied his hands. The blood of faeries ran through his veins, making him one of them. How long before that blood swallowed him whole? How long before he began to make bargains and deals that would leave every life he touched ruined, if he ever got free? How long before madness made him like his father? What would his mother think of him in a hundred years, in a thousand?

Jeth closed his hands, nails digging into his palms. "I won't be like them," he said.

"Like them, -ike them, -them, -em, -em," his echo argued.

"I refuse. I can't!"

Gleda had not raised her son to be a monster. She taught Jeth the names of flowers and animals. She encouraged him to help her with the healings and blessings and tinctures and salves. She ran with him in sun-bright meadows, laughing while her dark hair streamed behind her like a banner in the wind. She teased him over dinners of stew and fresh bread. She read to him and with him, encouraging him to find new things to learn around every corner.

She taught him...to be human, he realized. All the best things of this world, of this kingdom, she instilled in his very being. Even now, alone and trapped in the dark, he rejected the barest *hint* of that behavior.

“But I’m still a faerie.”

The whispers murmured.

Jeth frowned, pushing himself to his feet. “I was a witch’s son first. I’m both. I’m...me. Just me.”

Something stirred in the nothing.

“Even if I stay trapped in here for an age, when I come out, I will still be myself. I will only make good bargains if I have to make them at all, and I will never, ever trap someone. I am not a monster.”

“Monster,” the echo agreed. A glimmer of gold rippled away from Jeth’s feet.

Jeth stared at it, watching it fade. Aneirin’s light had vanished when his magic did. Were the glimmers in the endless night of this place...power?

He stamped a foot on the ground, watching the gold undulate off into the darkness. The light of it painted him in gilded ripples.

Jeth turned in place, studying the nothing. "Magic is never stagnant."

His mother had told him that. "*Look at the leylines. They flow like rivers, always moving. Even when they pool, there's a current beneath the surface, and the power flows out again. Magic is never stagnant.*"

The proof of it was at his feet. He felt the nothing stir again, turning to trace the unseen shift of magic like a hound scenting the air. Wherever it went, it ran and pooled and arced in little rivulets of silver that glowed like starlight.

"The problem with this cell is that it is pure magic," he said as if lecturing someone. He had seen it himself, when he tried to use his True Sight upon his arrival. "If the power is flowing, that means my prison isn't as solid as it seems. I might be able to direct the flow, to change the shape."

To escape.

Jeth activated his True Sight. His eyes watered. The silver glow surrounding him was blinding, but he kept his eyes open.

They'll adjust. Just hold on, hold on!

The light abated, fading until Jeth could just make out the shifts in the walls around him. How far away they were, he couldn't tell – but he could see the ripples, the layers, the knots.

He could see the weaknesses.

Jeth's breath caught. *I can tear through.*

He let his True Sight fade, blinking away tears as the nothing closed in around him. He opened his senses.

Magic was in the very air. It threatened to overwhelm him, battering at his consciousness like a storm swallowing a ship. With a shout, Jeth closed his mind, claspings his head in his hands.

The pain faded. The only sounds were his breath coming in pants and the echo of it.

I need help.

No, not help. He needed a focus. Jeth pulled the orb from his hip, cradling it in both hands. Already a flicker of golden light danced in its depths. Cautiously, Jeth opened his mind again, slower than before.

The magic poured through the small channel he made for it, setting his teeth on edge and making his hair stand up as it ran through his arms, into his hands, and then into the orb. The glimmers of gold around his feet swelled into a puddle, growing with every moment he channeled. He felt it through every inch of his body. It was more power than he had ever touched in his life.

The orb glowed brighter and brighter, the golden core of it bulging, growing, swelling. Jeth's breath caught as he opened a second conduit to the power in the focus, only to find an ocean of magic raging inside.

That must be enough!

He gathered his will. "Let me out," he breathed.

"Out, out, out," the echo chanted.

Crack. The surface of the crystal fractured, a spray of golden light pouring out of it. Jeth's heart began to race. *Did I pull too much?* He tried to bring up the walls around his mind – and failed. His will was in control now.

“No, no, no!” he cried.

Crack! Another fissure formed. The orb shattered, shards flying in all directions. Jeth howled, staggering as several pieces struck his hands and face. He lifted his arms over his head, waiting for the inevitable wash of power to consume him.

And it never came.

When Jeth lowered his arms, it was to find himself facing a golden gateway that hung in the air in the shape...of an orb. He walked around it in awe, a similar pool of gold at his feet. The edges of it flickered like it held barely contained lightning in its heart.

Jeth lifted a hand toward the power.

“Stop,” Aneirin commanded.

Jeth froze, glancing over his shoulder.

The faerie stood tall behind him, hungry eyes fixed on the glittering gate. “You will take me with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I am your father.”

Jeth frowned. “You’re a murderer, a monster. I don’t have to take you anywhere.”

“And what does that make you? My blood flows through your veins. You are as much a faerie as I am.”

Jeth laughed. "What does it make me? I am the son of a faerie king."

Aneirin lifted his chin, a smug smile forming on his lips.

"And I am the son of a witch. I straddle the magic of two worlds, and I can pull from both." The gold around his feet swelled, and the nothing stirred, pressing in.

Sparks flew from the edges of the gateway like embers in the night, there and then gone.

"I don't need to take you with me. When I leave this place, it will be to prove that faerie magic can be used for good, and that none of you creatures chooses to use it thus. I will change the world."

"You cannot be released!" Aneirin shouted, rushing forward.

Jeth slammed a wall of will into being between them, taking no small amount of satisfaction in watching Aneirin crumple against it. The faerie king howled, banging his fists against the barrier.

"I don't need your *permission* to be released, Aneirin. I can leave on my own."

"No! No, you cannot leave!"

"Watch me."

With a pull on the magic of the nothing, he made the wall around himself and the gateway stronger, thicker. With no magic of his own any longer, Aneirin wouldn't be able to break through, he'd be trapped. He wouldn't be able to use the gate.

Jeth stepped through the portal into the unknown.

It was too bright to see. With his eyes closed and his arms shielding his face, Jeth walked. Whatever he walked on still felt like the nothing, cool and smooth like marble. Then it crunched, giving way beneath his foot.

Jeth lowered his arms as the cold air of morning enveloped him. A single bird trilled somewhere nearby, the first promise of the impending spring. A rustle of bare branches dropped icicles to the ground in a tinkling symphony as two squirrels raced overhead. All that was left of the campfire were ashes covered with a thin layer of snow.

For several moments, Jeth didn't move. He breathed deeply, reveled in the light of the sun, and let his nose grow cold in the winter air. Breathlessly, he laughed.

"I did it. I did it!"

A whinny answered his words. Jeth turned to find his horse, still tethered where he had left it with a neatly cropped circle of grass around its feet. Shadowstep was gone without a trace. There was no sign of the portal he had stepped through, either. No mark on the ground, no shimmer in the air. Just a little clay jar in a leather holder, the top stoppered with a cork. Unassuming as it was, the vessel radiated magic in a hum that Jeth could *hear*, without needing True Sight at all.

Jeth bent to scoop up his father's prison, only to stop short.

He was...different. Where his skin had been peach-pale, now it held a golden warmth. The sleeves of his coat glittered with gold that he couldn't dust off. When he looked down he realized

that *all* of him was coated in a layer of gold. He brushed his fingers over the supple cloth of blue and gold.

It looks like the night sky, he marveled.

Jeth curled his hands into fists, hissing as he prodded one of the cuts left by the shards of the orb. He sat in the snow beside the jar, studying his wounds. *Those bits can't stay in there, they'll get infected.*

Only there weren't any. Each scrape was clean, if still fresh. Blood welled, but it would soon scab over. Another laugh bubbled up from Jeth's chest.

"What is happening to me?" he asked his gelding.

The horse tossed its head and stamped a foot, giving his tether an impatient tug.

"Alright, I hear you." Jeth picked up the jar and fixed it to his belt next to the empty leather pouch, then untied the reins. He paused when he caught sight of his reflection in the horse's dark eyes.

The face that looked back at him was different enough that for a moment he thought it was someone else. His dark hair was gone, replaced with blond hair down to the very roots. His eyes were still dark, but there was a faint gleam to them, a spark of power he had no doubt he could summon at will.

"Good. I still have magic." He patted his horse gently on the cheek. "Let's go use it."

First, he would go to his village and help them rebuild their homes, and find them a new witch. Then, he would go and warn the Queen.

And after that? he asked the air as he swung into the saddle.
The breeze rose, tickling along the back of his neck.
Anything, it seemed to say.

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He writes primarily fantasy, but has also written historic romance, science fiction, comics, and more. October is both queer (with too many letters from the alphabet soup to spell here) and disabled (with POTS). Despite that, he manages to be a workaholic and frequently needs his computer to be locked away so he will rest. His favorite place to write is his local Barnes and Noble café, which has no outlets. His life goal is to continue to write stories that come to him out of the blue until the end of his days, and maybe get paid decently for it at some point.

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ALSO BY OCTOBER K SANTERELLI:

Nightfall Series:

City of Day

City of Night (coming 2024)

Other Works:

Storm's Eye (An Out of Time Novel)

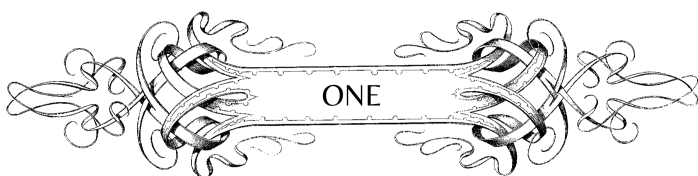
Mi Jaculpo (Hold Your Fire Anthology)

SNEAK PEEK

Turn the page for a sneak preview of the next novella in

The Book of the Witch's Son:

UNDER THE HILL



THE HEAVY DRONE OF pixies filled the late summer air of the forest. The closer Jeth got to Heartwood Hill, the door to the faerie court, the louder they got. Insects fled before them. Pixies were notoriously cruel to anything smaller than they were, and anything they thought was weak.

Jeth was glad he'd grown so much in the past six years. A flock of tiny fae folk would no doubt think the twig of a fourteen year old he had once been was an easy target.

The trees grew close together and the underbrush was thick, making it difficult for Jeth to thread his way through – and not just because his newly growing antlers threatened to catch on every low-hanging branch.

A growing buzz reached his ear and he stopped dead in his tracks, snapping his gaze to the side. With a flutter of beetle-like wings, the pixie hissed and darted back out of sight in a clump of wildflowers. That was a brave one, to mess with the man Jeth was now.

Over the past few years, he'd grown broader in the shoulder. He'd gained just over a foot in height, not including his horns,

and he filled out with muscles. His hands were rough and his arms thick from the work of pulling on ropes, tending to horses, hauling boxes, and scrubbing floors on his journey across Hallanor.

Jeth stepped delicately over a root that arched above his path, perfect posed to catch at the foot of an unwary traveler. With a groan, the wooden tendril curled itself back into the loamy forest floor once he had passed. It would be harder and harder to tell what was plant and what was fae as he neared the court. The forest was teeming with magic and life.

There was only one forest in Hallanor – *the* forest. Every town, village, and city had been painstakingly won from the woods and guarded by spell work to prevent the faeries from taking it back. There wasn't a person alive who didn't know the stories. Once upon a time, Jeth knew them only in passing, as cautionary tales he learned at his mother's knee. Gleda Penistone knew better than most how to thwart the fae – she'd bedded one.

Her son was the result of that ill-fated match, and the downfall of his father. Everything turned out the way Gleda had planned it but for one thing. She didn't plan for Aneirin, faerie king of the Blackthorn Court and Jeth's father, to murder her.

Jeth stopped in the dappled shade of a spreading oak, taking a deep breath. Her death began his adventures, when he stole her crystal ball and fled before the villagers could give his home to someone else. He'd walked right into Aneirin's hands.

That was when Jeth learned how faerie bargains worked, or rather didn't. There wasn't a single one that didn't come with a catch, and he hated it. He'd watched Burne Calder regret her deal. His mother died for hers. He, himself, narrowly escaped his by blowing up the crystal ball, which wasn't a crystal ball at all. It was a faerie focus.

He'd poured so much power in it that it shattered, and he absorbed the pieces. Well, that was his best guess, anyway. He'd emerged from his father's black prison a changed person. His once black hair turned the color of golden wheat. It curled over his ears and around his cheeks. His dark eyes were now flecked with amber around the pupils. Once perfectly smooth peach skin was dusted with gold that glimmered in the sun and never washed off. Though years of work tanned his face and arms, that gilded dusting was still there, still clearly visible.

The crackle and snap of branches nearby drew his attention. Jeth craned to see, for a moment not finding anything to explain the sound. Then, a distant hawthorn tree took another step before it settled into a sunnier spot. It swished its branches at the encroaching stand of aspens that drove it to move in the first place. As far as Jeth could tell, the aspens were unapologetic.

He turned back, peering up through the canopy at the growing mound of Heartwood Hill. 'Hill' was a bit of an understatement, however. It rose well above the canopy of the forest, shouldering out of the trees like a monolith. Its sides were too steep to climb. Someone – or something – carved steps that wound around it to the very top. The hill was crowned with

perfect circlet of stones. Humans who stepped into it had a way of disappearing, and less than half of them ever returned.

With the hum of pixies growing louder around him, Jeth set off toward his goal. For six years, he traveled the length and breadth of Hallanor, learning whatever magic he could from human and faerie alike. Battered scrolls, ancient grimoires, and tomes made entirely of leaves were memorized or copied over. He'd practiced with a single-minded fervor until his power was under perfect control. Now, he had only one thing left to learn.

How to make a faerie bargain.

Jeth couldn't quite get the hang of it. The fae folk held their secrets close to their chests at the best of times, and with something this important they kept their lips utterly sealed. The first bit of magic he'd ever learned, from his father Aneirin, had been a faerie spell called True Sight. During his travels, he learned there wasn't a single human who had heard of it – and not a faerie who hadn't. The wards, spells, and blessings used by village witches were clearly visible in that other vision. The fae knew exactly how close they could get to a human at almost any time.

That wasn't True Sight's only use, either. Anyone with magical abilities glowed when viewed through the spell. The stronger their magic, the brighter the light. Most important of all, with True Sight, leylines were visible. The powerful rivers of magic that flowed through the earth, air, and water ran over the entire world, so far as Jeth could tell.

He used the leyline overhead as a trail, a clear path through the woods that he could feel thrumming above him even without his True Sight activated. It was leading him toward a node, the powerful nexus where several leylines came together.

It was leading him right to Heartwood Hill. Some stories in the nearby towns and villages claimed that the sheer-sided slope was pulled up from the earth by magic. It didn't matter if it were nature or spell work that made it. What mattered was that it was the door.

Jeth stopped at the edge of the trees, tucked in the shadows beneath the boughs. The forest fell away at the base of the hill, leaving behind a strip of meadow that ran, as far as he could see, the whole way around. Long grass stirred and whispered in the breeze that tickled over his skin. Wildflowers bobbed their heavy crowns. A few scrubby bushes with waxy green leaves popped their heads up from the earth here and there.

Jeth circled the hill in the shade of the trees, one ear always on the woods behind him. The stairway to the top, carved in the slope itself and winding crookedly back and forth on its way up, was easily found. Too easily. Faerie circles were the way for humans to get to the kingdom below, but that couldn't be how the magical creatures of the world went back and forth. He turned away from the steps and continued to walk.

No, what he needed was something that was barely out of the ordinary, something subtle that would indicate a door that lay ahead. Something like two trees growing against the sheer side of Heartwood Hill.

Two gnarled and twisted alder trees all but leaned back against the near-cliff behind them. Their branches twined together in a tangle overhead, making it hard to tell where one ended and the other began. Over centuries, they had formed against the hill's face, molding to every bump and ridge. They created an archway to nothing – or so it seemed. The solid earth behind them was real enough, Jeth could tell. Faerie glammers and illusions didn't work on other fae. He would be able to see right through it if it were bespelled.

This must be the way on. Jeth stepped into the sunlight, the gold in his skin a-gleam, his head held high. The act began the moment he'd set foot in the forest, the act of the confident prince returning to claim his throne. Internally, he was sweating buckets. Eyes bored into him from every shadow. Creatures large and small were watching him, measuring him, and judging him. They didn't know who he was, but he did. When he stepped into the sunlight, he stepped into the role of a future king. His back was straight, his head held high, his hands relaxed by his side.

He wished his palms weren't sweaty, though he was fairly certain the faeries couldn't tell.

The leaves of the alder trees stirred in the breeze, the giants shaking off a doze as they realized someone was near. The pale silver-green undersides of the leaves shivered and rattled somewhere between a welcome and a warning.

The invisible gazes in the forest sharpened, the hum and buzz and chatter of the woods dying down to a whisper. Who is he,

they wondered, so loudly he could hear it without words. Who dares?

This would be the hard part. Jeth ran his hand over the iron seal of the ceramic jar hanging from the belt at his waist. Iron was toxic to faeries, but some lingering humanity in Jeth prevented it from doing more than sting. The sensation of shoving his hand into a thicket of nettles was uncomfortable, but it was better safe than sorry. Contained within that sealed little bottle on his hip was an unending faerie prison. He had once escaped it – and his father had not.

What would Aneirin's subjects think if they realized Jeth were carrying their ruler on his belt? Unpredictable beings at best, the fae could get angry...or could welcome him with open arms. There was no telling which until it happened, and Jeth couldn't run the risk. For now, he'd rely on nothing more than his father's blood in his veins to help him reach the Blackthorn Court.

He strode forward confidently, pausing before the archway.

New problem. He didn't know what to do to get the portal between the human and faerie lands to open. He didn't know if there were special words, or a key, or if his bloodline alone would be enough to open it with a touch. There were a thousand tales of doorways to other realms, and not one of them opened the same way.

The faeries in the forest were watching. Word of what he did here would race ahead of him to Blackthorn Court. Making a

powerful impression might be all that saved him from his own kind. After all, Jeth was a most un-faerie-like faerie.

Being raised human had its advantages.

Standing still as a statue, despite the tickle of a breeze stirring his curls, Jeth studied the ancient trees that formed the curving gateway. He could sense the veritable sea of magic that lay beneath the earth, fed by the node the Blackthorn Court was built within. It thrummed like a plucked string, trilling through his very bones.

Jeth's eyes widened. With magic that powerful, everything else would be drowned out. Between one blink and the next, he imagined pulling on a golden mask. When he opened his eyes, everything magical around him glowed. Heartwood Hill itself was a beacon. The same way he struggled to feel anything through its power, he fought to see anything magical around it. Bright as a miniature sun, the node threatened to wash away the gilded glow of everything else.

Clever of the faeries to build where they wouldn't be able to tell one another's power, where they couldn't detect one another's spells. Clever, and dangerous.

Jeth narrowed his eyes, squinting against the magical glare. He turned his head slowly, keeping an eye on the trees out of his peripheral.

There. The trees glowed, though it was faint. Not the entire tree, either. The heart of them, down near the base of each trunk, shone with the subtle sparkle of light on the water. The trees weren't trees at all.

They were lovpu.

The twisted, tangled branches of the alders were the gate, and the gatekeepers dwelled within them. That would, he hoped, make opening the door all the easier.

He let his True Sight fade and squared his shoulders. "I demand entry to the Blackthorn Court."

Everything around him fell utterly silent. The world around him held its breath. The buzzing pixies, the chitter of hobgoblins hidden in the shrubs, the lilting song that could have been birds or could have been sylphs – all of it came to a stop.

Jeth counted the heavy pulse of his heart as it beat. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Like his words were stone thrown on the still surface of a pond, a murmur rippled away through the forest. His audience, unseen as they were, was listening closely now.

The alder trees shuddered. With a creak like a branch bending under a great weight, two creatures stepped out of their trunks. It was hard to tell if they had been part of the trees or if they opened a door of some sort and stepped through, but quite suddenly there they were. Both of them looked to be made of the same wood they had come from, with skin crackled like bark and spindly, twig-like fingers.

They were armed. Each held a wooden sword with a wickedly sharp edge.

"And who are you to demand we let you in?" The taller of the two lovpu, hunched of back and with hair and beard of gray-white lichen, asked as they knelt down. Their joints

creaked and groaned with the movement. Their large eyes were black and glittered in the sun like polished obsidian stones.

"We don't like strangers here," the shorter said firmly. Their hair, if it could be called such, was made of thick, squat branches that ended in points made of the same bark-like brown as their skin. They looked like a flame of the forest, and their eyes were alight with a spark of suspicion that only reinforced that impression.

"We've been told not to let anyone in or out."

Jeth shrugged. "I'm not just anyone."

The shorter one scoffed, brandishing their sword as they stepped forward. "We should just kill you. Problem solved."

Jeth didn't move even a fraction of an inch as the lovpu swung their sword, stopping less than an inch away from his throat. To show fear or uncertainty would ruin any reputation he built so far. Though his heart was racing so quickly he could taste copper on his tongue, he didn't flinch.

The weapons carved by lovpu from the wood of their trees were the only weapons that could kill a magician with a single blow. A scratch was as dangerous as being impaled. Their wood was like poison to casters of human birth. Jeth wasn't entirely certain his faerie half would make him immune. He didn't want to test it.

"You won't," he said, glad his voice didn't shake.

The two faeries exchanged looks. The taller leaned forward, their gaze brimming with curiosity. "What is your name, stranger of the woods?"

"I am Jeth, son of the Faerie King, Aneirin."

Both lovpu reeled back as though he'd struck them. They retreated a few steps, putting their heads together and murmuring. After a minute or two, the taller seemed to win their quiet argument and turned back.

"We are Lock," they said, gesturing to the shorter one, "and Key." They touched their own chest.

Lock folded their arms across their chest, a stubborn frown on their features. "We heard rumors that our King had a son by a human woman. You don't look very human to me."

"Have you seen him? King Aneirin?" Key asked hopefully.

"My father lost both his power and his way. I've come to take my place on the throne in his stead."

"His Majesty wouldn't lose his power."

Key reached out, long fingers curling over Lock's shoulder. "But the fire *did* fade."

Both lovpu fell silent. It was the way of trees, Jeth decided, to think before they spoke. He didn't mind that. It bought him time to think. Lock's gaze was decidedly distrustful as they took in his appearance.

Though he long ago outgrew the blue cape-sleeved jacket his mother made him, Jeth kept the color in his clothes. He wore a rough-spun, travel-stained shirt beneath the long blue tunic, belted at the waist. Pouches, the jar, and a water skin hung from his belt, rattling faintly with each step. He was armed only with a simple dagger. He didn't look much like a prince, let alone a king.

Jeth knew who he was. He wasn't worried at all.

"If you're the lost prince, the hill will know," Key said slowly.

Lock sneered. "Yes. Prove your bloodline, if you can."

Prove it? How could he prove that he shared blood with someone who wasn't there? After all, he wasn't about to tell them he was carrying his father on his belt.

The hill would know, Key had said. Faeries liked their riddles and turns of phrase, and that one seemed very pointed. Prove his bloodline. The hill will know.

Jeth stepped forward, smoothly drawing his dagger from its sheath. He stepped into the shade beneath the boughs of the alder trees, and Key and Lock drew back to give him room. His blade wasn't made of iron, but copper. Its hilt was wrapped in gold and copper wire. It was a fine blade, and he kept it sharp. It took only a single movement to draw it across his palm and leave a clean gash behind.

He didn't know what would happen next, but he hoped his guess was right. Jeth lay his cut hand against the cool stone of Heartwood Hill.

The ground beneath his feet heaved. A rumble rolled away from him, the very earth rippling and the trees swaying madly in its wake. A bit of drama wouldn't go amiss, Jeth decided. With the node so close, it was stupidly simple to grab a tendril of the air and whip it into a fierce wind that swirled around him like a miniature storm. The leaves overhead rattled like dice in a cup. His hair was whipped into a cloud of golden froth around his

head. The hem of his tunic flapped wildly, like the pennants atop a castle tower, snapping and billowing wildly.

The earth stilled. The rumble stopped. Jeth allowed the breeze to go on its way with a sigh. Everything settled around him, and only when all was quiet and still did he drop his hand. He healed it with a twist of his wrist, leaving a thin pink line across his palm that would fade in a few days. The dark red smear of his blood on the stone glinted in the sunlight, but even that was fading as the porous earth drank it in.

Jeth turned.

Both lovpu were on their knees, the tips of their blades sunk into the earth before them as they bowed their heads. The woods beyond burst with a sudden cacophony, alive with whispers, chatter, and drones from faeries he couldn't see. Their words were just garbled enough that he could hardly make any of them out, and the ones he could?

The Prince. Who is he? His blood. Who is he? Proof. Who is he?

"Will that suffice as proof for you, or do I need to do something more drastic?" Jeth asked idly, pulling a handkerchief from his belt to wipe off the last of the blood on his skin.

"Yes, your Highness. That will do quite well," Key said quickly. They slid their gaze to Lock.

Lock sucked in air through their teeth, brow furrowed as they mulled it over. It required both of them to agree, Jeth realized – and Lock earned their name by preventing entry more than they allowed it.

"We'll open the door," the shorter of the lovpu decided at last.

"Good," Jeth said, fighting a heavy sigh of relief.

Until he found his footing, he was safest playing the role of the cool, aloof faerie prince. He wasn't certain what was expected of him, and he didn't know a single member of what would very soon be his court. Faeries weren't known for having kind and friendly dispositions. It was uncomfortable, though. Jeth was a quiet man, but not a cold one.

The lovpu passed him on either side, both taller than he was, their limbs creaking and groaning as they went. Lock and Key melted into the trunks of their trees. Once they were in place, there wasn't even a seam to denote where they had been. Jeth still couldn't tell if that was because they passed through some sort of magical door into their trees or if they simply *were* them.

Pebbles rattled down the side of the hill behind him. Jeth turned to watch the gate open. It was much less impressive than his claim. The doorway grew from where the hill met the earth up toward the boughs of the trees, as if the earth itself were being shouldered aside by some invisible giant.

The sun couldn't penetrate the looming darkness of the tunnel beyond for more than a few feet. Shadows gathered thick among the pitted, pockmarked walls of stone. Ripples of pale blue and green and white ran over brown stone, the remnants of water that vanished long ago. The walls undulated like waves, with holes that ran away in all directions, turning to little black pits on ceiling and walls and floor alike. Some were too small

for a hand to fit inside, others were large enough to fit two or three people side by side, and the rest were every size in between. There was one flat path, worn smooth by centuries of feet, that ran down the center of the tunnel. It was narrow and ran steeply downward, curving and vanishing quickly from view.

Jeth was the king of whatever lay beyond this point, and he was keenly aware that he had to continue to act like it now. He didn't hesitate to step through the opening. His footsteps made a scuff, but no echo.

The light behind him began to fade with the roll of stone against stone. The spot between his shoulder blades grew tight, and his breath caught – but Jeth turned slowly so his audience wouldn't think he was alarmed.

Alarmed was one word for it, as he watched the earth itself crawl back down behind him. His pulse fluttered like a hummingbird's wings. The gateway was closing. He didn't know how to open it again. He wasn't sure he could.

The tunnel sealed behind him.

It was pitch black. Jeth couldn't so much as see his fingers right in front of his face. The quiet was loud, but it wasn't silent. The soft clack of stones somewhere ahead of him. The scuff of something tiny scurrying. Water dripped quietly down a wall nearby, the soft *pit-pit-pit* of it slow and steady. Something squeaked. He couldn't tell if it were a faerie or a bat. His own breath seemed unreasonably loud.

Jeth lifted his hand. The faintest golden gleam formed in his palm and swelled until it was the same size and shape as the

faerie focus he'd once stolen in the wake of his mother's death. It pushed back the darkness, painting a pool of light around him.

"Well, no turning back now," he murmured under his breath, softly enough that the walls didn't pass the words along ahead of him. It was time to do what he came here to do. It was time to claim a throne.

Jeth braced himself and took his first steps down to the land under the hill.