

LANGUAGE *of the* SMALL FOLK *Part One: Spring*



Alex Stark



Asking Questions, Seeking Answers

Sitting cross-legged atop the log, my sketchbook spread open on my lap, I closed my eyes. I felt the tree beneath me, the trees around me, their roots below me and their leaves above me. I was surrounded by the forest, enveloped in its ancient embrace, breathing in its timeless wisdom, seeing through its omniscient eyes. I was one with the trees—or trying to be, anyways.

Opening my eyes and working with an agitated hand, I started sketching. I fixed my attention on a weed of some sort, leafless and brown, and followed its movements with the pencil lead. It was drooping, hanging towards the ground, seeking to return to what it had grown from. It seemed like it was lifeless and full of despair, but I was trying my best to look past that, to hear its voice.

Like the weed, I too was seeking to return to what I had grown from. That feeling of harmony and union I'd once felt with nature—the very feeling that had shaped my entire childhood—was something quickly slipping through my fingers. I wanted it back.

I finished the drawing with some satisfaction, for it was a decent sketch, but there was still a nagging feeling of discontent gnawing at me. It was an accurate representation of the weed, and yet there were no words, no speech. Disappointed, I let my attention wander.



The forest still looked like a winter forest. The snow had melted, but the trees were bare, the leaves on the ground crunched underfoot, and there was a distinct feeling of grey heaviness hanging about.

And yet, spring was coming. I knew that the wintry appearance was just a cloak—there was green life bursting just beneath its surface. A bitter wind passed between the trees, scattering leaves and making the trees complain about their stiff joints. I listened carefully, but couldn't make out their words. Goose bumps running up my arms, I rubbed them and sighed.

Winter's over, I reminded myself. The forest looked bare and the wind felt cold, but winter was already over. *Spring is coming*.



As I had the thought, something caught my eye. Getting up from the log, I knelt next to a small sprout. It was a curling green leaf—just one—poking up above the forest floor. At the sight of the brave plant, something inside me leapt with joy. I wanted to cradle the sprout in my hands, hold it to my chest, let it come inside me and grow tall in my soul.

"I'd take you with me if I could," I murmured, but I left the sprout where it was. It needed to grow here, not in my inexpert hands. Still on my knees, I looked around me, noticing that there were more leaves pushing up from the ground. *Spring is coming*.

I stood and brushed off my knees, and then looked around more carefully, my eyes cast to the ground. That was when I saw the forest within the forest. In a bed of soft moss, growing on top of a tree stump, a valiant troop of red and green shoots were standing tall and proud.

They didn't speak with voices, but instead spoke with their postures. They were some of the smallest plants in the forest, but they had a self-assured way about them that made me certain they were the most confident. They all stood together, none separated from the others. They seemed a perfect army, full of soldiers who bowed to no one, but never left a comrade behind. Wistfully, I longed to join them. They were the only plants there who didn't rely on speech. I would fit in well there.

"What would it take to join you?" I asked musingly, blinking slowly and turning away. I surveyed the forest again, searching for more traces of new life but finding none besides those already discovered. The forest had new life in it, but it still needed time to wake up fully. The green would take time to grow and to spread, and it would be a while before it was in its full radiance. Time and patience.



Nodding, taking in everything I'd seen, I packed away my sketchbook and pencil, slung my bag over my shoulder, and exhaled deeply. Putting my hand gently on the log I'd used as my seat, I said, "Thank you. That's all I needed to know."

Then, my footsteps firm but yet reluctant to leave behind the silent forest, I left on the path I'd entered and headed home.

I had my answer now, I realized grimly, but it wasn't the answer I'd wanted. And now, somehow, I was supposed to tell him that we were right.

"Spring is coming," I repeated, and walked a little faster.



Wind Chimes and Confessions

The wind chimes sang happily in the afternoon breeze, their metallic voices clamouring as each strove to be loudest. I paused on the porch step, smiling as I took in the familiar sound. As long as I'd known him, he'd put a set of wind chimes on his front porch. They were now a comfort, and I always knew I was safe when their music was playing in my ears.

Moving on, I went up the stairs and knocked on the front door with the heavy brass knocker. It was an elaborate piece, the metal worked into the shape of the North Wind's face with the brass ring hanging down from his beard, and it made no sound as it struck the wood. I felt the usual gust of wind blow over my shoulder and whip my hair into my face. Squinting, I brushed it aside and waited.

He didn't keep me waiting long, but probably because he already knew why I was here. He opened the door with a flourish and stepped aside for me to enter. I did so quickly, flashing him a smile as I passed, and we both headed straight for the sunroom.

I sat down on the end of the sofa facing the window, tucking my legs up under me and hugging a pillow to my chest. I followed him with my eyes as he closed the

sunroom door and came over to the couch. Before he sat down, he picked up a piece of bamboo and his carving knife from a nearby table. Once he was seated, he looked at me expectantly.

“How was your walk?” he asked.

I stared at him for a moment, silent. My tongue was refusing to accept the heavy words I needed it to deliver, and my anxiety was building with every passing second. I’d been able to ignore it before, but now there was no denying the hard knot that had formed in my stomach. I was dreading having to tell him the bad news, but not because I didn’t trust him—because I knew that it would be as hard for him to hear as it was for me to say.

His name was Nolan, and he was my closest friend. We met years ago, likely eight or nine, and had become inseparable in the time since. Not a day went by in which we didn’t speak and we saw each other as much as we could. Every time one of us had a bad day, the other was there with a solution. Whenever one of us had a problem we couldn’t handle alone, the other was there with all the right tools for the job. All the pain, we shared, as well as the laughter. So while my news was difficult for me to bear, I knew it would be just as difficult for Nolan.

“Alex?” he asked softly, snapping me out of my wandering thoughts. I realized that I’d been silent for quite a while in my reluctance to say anything. Squeezing the pillow a little tighter, I sighed.

“I’ve gone deaf,” I finally admitted, lowering my eyes. “I can’t hear a thing.”

Nolan said nothing. After a few wordless moments, I dared to look up at him, and saw that he wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was whittling his bamboo flute, working the holes slowly and carefully so that they were smooth and round. He remained completely absorbed in his task for several minutes. I sat there watching him, studying his hands and their tiny motions, until he at last came up with something to say.

“I guess we’ll have to fix that,” he said calmly, his voice steady. He met my eyes, holding my gaze for a few seconds before looking back down at his hands and asking, “Can you see, at least?”

I bit my lip and then said worriedly, “Not really. I can see certain things because I remember what they are, but other things...” I hesitated, my stomach twisting. “Most of the forest looks lifeless to me.”

Nolan nodded. “Okay,” he said simply, returning to his carving. “We’ll fix it, then.”

“Some people don’t get it back once they’ve lost it,” I argued, voicing a real concern that was lodged in my chest. “If I don’t learn how to listen and to see again...” He knew what I meant.

He cast me a sidelong glance, regarding me with his strange pale green, pupil-less eyes. His eyebrows were lowered critically, as if he could tell that I didn’t fully believe what I was saying. “Most people don’t try,” he pointed out, and I nodded in confirmation of the fact. “We’re going to try with everything we’ve got,” he concluded.

I exhaled deeply, rubbing the bridge of my nose and thinking of the tough road ahead of me. We fell quiet for a while, Nolan absorbed in his task of whittling and I consumed by my restless thoughts. I knew my sight and hearing weren’t lost forever, but there was still that nagging doubt in the back of my mind... What if I never again heard the song of the wood-fairies? Or never again saw the orange feathers of a dawn-bird? Those were precious things that I couldn’t bear to lose.

“Will you be ready to leave tonight?” Nolan asked me several minutes later. He put down his flute and knife and scooted closer to me. Leaning against the back of the couch, he stared at me, head tilted and eyebrows slightly lifted.

I grinned a little at his eager expression and said, “Yeah, I just have to get my stuff from home and then pick up my hunting knife from the blacksmith. I finally got it sharpened.”

“Took you long enough,” Nolan teased, smirking.

I rolled my eyes and shrugged. “I’ve been busy,” I said. I then stood, stretching out my legs, and Nolan stood with me.

“You left your hoodie here, by the way,” he said, jerking his chin in the general direction of the living room. “You can grab it on the way out, if you want. The wind’s picking up, so it’ll be cooler when you walk home.”

“All right, thanks,” I said with a tight smile, and his eyes narrowed sympathetically.

“Don’t worry too much,” he comforted me. “We’ll figure it out.” Seeing that I was still worried, he pulled me into a tight hug.

“Thank you,” I murmured, my voice muffled in his shoulder. He let me go and smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling happily.

“We’ll get through it,” he assured me, “You just wait and see.



Feathered Ritual

I shoved my hands in my hoodie pockets, trying to get some feeling back into them after I'd let them freeze up in the cool night air. My feet were starting to drag on the worn dirt path and my nose was running from the cold. Nolan was already at the top of the hill, watching me trudge, and I knew even in the darkness that there was a huge smirk on his face.

"You can do it!" he called, mock-encouragingly, the wind carrying his voice down the slope and around my ears. "Only the entire other half of the hill to go!"

"Shut up," I muttered, hoping that the wind would bring the words back to him. When I heard his laughter, I knew that it had. "You could have chosen a warmer night," I complained up to him, and I saw his shoulders bob in a shrug.

"You could have chosen a warmer sweater," he countered, and I rolled my eyes. Increasing my pace a bit, I climbed up the rest of the hillside and joined him on the top.

In the time it had taken me to reach him, he'd already begun to prepare for the ceremony. A dim flashlight was resting on the ground next to an open, blank-paged

book, and three round white quartz stones were sitting in the grass. He was bent over his backpack, digging out a few more things, and the breeze passing his hunched shoulders ruffled the small, downy feathers of his sparrow cloak.

I'd watched—and occasionally helped—him make that sparrow feather cape, right from scratch. The hardest part had been finding enough feathers to cover the whole thing, and that had required months of hard searching. Most of that, he'd done alone, going where the wind took him and often travelling quite a ways away. During that time, he would regularly be away for a week or more, and our only communication was whispers on the breeze.

I noticed that the cloak was looking rougher now. Some of the feathers were missing, and others were broken or mangled. It had also lost some of its amber sheen. Yet, despite the deterioration of the cape, I smiled broadly. Those feathers had been worn lovingly, on so many summer days and winter nights, and there was something absolutely beautiful about the sign of their old age.

While Nolan continued to gather his objects, I sat down on a nearby rock, one I had adopted as my “frigid throne”, and eased my satchel from my shoulder. I pulled out a thermos of hot chocolate to drink while I waited in the cold and clutched it tightly in my hands. Gradually, my fingers began to warm, just as Nolan was ready for the ritual.

I'd watched him do it a thousand times at least, and so I was familiar enough with the motions to be able to predict them before they happened. First, he pressed the side of his hands to his lips, then he put a necklace with a black starling-feather pendant around his neck, and then he picked up the small inscribed bird-bone trinket and enveloped it within his closed hands.

Faintly illuminated in the moonlight, Nolan next knelt on the grass, hands clutched to his chest, and remained like that for a few seconds, murmuring quietly in the dark. Reaching down one hand, he gingerly touched the pages of the book, tracing a small circle with his fingertips, before picking up the three quartz stones and placing them atop the blank pages. Saying a few more words, he then bowed his head and was both still and silent. He looked like a statue against the night sky, with only his feathers moving in the restless night air.

This was the boring part. The rest of the ceremony, from this point on, was done entirely in his head. He might stay kneeling there for ten minutes or a whole hour, depending on his peace of mind at the time. Sometimes, he would shift uncomfortably, his legs cramping up, and I would know that his focus was short.

Other times, he would stay so motionless, even the wind around him feared to disturb his meditation, and his feathers would join him in his frozen state.

This was when I cracked open my hot chocolate and stopped watching. I instead spent my time star-gazing. The stars, a source of never-ending magic and a gentle and sweet light, fascinated me. It was more than their beauty that captured me, though—I was most enthralled by the stories of the heroes who had been sent up to live amongst them. I didn't worry too much about what would happen when I died, but I hoped that I might in my lifetime do something worthy of the stars.

I sipped my hot chocolate and glanced over at Nolan. His hair had fallen in front of his face, hiding his expression from me, and I wondered how it was going for him. The wind was particularly unruly tonight, I noticed, for even though it was gentle around him, it kept biting my cheeks and blowing down into my hoodie. That would make it difficult for him to commune with the North Wind, I thought, and I hoped that we wouldn't be here long.

Luckily, fortune was smiling upon me. Perhaps fifteen minutes after he'd first knelt on the hilltop, he raised his head and stood slowly. He shook out his sore muscles and quickly began packing up his things, without a word to me to say if things had gone well. When he was done, he came over to my rock and handed me the book.

"Thanks for letting me borrow it again," he said mildly, and I nodded in acknowledgement. I then tucked the book and the thermos in my satchel and put it back over my shoulder before standing beside him.

"How are things in the sky?" I asked curiously, a little troubled by how brief he was being. Usually, he took a while to clean up his stuff, and he would chatter about all sorts of nonsense things while he did. Tonight, however, he was all business.

Avoiding my question, Nolan asked, "Did you bring your sketchbook with you?" I nodded, being the kind of person who didn't leave her sketchbook at home, no matter the occasion. "Good," he said, satisfied. "We've got an errand to run."

Then, without another word, he turned and started back down the hillside, beckoning for me to follow.



The Tip of My Tongue

I stopped at the edge of the forest, staring down the dark path and chewing on my lip. We were back in the same forest I'd visited that afternoon, where I'd found out I was deaf. It looked different now, and not only because it was covered in the snow-like blackness of night. It looked different because, where I had once looked at it and imagined its boisterous voice, I was now looking at it with the certainty that it would be silent.

"You okay?" Nolan asked, his glowing green eyes watching me. The feathers on his cloak were still, no wind to make them dance, and I thought that he, too, looked silent. It was as if everything around me had lost its voice all at once. In reality, I knew, it was me who'd lost my hearing.

Sighing, I nodded to Nolan and knelt to untie my shoes. I slipped them off and left them and my socks outside the perimeter of the forest. It was bad luck to walk in the forest with boots on at night. I couldn't remember who'd told me that, and I had no idea if it was true, but it had become one of those things I never questioned and so I always took my shoes off before entering a nighttime forest.

With Nolan a little bit behind me, I walked into the trees, my bare feet following the familiar tread of the path. The soles of my feet were chilled by the fallen leaves and blades of grass kept slipping between my toes. My footsteps were like whispers in the forest's eerie silence. I tried to focus on those whispers, to hear what they might be saying, but they skipped beyond my senses as nimbly as daisy-sprites.

Nolan still had his flashlight, which he used to illuminate the ground directly in front of his feet, but I relied on the moon's light and my own memory to guide me through the woods. This was my domain. Even in night, I knew it inside-out, every dip in the path, every overgrown root jutting out of the ground. I walked comfortably, sure of where I was going, when suddenly some sixth sense made my foot stop mid-stride.

Nolan bumped into the back of me and, confused, he scanned the forest with his flashlight in an effort to find what had stopped me. I gently took the flashlight from him, without explanation, and pointed it straight down, where my next footstep would have landed if I had completed it.



“Do you see that?” I whispered, pointing the beam of light at a patch of forest floor where the leaves were cleared away and it was bare mulch. In the centre of the patch were eight or so cone-shaped structures made of wrapped-up leaves. Nolan got down on one knee to get a better look, and when he reached out his hand to touch one, I snapped, “Don’t!”

His hand froze and he slowly withdrew it. He turned his eyes up to me, eyebrows raised in obvious hope. I knelt next to him and gazed at the little cones, thinking hard. Nolan's eyes narrowed as he studied my face, the small crinkles forming at the corners. “Do you...?” he started to ask. I shook my head slightly and closed my eyes, and then the words were tumbling from my mouth faster than I could contain them.

“Little houses,” I said quickly, “The Village of Dishwin. The crickets live in the cones, and when they wake in the morning, they unwrap the leaves and spread them out in the sun to warm up. Then at night, when their chores are done, they return to their leaves and get inside, where it’s warm, and they wrap them back up again for protection. They’re tur...” I struggled with this word. “They’re turn-ups, I think,” I said uncertainly. I willed myself to remember just a little bit more... “Turn-ups because they walk with their faces turned up towards the sky.”

Nolan’s pointed ears twitched with surprise. He lifted his eyebrows a little more, scrutinizing my face to see how much I could recall, but that was all that my clouded mind could dredge up.

I sighed and leaned back on my heels, frustrated. “That’s all I’ve got,” I told him bitterly, but he shook his head firmly.

“That was good,” he said encouragingly, one corner of his mouth smiling at me. “At least you can remember. It isn’t easy to remember things like that when you can’t hear the voices.”

I shrugged. Remembering was easier than listening. Intending to stand, I put my hands down in front of me to push myself up when I felt a strikingly familiar feeling beneath my palm. “Fifteen,” I said aloud, not knowing what it meant. I stared at Nolan, silently asking him to help me as I puzzled over the number. “Fifteen what?” I muttered.

“Paces?” he suggested, and suddenly the memory snapped into place.

“You’re brilliant,” I said with a grin, and hurriedly stood. “Fifteen paces right,” I remembered, and began walking, counting as I went. “Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen,” brought me to the base of a tree, where there were bare, tangling vines atop a carpet of moss. There, nestled beneath, amongst the green sea, were four clovers in a line.



Nolan followed me curiously, head tipped to the side, and I pointed the clovers out to him. “Little umbrellas,” I explained, “but I can’t remember who they belong to.”

Agitated and wishing there was more, I turned away from the clovers and scanned the rest of the forest, hoping beyond hope that something would pop out at me and make me *remember*.

I sensed Nolan behind my shoulder just seconds before he nudged my arm. I turned my head and he said, “I need to ask you a question.” His voice was very quiet and very serious, lacking the optimism he’d had just moments before. “Can you remember any names?” he asked, sounding a bit apologetic.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, thinking hard. What little clarity my mind had gained, however, had disappeared just as suddenly as it had come. “I’ve got nothing,” I admitted, feeling a small knot of worry tie itself in my stomach as I said the words.

“Not even *her* name?” Nolan asked, putting his hand on the trunk of a nearby tree. Wondering, I put my own hand on the tree’s side, feeling how smooth her ancient bark had become over time. There was a knot in the wood just a few feet above my head that looked familiar, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember her name.

I shook my head at Nolan and he blinked, lowering his chin. When he lifted it again to look at me, there was a calm firmness in his eyes that I rarely saw on his expressive face. “Let’s get home,” he said softly. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I nodded and he started walking towards the path out of the forest. I lingered just a moment, my hand still on the tree trunk, wishing that I could remember her name.



A Pulse of Thunder

As Nolan and I walked towards home, the sky rumbled lowly, the first warning growls of an approaching storm. The wind had gradually grown as we walked, until it was whipping my hair across my face and making the feathers of Nolan's cloak stand straight. There was a storm coming, and it was coming fast. We'd be lucky to get home before we got soaked by rain.

"Why did we take the long way home?" I asked, having to raise my voice above the thunder.

Nolan glanced anxiously over his shoulder, eyes fixed on the sky, and answered absently, "I need to get the timing right."

He was being vague and it was bothering me. "Are you trying to get us wet?" I complained emptily, more focussed on the road ahead than what I was saying. We were nearing a small rise with a bare-branched tree standing stubbornly against the wind. It was an old tree that had once been marked with a memorial stone, but the inscription on the stone was in a different language that neither of us understood. We'd passed this spot many times, always in deference to the soul

whose memory was planted there, and always with an unsettling feeling that we were being watched.

“The light’s fading,” Nolan muttered to himself, staring up at the dark clouds that were thinly covering the moon and stars. The wind was blowing them across the sky with furious speed, seeming determined to blot out all the night’s light in just a matter of minutes. Lightning flashed brightly directly above us and was followed by a peal of thunder so close, it shook the ground. “We’d better hurry,” Nolan called to me, jogging towards the memorial tree. I followed him without question, but my thoughts were with the thunder.

I remembered a story I’d once heard about thunderstorms. There was a war raging above the sky, I’d been told, where titanic beings charged across an otherworldly battlefield at one another. Their feet raised screens of dust so thick and grey, they became storm clouds, and the pounding of their feet could be heard as thunder. Every once in a while, a sword or an axe would swing wide and slice through the clouds, light reflecting off the blades so that we below the sky saw it for a split second as lightning. As the intensity of their fighting increased, so too did the thunder, becoming the booming crash of war drums, the rumbling, shouting voices of the warriors, and the lilting cadence of marching feet. Sometimes, the battle was so fierce, it shook the whole earth. Other times, it was so powerful, a steel blade shattered and sent shards of fire careening towards the ground. When the titans took to war, no one escaped the power of the storm.

More thunder cracked and I felt the vibrations under my feet. The clouds were going to break and let down the rain soon, I knew, and I ran a bit faster to catch up with Nolan. We stopped beside the dead tree, the wind tearing at our clothes as if warning us to find shelter before the storm unleashed its fury. “Get out your sketchbook,” Nolan called to me, the gale playing tricks with his voice.

“Are you crazy?” I shouted back, digging in my satchel nonetheless. In this wind, I would be lucky if the pages of the sketchbook weren’t all ripped out and cast to the sky, and I would be equally in trouble if it started to rain. But Nolan was looking around him in the familiar way—eyes half-closed, chin uplifted, ears flickering—that told me he was listening to the wind. I assumed that he wouldn’t be telling me to take out my sketchbook if he thought it would be ruined.

I pulled out the book and opened it to an empty page, fighting at first against the strong winds that chewed hungrily at the paper. Then Nolan said, “Leave it be,” in his sharp Wind-Voice, and the winds obeyed him, letting my pages fall still. I pulled out a pencil from the bottom of my bag and looked to Nolan for instructions. He was

distracted looking up at the sky, but then he suddenly seemed to hear something and whispered, “Just draw what you see.”

I stared at him, but he was still absorbed in the sky. What was that supposed to mean? Did I start drawing right away, or was something supposed to happen? There was nothing unusual around me and so, uncertain, I glanced left and right, finding that the only subject to draw was the memorial tree. I put pencil to paper and was about to sketch out the first line when there was an unexpected burst of sound from above us.



My first instinct was to duck as something flew above my head, but I suppressed it and instead turned my head sharply to see what that flying something was. It was a pair of mourning doves, flapping desperately against the stormy gale, giving sharp, keening calls that were very unlike the low hum of doves. They flew a few metres away and then turned in the wind and came back in our direction, passing directly over our heads. I craned my neck to follow their movement and then understood what Nolan meant.

Just for a heartbeat, as the second dove’s shadow slid over me, I saw not a bird, but a sprite, wearing a cape of feathers, a headdress of pink and blue, a flowing tail streaming behind her...

I drew quickly, not wanting to lose a single detail, the image of the sprite burned into my mind—and I felt that familiar rush of warmth down my arms and back, the warmth that was the magic of the small

folk. I had seen one, unexpectedly, and my heart was pounding with hope. If I could see one, maybe I could hear one, too.

Nolan looked over my shoulder at my sketch, nodding with satisfaction at what he saw. “I would have been really scared if you hadn’t seen that,” he confessed a bit worriedly. “But do you recognize her?”

I stared down at the picture, trying to absorb the magic through it, not wanting to lose it again, and said, “I do. She’s one of the gypsy sprites. Chieftain’s daughter. Why has she come so far?”

Nolan blinked slowly. “The North Wind called her here, to show her to you. There’s been trouble in the gypsy tribe and they want you to come help them.”



By the Fireplace

By the time Nolan and I got back to my house, we were both soaking wet. My hair hung in strands on my shoulders and Nolan's feathers were slicked flat with the rain. We shook ourselves on the front porch, scattering droplets through the air and sprinkling each other. He laughed as he wiped the raindrops off his forehead, looking refreshed by being out in the storm, but I could barely stop myself from shivering. It was a good thing my satchel was waterproof, or my books would have been ruined and I would have had to strangle Nolan for getting us caught in the rain.

"Do you want to come inside to warm up or dry off?" I asked him, unlocking the door. We went into the foyer and I shut the door behind us, temporarily closing off the patter and chill of the storm. The thunder growled, a bit lower now than before, and I waited till it had passed before offering, "I could get you a dry sweater or a raincoat."

He shook his head, water running off his chin, and said, "I'm happy to walk through pouring rain. Unlike some people." Grinning slyly, he jabbed me in the ribs with his

elbow and tilted his head down mischievously. “Are you going to make it till morning or will I come to find you just a blob on the floor, completely melted away?”

I rolled my eyes and untied my shoes. “I’m fine, thanks,” I muttered, kicking them off and peeling my soaked hoodie from my body. “Want anything warm to eat or drink before you go?” I asked him, shivering and with goosebumps all up and down my arms.

“Nuh-uh,” he replied, lips twitching in a grin. “Go make a fire,” he said, turning to leave. “You’re about to freeze up on me.”

I rubbed my arms, only too eager to do as he suggested, and said, “All right, suit yourself. Don’t get pneumonia or anything.”

“I’ll try not to,” Nolan said with a broad smile, opening the door and stepping onto the porch. “G’night.”

“Night,” I said softly, standing at the door to watch him trot out into the downpour. I waited till he’d left the path through my yard and had started along the road before closing the door and going back inside. Wasting no time, I immediately got to work on building a fire. Once that was done, I went to the mantle and took down a stack of six leather books.

In these six books, I’d poured pages and pages worth of my knowledge of the small folk. I’d documented races and tribes, habitats, magics, customs and cultures, songs, traits, descriptions of all sorts—anything I thought would be useful. I had full-colour photographs and sketches, letters, pressed flowers and leaves, and even scraps of fabric tucked between the pages. Almost everything that I knew and had taken the time to write down was contained in these books, but I had realized while writing the sixth book that the amount that was left was still so broad, so much still left untouched. I had stopped then, unsure how to proceed.

I now opened the third book, flipping to where I had marked the page with a bright blue feather. The gypsy sprites. I had some sketches of them, and a few blurry photographs, mostly of the chieftain’s family and the family that I’d lived with during my visits. I had been with their tribe two or three years ago, having been sent an urgent message that a child had fallen ill and needed healing. I ended up staying for close to four months, travelling with them and learning their ways, and it had been an uplifting experience. The most important thing to a gypsy sprite was enjoying good stories and good songs.

I thumbed through the pages I'd dedicated to the tribe and tried to guess at why they were calling me back now. It likely wasn't another illness; with summer coming on, the sprites would be brimming with health and joy. The chances of it being some other injury were also slim, seeing as how they were a careful people who could more or less take care of themselves, so the likeliest cause was some sort of outside conflict. And if I had to guess at that, I knew exactly what to choose: the lily-slips.

Lily-slips were a beautiful, elegant, mysterious race, and they knew it. Proud, arrogant, self-absorbed, they had an outwardly indifferent attitude towards other races. They walked where they wanted to, no matter who was in the way, and always believed that their rights came first. They were at times insufferable to deal with, and so it was no surprise that the gypsy sprites, who frequently travelled through lily-slip territory, often confronted the snobbish creatures with hostility. For a race like the gypsy sprites which believed that the land was everyone's to share, they had a strong hatred for any races who thought they owned the rights to a place.

There had been war between the lily-slips and gypsy sprites before, many years ago, but that had ebbed as the years passed and was now mostly reduced to the occasional skirmish between small groups of them. These were usually resolved without much trouble, but every now and again a particularly bad dispute would require outside help to end it. It seemed like this was the case now, and it would have to be a bad fight indeed for someone like me to be called in. Knowing it was a long walk for me to reach them, the gypsy sprites typically only called me if it was absolutely necessary.

Dispute or no dispute, I was looking forward to the trip. I hadn't seen the gypsy sprites in a year or more, and they always made for cheerful company. I also hoped, faintly, that they might help me get my hearing back. They were a people full of music, and songs were always easier for me to remember than spoken phrases. There was a chance that some small fragment of their melodies might spark a memory, and that that memory would grow to full remembrance...

Exhaling deeply, I closed the book and stared at the lowering flames in the fireplace. *Wait for the new day to come*, I told myself. *You never know the song until it's already been sung.*



Warrior's Dress

The next morning, after eating breakfast and packing my bag with books and provisions for our trip to the gypsy tribe, I took care of a few dirty dishes, put my stuff by the front door, and made my way upstairs to my room. I drew the curtains mostly closed, letting in only a faint beam of light, and then changed into an undershirt and tight breeches. Then I opened my closet and let the light spill onto my well-loved set of armour.

The plate and mail armour was the most expensive possession I owned. It was far from high-end or stylish, like the city guard liked to wear, and it looked a bit rag-tag and makeshift compared to their gleaming outfits. But it was still high-quality and excellent protection, and that was what made it so valuable. I'd spent most of my life earning this suit. Part of it had been raising the money with small labour jobs, and the other part of it had been finding something to fit me—and someone who would sell to me. Being short could have its disadvantages, but I had enough determination to make up for it.

My armour, shining faintly in the morning sunlight, was a comforting sight. It meant protection and defence, but also duty. As much as I liked to be reminded by its weight and pressure that I was safe from attack, I also liked to be reminded that

I had responsibility—responsibility I had earned. I could wear it with pride, knowing that I'd earned this difficult but rewarding duty.

Although, I reflected as I approached the lengthy task of putting it on, the armour would probably be more rewarding if there were fewer buckles to fasten.

There was nothing for it but to start. First was the chainmail chausses, basically just a pair of jangly metal pants. They only came down to my knees, fastened with straps along the backs of my thighs and waist. They felt comforting, snug against my legs and with their own modest weight. I pulled on my leather knee-high boots below them, pulling tight the laces, and then strapped on segmented knee plates. I found the knee plates irritating as the straps sometimes pinched me, but they were needed to protect the gap between the chausses and boots. I'd had enough bruises on my knees to know that.

I pulled the cuirass on next. It was a plate in front and back for my torso, connected by leather straps at the shoulders and sides. The chest was covered by a solid plate, but the stomach was a series of segmented bands. This felt the best to put on. It wasn't constricting, but it was secure and close to my body. Each breath I took pressed my chest against the cuirass' sides and reminded me that I was safe. I took a few deep breaths, smiling with satisfaction, and then fastened the vambraces around my forearms. I had an extra plate that went on my right upper arm, for defence, and a pliant leather wrapping for my left upper arm. I put both on and then turned to the pauldrons.

The pauldrons were curved plates to cover my shoulders. The left was smaller and unadorned, fastening to the back of the cuirass with a clip and to the front with a strap. The right was larger, with a decorative metal band on it, and the strap that attached it to the front crossed over my chest to the side of the breastplate. Though the cuirass itself felt best to put on, the pauldrons were my favourite part. They made my shoulders look broader and made me feel stronger, like an ox. The rest of my armour made me look capable. The pauldrons made me look formidable.

There was just one piece left: my belt. This was what made me complete. It was what held my sword. I strapped the thick leather band around my waist, feeling the weight of the tassets—segmented metal plates—settle on my hips. The belt and tassets kept me grounded. They made me feel stable and sound, and I almost needed them as much for their solidity as I did for their defence.

I paused after buckling the last strap, enjoying for a moment the feeling of my duty. I then turned to a wall across the room. There hung my sword. The very last thing that made me who I was. I walked to it steadily, adjusting to the new weight of my armour, and gently took the blade from its spot on the wall. It was a longsword, almost too long for me to handle, but I was determined to grow into it as I became more capable with swordplay.



Decorated with dragons and bearing a circular addition to the crossguard adorned with a ruby, it wasn't quite the most expensive possession I owned, but it was certainly the fanciest. The city guard would scorn such an ornamental weapon, but I loved it. It was fierce and unique—two things I strove to be.

I slipped the sword into its proper place in the scabbard on my right hip. Its added weight, though not too terribly significant, was confirmation of the fact that my attire was complete. Well, except perhaps for one thing. Neatly folded on a shelf in my closet, almost forgotten, was the cloth tabard I sometimes wore over my armour. Most times, I thought it was too showy to bother putting it on, and today was no exception.

But I took it with me anyways. It was a part of my identity as a warrior, showy or not, and there was a chance I would put it on at some point.

Now that I was dressed, I went to the mirror to braid my hair. Dark, long, and straight, it looked nice falling free around my shoulders, but that was impractical if I had to fight. It was better to pull it back out of my eyes. I looked myself over from head to toe as I braided, admiring the tough look of my armour. I looked ready for battle, I thought. I looked like a warrior.

As I finished my hair, I straightened and threw back my shoulders, giving the mirror a stern, fighter-like stare. *This is who I am, the warrior*, I thought proudly. For years, I'd worked on my warrior image, training myself in strength and in bravery. I had always wanted to be a warrior. I had always wanted to be strong and brave, fearless and capable in battle and able to take care of myself. But I also wanted to be strong enough to protect the people and things I loved. Warriors were defenders

and guardians. People relied on them, and I liked having the responsibility of supporting others. It gave me purpose.

Giving my reflection a small smile, I grabbed my tabard and went downstairs to wait for Nolan.



The Banishment of Isolation

There was a knock on the door and I opened it to see a windswept Nolan standing on the doorstep. Dressed in a white blouse, a hawk-feather vest, and with white gull feathers braided into his wild black hair, he looked like he'd just escaped years of living in a bird nest. The fact that he had feathers sticking up at odd angles and was already covered with the dust of the road didn't help either.

"G'morning," he greeted me cheerily, sounding out of breath but bursting with energy.

Raising my eyes briefly to the sky, I said more soberly, "Morning, Nolan. You run here?" He nodded eagerly as I shut and locked the door behind me and I chuckled. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"I don't know," he said with a good-natured shrug. We walked side-by-side down the front path and then to the left, towards the trees that surrounded my little house. We hopped the fence of an enclosure built just a few feet within the trees and made our way through a relatively clear space. There was a compact, barn-like structure at the other end of the pen and a horse stood grazing outside it.

Nolan whistled and the brown and white paint mare raised her head and nickered, the sound rumbling and welcoming. Reaching her, I put my hands on either side of her nose and rubbed her fondly. “Morning, Faith,” I said quietly, patting her on the neck. She nudged me, hoping for a treat, but there were no pockets in my armour with which to carry carrots or apples. Nolan, on the other hand, had stuck a bright red apple in his backpack and pulled it out to give it to her. Faith bit into it happily, spraying Nolan with juice, and he laughed with pleasure and scratched her behind the ears.

I grinned as I went into the barn-like shelter to get Faith’s tack. Nolan loved horses with all his heart, and yet he didn’t want to get one of his own for some reason. Instead, he took every opportunity to spoil my young mare. I loved watching them together. Though I knew that Faith was loyal to me first, she had an incredibly strong bond with Nolan and they shared a mutual understanding that I didn’t think even I had with her. And seeing the broad smile stretch across Nolan’s face was one of the most heart-warming things I could think of.

Nolan hadn’t always smiled so freely. I had met him in the marketplace of the nearby town about eight years ago. He’d looked lost and alone, wandering without purpose, and had almost thrown a fit when he accidentally crashed into me while trying to avoid a passing horse. I remembered being irritated that he’d run into me, but my irritation had soon turned into confusion when he stuttered apology after apology, tears dribbling down his cheeks and a look of panic on his face. When he’d finally fallen silent, staring at me helplessly, I’d asked him softly, “Are you all right?”

That was when he’d truly dissolved. He’d sunk to his knees in the middle of the street, running anxious fingers through his hair, and had babbled incoherent words—the best I’d been able to make out was that he was lost and his home was gone. Embarrassed on behalf of this stranger blubbing on the road, I’d yanked him up by the arm and started pulling him down the street, back towards my home. At first, he’d done nothing but sob and jabber, stumbling along behind me. But as he’d calmed and caught his breath, his story had slowly begun to come out of him.

Nolan was an exile and an outcast. Eight years ago, before I’d met him, he had made a grave mistake. While out in the forest with a hunting party, searching for a stag to bring home for dinner, Nolan had been given the task of holding the leash of the big black hunting dog. Excited by the smell of prey and straining at its leash, the dog had suddenly rushed forwards when one of Nolan’s companions had walked out of some nearby brush, deer scent heavy on his clothes. Nolan was taken by surprise at the dog’s sudden movement and let the leash slip between his fingers.

The other man had been badly mauled by the frenzied hound and was crippled too badly to hunt any longer.

Nolan had been thrown out of his village immediately. I had eventually come to understand that he hadn't been very well-liked before the incident, apparently too clumsy for his fellow villagers' liking, and so they had been looking for the first opportunity to banish him. I thought it was harsh punishment, but he had come to accept it, with time. It was for the best, he later told me. The pressure of living up to their expectations would have crushed him sooner or later, and at least this way, he was free.

Free or not, he'd still been a wreck, out in the big world all on his own, and I'd taken him to my house in town and let him stay with me for a while, secretly hoping that he would get over his grief and move out and I would never see him again. But in the few weeks that he'd lived with me, he had proven so comic and happy-go-lucky, it was hard not to enjoy his company. We'd soon become friends, and moved out together from the town to the surrounding countryside. Though we now lived apart, we had become as close as family.

Bringing Faith's saddle and bridle from the barn, I came back out and started tacking up the paint. She stood patiently, nuzzling Nolan as he stroked her neck. His smile was gone, replaced with a straight-faced expression of calmness. I smiled to myself as I tightened the girth and buckled the leather straps. The best gift I'd given him, Nolan had told me once, was an end to the loneliness. Of all things, the loneliness had been worst for him. I'd told him then that he wouldn't have to be alone anymore, as long as we were friends.

From that day on, I made sure it was true.



Trouble in the Air

Nolan and I made our way down the dusty road at a comfortable pace, me seated on Faith's back and Nolan tripping along at my heel. I used to ask him all the time if he wanted to take a turn riding, but he was happy as a lark walking on his own two feet. He also pointed out that he could run faster with the help of the wind than Faith could gallop, and so he was better off on the ground anyways. It had taken just a few trips for me to realize that he was right—he was bursting with so much energy, he wouldn't have had the patience to sit in a saddle for very long. He was constantly running off the path to look at something interesting, or running ahead to scout out the path, then running back to me until he was out of breath. Faith wouldn't have lasted ten minutes with a bundle of energy like that on her back.

As we walked, the morning's peaceful stillness was effortlessly shattered by Nolan's continuous stream of chatter. He talked about *everything*. If he heard some news on the wind, he would tell me all about it. If he thought of a story he'd been told recently, he would tell me all about it. If he remembered some random chore he needed to do when we returned home, he would tell me all about it. With Nolan, there was nothing that wasn't worth saying. And he said it so quickly, it was easy to get confused and lose track of all his stories.

"That's why the rain's been low so far this year," Nolan was saying. "It should get better, the Westwind says, but she's been wrong before. Remember two summers

ago when she said that the corn crop would be fuller than it's been for years, and then it was worse than it's been for years? It could be the same thing. She says the rain will come, but maybe it will only get worse. The last thing we need is a drought. You know, he told me about it last time we had one. A drought, I mean. He told me that the rain just wasn't full enough for him to carry it along. But I doubted him, I'll admit. We were having so much rain, the fields were flooded in some places. But never doubt the Rain Shaker. Believe me, he's always right."

Nolan jogged ahead at that point, something either catching his eye or his ear from over the next hill, and I sighed with faint relief. As much as I loved the guy, the constant talking was a bit much. I just wished we could get to the gypsy tribe faster. The sooner we were there, the sooner I could get my deafness sorted out. The sooner I could go back to normal, and not get so caught up in—

"Hey, Alex!" Nolan called suddenly, looking at me over his shoulder. He was a few metres away, standing at a rise in the road and looking down. I nudged Faith into a short trot to catch up, and then followed Nolan's gaze.

There was a split in the road ahead, one path veering sharply to the right—the path that led to the gypsy tribe—and the other continuing more or less straight from the track we'd been following. I saw almost immediately what had caught Nolan's eye—on the straight path, several kilometres away, a group of people were trying to catch a panicking horse. The animal was rearing and kicking, its distressed neighing ringing out in the morning air, and the people trying to catch it were making no progress.

"We should help," Nolan said, beginning to run down the hill.

I stopped him quickly. "Hold up," I called, and he turned to look at me curiously. "We don't have time to go help," I told him. "If that horse breaks out of the circle and runs, it could take all afternoon to find it and catch it again. I want to get to the gypsy tribe by dusk. I'm sure those people will catch the horse soon anyways, without our help. We'll just get in the way."

A shadow of displeasure passed over Nolan's face and he shook his head unhappily. "They don't have a horse to ride, so if that panicked horse runs, they'll never catch it. *You* have a horse. *I* can run with the wind. We need to go help them."

"No," I argued irritably, "what we *need* to do is get going. We're wasting time. If we weren't going anywhere, I would stop to help, but we have things that we need to do, just as much as they do."

Growling deep in his throat, Nolan said, “Don’t be selfish. They’re about to lose their horse. You aren’t going to lose anything.” With that, he turned and started running again.

“I’m not selfish,” I snapped, angry that he would accuse me of it. Reaching the gypsy tribe meant a lot to me—a stranger’s horse didn’t. As good as Nolan’s intentions were, I wished he would understand that not everyone needed to be helped.

But I wouldn’t leave without him, so I had no choice but to lend a hand. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to help, I just wanted to get on with my quest even more.

Grudgingly, I kicked Faith on and we cantered down to catch up with Nolan. *I just hope they don’t catch that horse before we get there, I thought bitterly, or else this really will be a waste of time.*



Thorns

Nolan reached the group of travellers with the panicking horse long before I did, and was already trying to help them calm the beast. I could tell just from the way he was moving his hands that he was speaking to the horse in the wind in an effort to soothe it, but the big white draft was having none of it. *A draft horse*, I thought unhappily. *Why did it have to be a draft horse?* The heavy wagon-pulling drafts were hard to spook, but were so much heavier than horses like Faith that they were more dangerous when they *did* freak out. This would be tricky.

The moment Faith got near the panicking draft, she started dancing on the spot, reluctant to go too close but also too unwilling to disobey me to run away. She nickered lowly, letting me know that there was danger, and I patted her neck comfortingly. “It’s all right, girl,” I said calmly, but inside I was simmering with frustration. If that horse bolted and struck out at Faith, there would be serious trouble. *No one* hurts my horse and gets away with it.

Not wanting to upset Faith any more, I dismounted and left her standing on the sidelines while I approached the crowd on foot. There were four travellers with the horse: two brawny men, a tough-looking woman, and a younger girl watching the rearing horse with round eyes of concern. One of the men was yelling at Nolan to leave and I wished that he'd listen. If they didn't want our help, why should we try?

But Nolan kept approaching the horse and none of the travellers was trying to stop him. I pushed between the two women and came right up behind Nolan, looking over his shoulder to see what he was doing. He was moving his hands in small circles, his fingertips moving the air and carrying his gentle whispers towards the horse's ears. To my surprise, whatever he was saying seemed to be working—the horse had stopped rearing and was only tossing his head now, getting calmer by the second.

“Grab him,” Nolan muttered to me, keeping his hands moving all the while. One of the men shouted at me to stay away, that he didn't want us to touch his horse, but I didn't pay any attention to him. Instead, I carefully reached out and gripped the horse's halter tightly, stroking his neck to soothe him further. Nolan came over and patted the horse's nose, giving me a small, reassuring smile.

I was about to admit grudgingly that it was a good thing we'd come to help when the man who had been yelling at us suddenly shoved Nolan to the side of the road and pulled the halter aggressively from my hand. I stood in stunned silence while Nolan, who had been so startled that he'd lost his footing, picked himself up off the ground with his mouth hanging open. The other man, fast as lightning, pushed Nolan down again before he could even catch his breath.

The sight of the men shoving Nolan around awakened a fierce anger in my chest. I half drew my sword and snarled at the nearest man, the one who'd taken the halter from me. “We helped you with your horse, so leave us alone,” I said between gritted teeth.

“We didn't need your help,” snapped the man, “and we especially didn't need it from *his* kind.” He pointed at Nolan and I saw the young girl make a fearful gesture—like she was warding off evil. My temper quickened.

“Stay away from us, heathens,” sneered the older woman as she took hold of the horse and began leading it down the road, the girl following on her heels. I pulled my sword the rest of the way from its sheath as they passed, and noticed smugly that even though they didn't lose their looks of disgust, they did walk a little faster. I glared at them until they'd gone and then shifted my attention to the men.

They were watching Nolan with bared teeth as he sat on the grass and looked warily up at them. “Get moving,” I ordered the men, but they stayed put.

“We didn’t need any help,” said one with cold sparks flaring in his eyes. “You have no business offering help to people like us in these parts.”

“What kind of gratitude is that?” I grumbled, stepping towards Nolan so that I could help him up. The moment I moved, however, the man with the sparks in his eyes hit me hard and fast in the face.

I reeled back, taken by surprise, and pressed my hand against my throbbing jaw while shock and rage flowed through me. I tightened my grip on my sword and raised it as if to start a fight, but then Nolan was on his feet and was pulling on my arm. “Don’t fight,” he told me—he *begged* me. “Don’t get hurt, please.” He tugged on my arm until the two men turned away and spat on the ground before following after the women. When they were gone, I turned my anger on Nolan.

“Stand up for yourself!” I scolded him, shoving my sword in its sheath and rubbing my jaw. “Why do you always make it my job, to make sure you aren’t hurt? Why can’t you defend yourself?”

“I didn’t want to fight,” Nolan said calmly. “I wanted to help them, and we did.”

“And we were better off just walking away.” I stormed towards Faith and climbed up into the saddle. “I told you we should walk away.”

“And I told you we should help.” Nolan brushed grass off his pants as casually as if he’d just been napping. His passiveness annoyed me sometimes. Along with his eagerness to help everyone in trouble.

“Next time I say we shouldn’t help someone, we’re not going to help them,” I declared as if my word was law. “It’ll only get us into trouble.”

“*You* get us into trouble,” Nolan said. “You shouldn’t have threatened them. They wouldn’t have hit you.”

I clenched my teeth. “They hit me because I was trying to protect you. And you didn’t let me hit them back, so now they think I’m just as weak and pathetic as you are.”

There was silence. *Oh, crap.* I should have felt guilty for what I said, but it was very hard when I was still burning with anger towards the ungrateful men.

“There are thorns in your heart, Alex,” Nolan finally said, his voice hard. “Let’s go, then. I wasted your time.” He started walking towards the path we were supposed to take and I followed along behind with dread. It was going to be a very long trip.



A Tangling Taint

Faith snorted and bobbed her head up and down, bored of walking and especially bored of walking so far behind Nolan. Nolan had made it obvious that he didn't want to walk near me, though, so I'd kept Faith back to respect his wishes. Now that I wasn't as fired up about the rude band of travellers and their cruel treatment of Nolan, my guilt was chewing me to shreds over our argument.

I shouldn't have called him weak and pathetic, I knew it for a fact, but there had always been a part of me that had seen him that way. Right from the beginning, I'd known him as the underdog, the outcast and the unwanted one, and had felt like I was doing him a great service by befriending him. I'd stood up for him when he was too passive to stand up for himself, and I'd fought to protect him in a few tricky battles. I'd always felt like the strong one in our relationship, but never in that time had I meant any disrespect or insult to Nolan.

Not even when I'd found out he was tangled.

He walked resolutely down the path in front of Faith, the wind gently tugging on the white gull feathers tied into his hair, and I sighed to see him alone. I hadn't discovered that he was tangled until just a couple years ago, and it had explained much of Nolan's past—especially why he had been disliked in his village.

Nolan had been born in the nearby Rindt Forest and had quickly grown into a healthy Wind Shaman child, having inherited his father's gift for manipulating the wind and his mother's peaceful temper. He was the typical Rindt boy, with long hair, pointed ears, pupil-less eyes, and a talent for magic, and his elders had predicted that he would grow into a strong, popular young man. But they hadn't predicted his insatiable desire to help others, and that was what led him into the forest on a Path's End morning.

Path's End was the fifth month of the Rindt calendar, and the one month during which all the Rindt children were warned to keep out of the forest. It was known for its over-abundance of the knotted folk, who were born into this month and flooded the woods with energetic young. The knotted folk were considered devils or demons to most people in the towns, because if they ever touched a child's brow, it was said that the child would die.

Nolan had told me about the knotted folk once, just in passing, and had explained that the child didn't actually die, but was cursed. The curse affected the child's blood kin and usually most of the village, and so most of the tangled, as they were called, were exiled from their homeland. What Nolan hadn't realized, as he'd told me this, was that sometimes being cursed and being dead meant the same thing.

When a tangled child was cast from the village and wandered into the towns, they were often treated poorly, sometimes beaten and usually starved. The towns people didn't know enough to see that the child was tangled—they saw only that they were different, and typically blamed it on some sort of dark magic at work. Until I'd had all of this explained to me by one of the town's more isolated seers, I too had believed it was dark magic. I had been shocked when I'd found out that Nolan—sweet, gentle Nolan—was one of the tangled.

The day he'd wandered into the trees, he had been following one of the younger Rindt boys, one who didn't know any better and was sure to get himself hurt. Nolan had caught up to the boy just as a pack of curious knotted folk young were surrounding him, and had been too late to stop the little boy from being touched and tangled. But when he'd shooed away the knotted folk and had picked up the little boy to carry him back to the village, he had drawn some of the tangledness into himself. The knotted magic took hold of him in a weaker state, making him only half-cursed, and technically only half-tangled.

So while the tangled boy had been outcast, Nolan had been allowed to stay because of his uncertain condition. He had started taking on the tangled symptoms, though, and that won him only distrust from the others in the village, which led to his eventual exile when I'd befriended him.

I hadn't realized he was tangled for most of our friendship, though he had shown the signs. He was twitchy and flighty, always on the move, sometimes slow to understand social cues and often over-expressive with his face and his gestures. It made him seem less intelligent and different from everyone else—which is what I, as someone who grew up in the town, understood as being tainted by dark magic. But being tainted and being tangled were two very different things—though the Rindt folk thought that being tangled meant bad luck, like being tainted, it was according to seer lore that being tangled meant only that a person could no longer lead a straight and simple life. Their path had become confused and their fate was no longer straightforward.

What that meant for Nolan, I didn't really know, but what I did know was that his tanglement, though not as strong, still affected others' treatment of him. It was as if he had the word "tangled" tattooed across his forehead; people like those travellers could see the tanglement on him and treated him like dirt because of it. They thought he was some bearer of black magic and curses and were afraid that it would be passed onto them. That was why they'd shoved him to the ground. That was why I'd been angry.

It wasn't Nolan's intention to be tangled when he helped the little Rindt boy, but he was paying for a good deed with never-ending suffering. I saw this every time we went to town, and every time, I wished that he would stand up for himself. That he would refuse to be treated like garbage. I hadn't tried to fight because I wanted to cause trouble—I'd tried to fight to help my friend. Yet he couldn't see that, and it frustrated me.

Ahead, Nolan stopped. He stood at the end of the path, at the edge of the trees. Beyond was where the gypsy tribe lived, our destination.

"We're here," Nolan said, his voice hard and emotionless.

I looked into his pale green eyes, trying to communicate my concern, wishing he would understand. But then he turned away, and so I wordlessly nudged Faith forwards towards the dark, cool forest.



Unpredictable Foes

The gypsy sprites were currently living on the top of a raised riverbank, where the moss was thick and hanging willow trees provided a bit of shelter for them. Nolan had to follow the wind's directions to find it, since it was so well-hidden and we'd never been there before. The sprites weren't called gypsies for no reason—they moved around frequently from camp to camp and that made them very hard to find without help.

We pushed through the screen of willow branches and several startled birds flew up into the air. They were birds of all different species flying as one flock, and that was a clear sign that they weren't ordinary birds. Even though my ability to see the small folk was impaired, I still knew that a mixed flock often meant gypsy sprites. Knowing this, I concentrated on seeing them for what they really were, and succeeded a couple times in catching glimpses of sprite faces and feet. Most of what I saw, however, was just ordinary birds. I frowned. This was going to be a difficult meeting.

I hopped off Faith and removed her bridle so that she could graze while Nolan—perfectly capable of seeing the small folk—walked over to some of the birds and spoke to them through the wind. He could see the small folk well enough, but he'd never had the talent of speaking their language and relied on the wind to translate for him. That at least gave him the means of communicating, while I couldn't even use the wind. I was completely deaf and mute—and partially blind too.

I patted Faith's spotted neck, watching Nolan for a few moments. "I hope this goes well," I murmured to Faith, and she looked at me with one brown eye as if to ask what the trouble could possibly be. I rubbed her nose and smiled sadly. "Such a sweet girl." She never seemed to notice whenever Nolan and I were upset with each other. We needed to help the gypsy sprites, though, so avoiding him was out of the question. Sighing, I left Faith's side and walked over to join Nolan.

He was still talking to one of the sprites—disguised as a brown sparrow—when I approached, so I had to wait for them to finish speaking before Nolan would explain the situation to me. "The chieftain and his daughter are out scouting right now," Nolan told me, "and they won't be back for an hour or two. None of the other sprites will tell me what's going on without the chieftain's permission."

I nodded, not too surprised by his last statement. If the chieftain had called us here, then it would be his responsibility to tell us what was happening. But why was he out in the first place? The chieftain wasn't usually in charge of scouting the territory, and I'd never heard of him taking his daughter along. "Did they say why the chief and his daughter are out?" I asked.

"They're searching for wounded," Nolan said, his ears twitching uncertainly.

"Wounded?" I echoed. That was disturbing. If my prediction was correct and we were dealing with a war between the gypsies and the lily-slips, then it was a lot worse than I expected. "So what do we do until the chief and his daughter get back?" I asked Nolan.

He shrugged. "Not much *we* can do. But we should figure out what *you're* going to do. Can you even see them?"

I bit my lip and glanced around. I was still only catching little glimpses of the sprites, nothing concrete. "Not really," I admitted.

“So there’s no chance of you speaking to them, then. I suppose I can translate for you, but it will be inconvenient.” Nolan sounded unhappy about it and that only made me feel worse about being deaf.

“I was hoping that being here with the sprites would help me get my memory back, so that I can speak to them again. If I spend enough time with—”

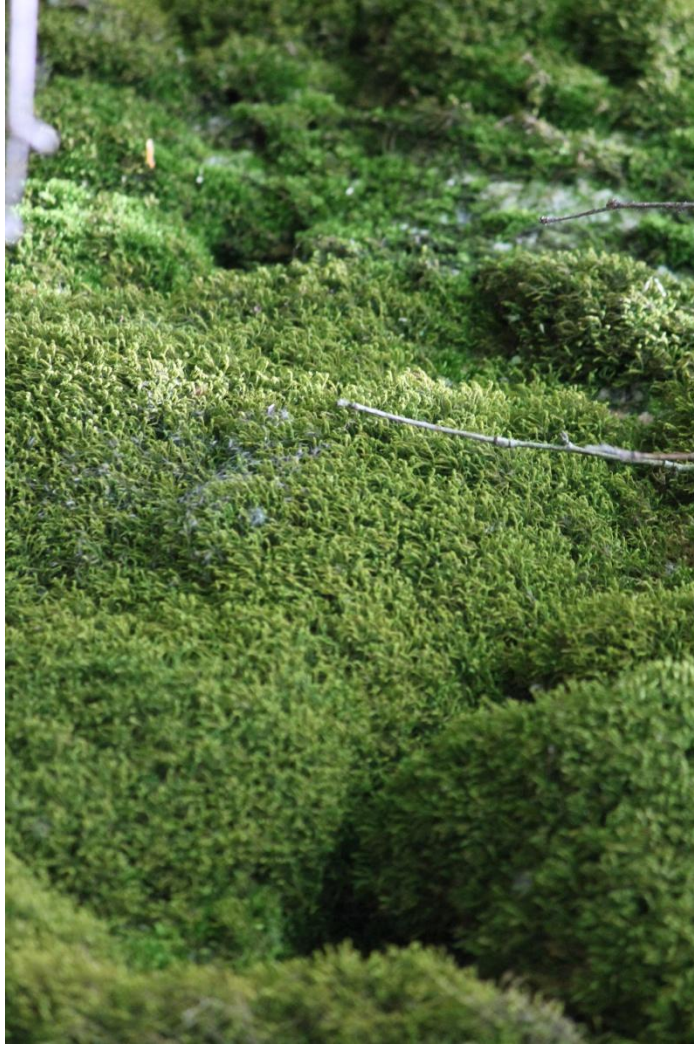
I was interrupted by a sudden flurry of wings as a flock of mismatched birds flew through the willow leaves and landed in front of us. Most of the birds were healthy, but I saw blood and scratches on some of them. I recognized the mourning dove feathers of the chieftain’s daughter and caught a glimpse of her very unhappy face. She seemed to say something to Nolan and he responded in turn, but didn’t say anything to me. Left out of the conversation, I looked around at the wounded.



There were so many of them, I realized, with bloody wounds on their anxious faces and missing feathers in patches. It was clear they’d been in some sort of fight, but I couldn’t imagine that the elegant lily-slips would do that much damage. In fact, I was convinced by now that we were dealing with a lot worse than lily-slips.

Nolan was finally ready to speak to me. “It’s very bad,” he said, but I hadn’t needed him to tell me that. “They won’t say anything about the monster that did this to them—not in front of the others, anyways—but the chieftain’s daughter did tell me why she called us here.” Nolan tipped his head, looking confused.

“It’s rather strange,” he said slowly. “They need us to help them rescue the lily-slips.”



On the Inside

I sat alone at the edge of the river, sitting on a thick cushion of soft moss and fiddling with my bootlaces while I waited for Nolan to come back. He had gone to talk to the chieftain without me. We had both decided that it would be better for him to talk alone with the sprites so that he wouldn't have to translate for me. They were discussing the situation with the wounded lily-slips and were going to try to figure out how I could help, even though I couldn't see any of the small folk. Before they'd gone off to talk, the chieftain had explained my condition to a seeress and requested that she come see me tonight. Nolan had thanked the chief on my behalf and then walked off without saying a word more.

And so I waited for him, the only person here I could see and talk to, while the sun started to set and rich golden light poured over the world. I stopped playing with my laces and held my palms out, letting the liquid gold settle in my hands like

magic. I curled my fingers closed and the sunlight squeezed out, leaving nothing but shadows in my fist. I opened my hand again and the light flooded back, warm and happy on my skin, and I wished that I could hold onto it. That I could put it in my pocket and carry it with me. There was something special about this warm golden light. I felt as if it would help me understand, return my magic to me, if only I could capture it and put it inside my soul.

But it always slipped away, evading me.

I lowered my hands and buried my fingers in the moss, wondering if the earth would help me where the sun did not. I wanted to make myself small, small enough to hide in the moss and become one of the small folk—the smallest I could possibly be. I used to be able to talk to the moss, in a way. I had been able to hear its thoughts, those tiny little ideas that shivered through its roots and seeped through your skin. I'd learned quite a bit from the moss: the way sun changed its light at the beginning of each month, the way pollen travelled when there was no wind to take it, the way bark grew on a tree sick with mourning. Moss was wise and observant. I wanted to become the moss, so I could be wise and observant too.

But just as the sunlight had not allowed itself to be captured, neither did the moss accept me in its arms. I was stuck in my body, blind and deaf and clumsy, no longer a part of nature like I was when I had magic. Winter had stilled my blood and stripped me of life, like a leafless tree, but even with the coming of spring, I had not been renewed. I'd been left crippled and withered, separate from all that I loved.

It had been a long time since I'd felt bad enough to want to cry, but this was one of those moments.

Yet still I held it in. I poured it into the new magic inside me, an insidious magic that writhed and twisted in my gut like a serpent, consuming my old magic and turning it foul. This magic had grown in me through the winter—I'd felt it ever since it was just a small seed—and had swelled until it consumed every part of my living soul. This blight was a kind of life, in its own right, but it was a sickly life. Only I knew it existed—I hadn't even been brave enough to tell Nolan.

Most of the time, I could ignore it. I could shove it down into the very bottom of my stomach, turn it into a cold, hard stone that sat heavily in my gut. Most of the time, it was dormant, passively absorbing all my good magic into its vortex. But sometimes I could touch it, use it like my old magic. The first time I used it, I almost didn't realize that I was tapping it. For it wasn't any new magic—it was a magic I'd always had, that everyone had within themselves in some small amount.

It was anger. Raw, merciless anger.

And it was eating me alive.

Faith came up behind me, putting her nose on my shoulder and tickling my cheek with her warm breath. I smiled and stroked her nose, thankful that she had come to interrupt me from my sickening thoughts. I petted her for a while and she half-closed her eyes with sleepy contentment. “Can you see them?” I murmured to her. “Can you hear their voices?”

She opened her brown eyes and stared at me, but didn’t answer. She didn’t know how to answer. I wondered dreamily if she *could* see and understand the small folk. If I became a horse, would I reclaim the magic I’d lost? I had no way of knowing. Faith had no way of telling me.

Together, we watched the last of the golden light fade away until shadows started to fill the world and the forest creatures began to prepare for night. It was as the earliest stars were appearing in the sky that Nolan returned, a ward against evil drawn on his brow.



The Name of the Threat

For a while, Nolan wouldn't speak to me. He just sat in the moss, shadows lengthening on his face as he rocked slowly and rubbed at his forehead. He'd long ago rubbed the red painted ward against evil off his brow, but he couldn't stop touching it, trying to get rid of it. His skin was almost as red as the paint. And it was driving me crazy.

"Stop doing that and just tell me what's wrong!" I snapped, finally losing my temper.

He cringed at my harsh words and buried his face in his hands, moaning with despair. "*Bearskins*," he hissed, and my stomach tightened uneasily.

Bearskins were nasty. True to their name, they often wore the skins of animals they'd slain—typically bears—and were widely regarded as the worst predators in any forest. And they were everywhere. They were insidious pests, like blood-sucking ticks, that crept out of nowhere and slowly and subtly grew out of control, devastating an area before suddenly disappearing to infect somewhere else. The lands they ravaged never fully recovered. For they didn't destroy from the outside, no—the bearskins knew the secrets of the heart, and they attacked brutally from the *inside*.

I exhaled deeply and dug my fingers in the moss, searching for an anchor. No wonder the lily-slips and the gypsy tribe had been so brutally defeated. The

bearskins would have used the two tribes' weaknesses against them, driving them to fear or anger in order to bring about their downfall.

The one question I had now was why the bearskins would have done something like that. They didn't fight for pleasure—they weren't *that* morbid. They always fought for a reason. Sometimes they needed food, or hunting weapons, or land, so they would raid and pillage to get what they wanted. But none of those could be the reasons for these attacks. The gypsy tribe didn't have extra food, any weapons, or even a fixed territory. And the lily-slips were insectivores, had poorly made weapons and tools, and lived on sparse and poor land.

The bearskins' reasons would have to be more than just the need to survive. Either the gypsies, or the lily-slips, or both had something the bearskins wanted. If it came between giving the bearskins what they wanted or fighting them in an outright war, I thought it might be better to just give them what they wanted and be done with it.

Nolan was still in distress, dragging his fingers through his dark, messy hair, and I spoke his name to settle him. "Nolan, please. I need you to go back to the chieftain and ask him why the bearskins are attacking them." I tried to convey my urgency with my tone of voice, and he seemed to hear it, lifting his head to look at me. "I think they have something the bearskins want, so ask what it might be. Okay?"

Nolan inhaled shakily, his chest shuddering, but then nodded quickly and stood. Even his legs were trembling as he walked back towards where the gypsy tribe was preparing for the night. I watched him go with a cold hard knot sitting in my gut. This was bad. Bearskins were a problem I'd never had to face before, but the stories I'd heard were plenty enough to make me understand that fighting them off would be no easy task.

Maybe even impossible.

I propped my head on my hands and stared at the shadowed moss, thinking of every dark and gruesome fact I knew about the bearskins. I was lost in a tangle of terror when soft footsteps brought me back to reality.

I turned, and there in the silvery moonlight was a tall, thin old woman, her body adorned in downy blue-grey feathers. She had a necklace with three linked stone rings on it, the centre ring holding a piece of pink quartz in the middle. She watched me with bright yellow eyes and a wrinkled smile.

“Alex, yes?” she asked, her voice rough as the moors.

I nodded and stood, bowing at the waist, enchanted by this gypsy woman. How could I see her, when all the others remained hidden? My eyes were again drawn to the three-ring necklace and I thought I understood. She was the seeress who was supposed to examine me tonight. Of course she would have charms that would reveal herself to me, and make her speech plain. Realizing who she was, I bowed a second time, just a little bit deeper.

“Are you ready?” she asked, pulling an elegant silver wand from a sash around her waist.

Closing my eyes briefly, I nodded.



Finding the Root

The seeress had me sit on my knees, toes crossed, arms raised at my sides, as she began her examination. She circled me slowly, drawing invisible rings around my head and shoulders with her silver wand. At least a dozen times, she walked around, drawing those rings, before she ordered me to close my eyes. I silently obliged, though my arms were starting to ache from holding them out for so long.

I couldn't see what the seeress was doing, but I could certainly feel it. A gentle, trailing touch ran from my shoulder to my fingertips. Once, then twice, both on my left arm. There was a pause, and then she repeated it on my right arm. It tickled more on the right, and my fingers twitched impulsively as she stroked the back of my hand. When she saw me twitch, she hummed to herself, but I had no idea whether it was a good hum or a bad one.

"Open your eyes," she ordered briskly, and I did as she asked, blinking a couple times to readjust to the dimness. She was kneeling in front of me, her face level with mine, and once my eyes were open, she reached out and put her hands on my face, thumbs resting on my cheekbones.

I immediately flinched, squinting my eyes defensively. She maintained gentle pressure till I'd gotten used to her touch and could keep my eyes open, and then she began to mutter. My skin prickled under her cold hands and I wanted desperately to pull away. This examination was awkward and uncomfortable. And I didn't even know if it was going to work.

Apparently having gained enough information from my cheekbones, she let go of my face and got to her feet, again pulling out her wand. She walked behind me and told me to stand, and when I turned my head to look at her she barked harshly, “Don’t look!” Frowning, I put my back to her and stood impatiently as some of her soft grey feathers floated past me towards the mossy ground.

I stared at a couple of the feathers just as I was jabbed hard in the lower back, near my spine. I started, reflexively twisting around to face her, but she pushed my shoulder to keep me straight. The next time she jabbed me, a little higher up, I was ready and didn’t react as strongly, but I was still unhappy to have to endure such a ridiculous process. I didn’t understand what she was doing or how it was helping me.

She poked me with her wand until she reached the back of my neck, and then began to circle me—yet again. She went around once, then stood in front of me. “Can you see me?” she asked.

I responded without thinking. “Of course.”

She nodded, then went around again. She stopped in front of me, paused, and asked again, “Can you see me?” I nodded right away, but now I was doubtful. Was there some reason why I *wouldn’t* see her? She went around once more, and this time when she asked, “Can you see me?” I hesitated before answering.

I stared at her, eyes narrowed. I could see her, couldn’t I? Her gold-yellow eyes fixed me with a fierce stare and my gaze darted uncertainly over her form. Her grey feathers fluttered, my vision twisted, and suddenly I was no longer looking at a gypsy sprite—I was looking at a grey dove, and as I watched, it swooped around behind me and circled back.

“I-I can’t see you anymore,” I said, confused, and the dove that was the seeress swept in another circle before landing on the ground in front of me.

Can you see me?

As I watched, the dove stretched and grew, feathers fluffing outwards, until I was again looking at the old seeress. Baffled, I answered, “Now I can.”

She nodded, looking like she expected my answer, and then gestured for me to turn around. I did so slowly, and my gaze dropped to the moss. There, lying discarded,

was the seeress's three-stone necklace. I stared at it for a moment, not understanding what it meant, until the seeress explained it to me.

“That is a charm that lets you see me,” she said, confirming what I had guessed when I first saw her. “When I was behind you, prodding your spine, I took it off and put it on the ground. I then began to circle you. You didn’t notice that I had taken the charm off, and so you continued to see me in my true form.” She paused, putting her hands on my shoulders from behind. “But when I gave you doubt,” she continued, “you no longer could see me. Your blindness, as well as your deafness—it is all psychological.

“This problem is all in your head.”



Scared for Me

I didn't wait for Nolan. I led Faith into a quiet, secluded place in the forest and made a fire. As I crouched next to it, I fed kindling into the infant flame and warmed my fingers. Ordinarily, the news that my problem was mental would be good news—that meant it could be cured. But things weren't ordinary anymore. If things were ordinary, I wouldn't have lost my hearing and sight in the first place.

What upset me most, about finding out that my problem was psychological, was that it meant I *should* be able to get over it, just by changing the way I think. Mind over matter. But I knew it wasn't going to be that easy. If it was my fault I had this problem in the first place, then how was I supposed to fix it?

I snapped a stick in half and threw it in the fire, watching as it rapidly blackened. I hated this. I hated that my problem was self-inflicted. I hated that I'd let myself get this way. I hated that I'd taken away the one thing in my life that meant most to me.

I couldn't have hated myself more, for what I'd done.

I wanted to cry angry tears, to let their molten tracks burn the remnants of what I'd done. I wanted to scream and tear the memory of my misery to pieces. I wanted to

let everything I'd done burn and crumble, turning to white ash and blowing away on the breeze. I wanted a way to destroy every mistake I'd ever made.

I was letting my anger get the best of me.

It thrummed in my chest, swelling as I fed it more and more. It made me feel nauseous, sick to my stomach, but I wanted nothing more than to be angry. To punish myself with my own sickening anger, as if that would make things better.

But I wanted so desperately not to be angry. To be happy, so I could fix my mental problem and get my hearing and sight back.

I wanted things to be the way they once were.

Somehow, Nolan found me. He came to me as soon as he was done speaking with the chieftain and his daughter.

"I asked them if they knew what the bearskins wanted," he said, sitting next to my little fire. "They didn't know. He said maybe it was something the lily-slips had. But he didn't know." He sat silently for a moment, then exhaled and asked, "Did you see the seeress?"

I didn't look at him. "It's psychological."

"Oh." He sounded surprised. "What does that mean?" he asked.

I shook my head, staring at the ground. "It means I can't be fixed. I did it to myself and that's that." The angry tears were crowding my eyes, begging to be set free. I held them back.

Nolan was momentarily speechless. Twice, he inhaled as if to say something, but it only ended up a wordless whimper. When he finally thought of something to say, he spoke it with a tiny voice. "Why?"

I rounded on him, about to snap that if I knew why, we wouldn't be having this discussion, but I cut short when I realized he was crying. "Why would you say you can't be fixed?" he moaned, distraught. "Why would you give up on yourself like that?" He staggered to his feet, and I stood as well.

“I know what bearskins are, you know,” he said unhappily, the tears pouring off his chin in a steady stream. His hands made cutting gestures through the air between us. “I know what they do to people. They’ll know you’re hopeless. They’ll use it.” His words were now nothing more than a choked whisper. “They’ll kill you because of it.”

He was scared. Scared for me.

And he was right. If I fought the bearskins, feeling like this... they would use it against me and they would probably kill me. The thought was sobering, but it didn’t scare me. It just meant I’d have to be careful. What *did* scare me was Nolan’s reaction. He was getting worked up about something he couldn’t change, and that would make him a hundred times more vulnerable than he already was. If he didn’t cut it out, he was going to be the one who got killed.

“They’re not going to kill me,” I said sternly, “because I’m not hopeless. It is what it is, and I accept that. So what if I don’t get my magic back? I’ll live.” I couldn’t erase the bitterness in my voice, or that underlying anger just bursting to be free. But Nolan needed to stop.

He stared at me for several long seconds, tears still chasing each other down his face and a very hurt look in his eyes. “I don’t believe you,” he said. “You’re going to get your magic back. You have to.”

“I don’t have to,” I said, “I just have to get over it. Move on. Find something else. But it’s done.”

“It isn’t done,” he muttered, turning away from me and wiping his cheeks. He looked like he wanted to leave, wanted to stop listening to my resigned words, but he was afraid of being alone. So he stayed, but he wouldn’t look at me anymore or acknowledge my presence. It was just as well. I didn’t want to talk to him, if he was just going to get so upset.

I let my tiny fire go out and pulled my blanket from my saddlebags to go to sleep. It took me a long time to finally settle my mind enough, as I kept worrying about confronting the bearskins. I couldn’t let the gypsy tribe fight them alone, but I was worried that Nolan wouldn’t be strong enough. And if I couldn’t even *see* the bearskins, then what use was I?

My last thought before sleep was of my lost magic. It was so easy to believe that it was gone forever, but what if it wasn't? Was there a chance I could get it back? I had no idea.



Riding Faith

It was incredibly awkward, eating lunch surrounded by a bunch of chattering birds that I knew were actually sprites, and sitting across from Nolan, the only person I could actually see but also someone I'd just had a horrible fight with. So as I ate roasted squirrel as fast as I could, I made sure to keep my eyes firmly fixed on an inchworm working its way through the grass beside me, just so I wouldn't have to look at anyone else. I could feel Nolan's intense stare burning a hole in my forehead, but as long as he said nothing, I was content to let him stare.

I finished eating before he did and excused myself to go saddle up Faith. Nolan thankfully didn't follow, leaving me to work in peace. Once her saddle and bridle were properly adjusted, I set about putting on my armour. I'd taken it off to eat lunch, out of courtesy for the gypsy sprites, but had been itching to put it back on ever since. I now felt my discomfort ease as I settled the pauldrons on my shoulders and felt the press of metal against my ribs. I put my sword on, too—there was no way I was going for a ride with bearskins nearby without bringing my sword.

I put my foot in the stirrup and pulled myself into the saddle, settling easily and picking up the reins. I nudged Faith forwards and she went willingly, picking up a trot when I asked for it. I posted instinctively, rising and falling in the saddle in time with Faith's steps, and for a time there was no sound but the steady thump of her hooves and the groan and jingle of her tack.

After a while, we veered from the riverside and towards the forest where there was a path wide enough for me to ride along it comfortably. I asked Faith to canter and she sprang into it eagerly. Her hoofbeats grew louder as she picked up the pace and I felt our connection, as her strength surged and carried her forwards and my muscles worked in tandem to keep me secure on her back. We cantered quite a distance till she decided she'd had enough and I pulled her back to a walk.

Everything was so quiet around us. The sunlight was dappled on my face and the ground as it filtered through the still leaves high above, and there was no wind to stir the air or undergrowth. It was peaceful, except that I had never before been in a forest so calm. Usually, it was bursting with life, bursting with Small Folk, and it was nearly impossible to find such quiet. That was the way it was supposed to be. This was wrong.

Psychological.

The word hung over my head like a curse. Accusing me. Telling me all my faults.

You did this to yourself, and now you can't undo it.

When I first realized I was deaf and blind to the Small Folk, before I'd been given a reason for it, I never would've guessed that I'd done it to myself. Why would I? I didn't *want* to lose my magic. I'd been able to blame my disability on some unknown power, something I could probably attack or confront or at the very least hate. The fact that that power was myself, and that I didn't even know how or why I'd done it... I had betrayed myself. And now I was supposed to trust that I could handle fighting the bearskins?

I now had my doubts. With the anger in my chest, and the resentment I'd been living with... I was suddenly afraid that I wasn't prepared for this fight.

Faith tugged at the reins and I realized I'd been clenching them tightly. I loosened my grip and gently steered her back towards the gypsy sprite camp. I didn't want to go back there, surrounded by people who didn't understand, but I didn't want to stay here, either, in this hollow forest that was too quiet. I didn't really want to be anywhere right now—I just wanted to stop, to curl up and sleep, and wake up when the world had righted itself and I felt like I could be a part of it again.

I can't.

The thought was terrifying and I felt a momentary breath-stealing flash of panic. I wanted to pull Faith to a halt, to stop her moving forwards because *I couldn't*. I

couldn't fight the bearskins. I couldn't overcome my anger. I couldn't get my magic back. I just couldn't deal with everything right now. All I wanted to do was cry, but I couldn't let myself do that either. If I cried, people would see. They'd see me as weak.

But I *was* weak, wasn't I?

As Faith brought me closer and closer to the camp, closer to a battle I couldn't fight, to people I couldn't face, to a world I couldn't handle, I felt my panic grow.

What was I getting myself into?



Marching Out

When I got back to the gypsy tribe camp, it was abuzz with anxious anticipation. To my blind eyes, it looked like a flock of birds, all different colours, flying in a flurry between the trees like a bright, feathery whirlwind. I could feel their tension, tightening the air and making me feel short of breath, and Faith tossed her head with agitation. She sidestepped warily under the saddle and I patted her shoulder to reassure her. I searched the forest for anything that made sense, and finally picked out Nolan, standing alone and looking incredibly upset.

I slid off Faith, pulling her reins over her head and leading her gently towards my distraught friend, her hooves thumping softly on the moss. Nolan glanced up immediately, ears twitching, mouth twisting into an anxious grimace, and he refused to look at me when I reached him. Instead, he held out a hand to Faith, rubbing her nose and scratching her behind the ears. She nudged him, looking for treats, but he had none and so she was content to let him scratch her, closing her eyes with pleasure.

I stood there silently, watching the expression on Nolan's face waver between chin-quivering fear and narrow-eyed anger. He was struggling to work out his feelings towards me, I knew, and he hadn't yet decided if he was still mad at me for our fight

or if his fear for our wellbeing was greater. Staring fixedly at my hand as I picked dirt out from under my fingernail, I asked tersely, “Are you ready?”

I heard him inhale sharply, heard the pain behind the action. *He’s not ready*, I thought grimly, but he answered, “Yes, I’m fine,” as if I didn’t know any better. There was a pause, his hand stopping on Faith’s forehead, and then he asked waveringly, “Are you?”

I stopped picking at my nail and my hand dropped reflexively down to the hilt of my sword. I ran my thumb along the ridged leather. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” I said with false resolve. I wanted to tell Nolan that I wasn’t ready, that I was certain this battle would end badly, but pride stopped me. I wasn’t about to admit weakness to him, not when he thought I’d given up on myself—which I very clearly had not. I wasn’t the kind of person to give up.

He stared at me then, straight on, his strange pale green, pupil-less eyes searching mine. “I don’t want to die,” he said plainly, voice devoid of emotion. “I don’t want you to die.” He stopped, forehead creasing as he thought, and then said, “You shouldn’t fight. You can’t see, or hear—”

“Shut up,” I snapped hotly. “I am going to fight. Bearskins are different. I’ll be fine.” Only half of it was a lie. It was true, that bearskins were easier to see, since they took on disguises, but the me being fine part... Without my sight, I would be seriously crippled. I knew that. For the first time, I’d be entering a fight without any idea what to expect. I was willing to face it, to take whatever was to come, and Nolan was going to have to let me. If I was going to live the rest of my life without magic, then I wanted to know I could handle it.

We stared at each other for a moment longer, both testing the other’s stubbornness, until Nolan finally turned away, walking a few paces off where he’d dropped his backpack. He sat on the ground and started digging through it, muttering to himself, and I assumed our conversation was over. I turned to leave but he called out, “Stop,” and I spun on my heel to face him.

He had found whatever he was looking for and now walked back towards me, hand held out in offering. He was holding a feather, brown with white stripes, and his eyes implored me to take it. “For protection,” he said lowly, and I carefully took it from him.

“Thank you,” I murmured, before leading Faith away. When I was far enough away from Nolan, I rebraided my hair, tying the feather onto the bottom the way he

always did. I needed all the protection I could get, and I hoped that his gesture would bring us luck. I didn't want our fight to endanger our lives.

Just as soon as I'd finished my braid, the tumbling mass of frenzied birds—the gypsy sprites—suddenly reached a peak in their panic. They began to move en masse, a few select voices crying out louder than the others. I couldn't see them clearly, but the message was obvious.

We were marching out to battle.

I exhaled, steadying myself even as I felt panic start to swim in my stomach, and thought dryly, *Ready or not, here I come.*



Seeing Red

When I saw the gypsies moving out for battle, my thoughts instinctively went to Nolan. I turned, searching for him among the flurry of wings, and saw him jogging behind the mass, also searching for me. Our eyes met and, despite our anger towards one another, we made our silent oaths to watch each others' backs. I didn't have much of a choice—he was the only being I could actually *see*—but nonetheless, our loyalty outweighed our dispute.

Adjusting my armour where it had twisted out of place, I rolled my shoulders, tested my sword in its sheath, and climbed up into the saddle. Faith saw the movement, felt the urgency, and understood what it meant, and she was dancing on the spot with anticipation. I looked again for Nolan and, seeing we were both ready, let Faith slip into a gallop after the fast-moving throng of gypsies. Nolan ran with the wind parallel to us, keeping pace easily and evenly. We plunged into the forest, the river at our backs, and our army thundered through the trees with tremendous might. I had no clue where the bearskins were hiding out but trusted the gypsies' instincts. When such a terrible foe was in their territory, they made sure to know exactly where the threat lay.

Faith followed the colourful birds unfailingly, weaving nimbly through the trees and hopping over obstacles in her path, and I stood crouched in the stirrups to gain better height and scout out our route. I was focussed more on an upcoming ditch

than the forest around me when the first garbled howl erupted from the shadows. Startled by the chilling sound, I looked behind me for the source of the sound and saw a pair of bearskins loping after us, tongues hanging from their jaws and a hungry glint in their beady eyes. They bore the mangled pelts of bears and I couldn't help but notice their twisted claws. A set of those in Faith's flank would be bad news. I whistled lowly, sending Nolan a warning on the wind, and urged Faith to go a little faster.

The more I looked around, the more bearskins I saw coming out after our warband. We were gathering them, flushing them out from beneath the trees so we could fight them all at once, drive the whole colony away. My heart started beating a little faster as I saw them pouring out. Some were running ahead of Faith and me—if they turned and saw us, we'd be hard-pressed to avoid them. But Faith galloped on bravely, keeping alert and wary of the bearskins slowly surrounding us. I could see the gypsies pulling to a stop ahead of us, flapping in a vortex amongst the trees with bearskins flooding in around them, and as Faith neared the flock, I drew my sword. It was time for action.

I glanced at Nolan one last time before riding into the battle. He was set and determined, eyes locked on the impending fight, his feathers wrapped around him and the wind at his back. Praying briefly that he would be safe, I returned my gaze to front and centre as Faith plunged into the writhing mass of bearskins and gypsies.

Trained for combat, Faith was light on her feet, avoiding swiping claws and snapping teeth while dealing her own damage with vicious kicks and bites. From her back, I swung at any bearskins that came close enough for me to reach. They were horrible to fight. They were creatures full of rage and ruthlessness, not fighting with any logic or sense of purpose, but instead writhing and clawing and snapping at any flesh around them. They were like cyclones of malicious energy. And when I managed to get a stab in, to pierce their thick, mangy hides, they screamed with unearthly pitch but didn't seem to slow down despite the injury. It only made them angrier.

Faith was used to intense battles, but this was too much for even her steady nerves. She was tense and anxious under the saddle, fighting very hard against the urge to flee, and I was having to expend more and more energy in keeping my seat on her unstable back. Blood pumping with fear and adrenaline, I tried to control her, to guide her out of danger. It struck me then that we were feeding off each other's fear, and that the bearskins in turn were getting hungrier and hungrier, sensing that very same fear. We were building a storm around us and as I began to see the enormity of it, I felt horror build inside me.

And with that horror built anger.

It swelled hot and large within me, and I dug the edge of my blade deep into the shoulder of a bearskin, snarling at it like I was a bear myself. It twisted, furious, and swiped its ugly claws at me. It missed my flesh but didn't miss Faith's—catching her on the flank, it ripped deep gashes in her beautiful pelt that spurted hot blood. I saw the cruel act and burned ever hotter. Seeing only red, I struck again at the bearskin, managing to kill it, but that had been the last straw for Faith.

Neighing with a high, terrified note, she reared desperately before plunging back towards the earth and kicking out, spinning and lurching in a panic-driven frenzy. I clung to her mane as my bubbling anger fought with my desire to help her, to comfort her. Finding it too hard to remain on her back, I slipped out of the saddle. I staggered slightly as I hit the ground, grabbed uselessly at her reins, but she was too worked up to be calmed.

Stumbling back from my mad, dangerous horse, I bumped into none other than Nolan. I turned to face him, my wrathful gaze meeting his tear-stained one, and the bearskins around us howled with a thirst for blood.



Flames

“*Alex*,” Nolan said, his voice half a whimper. I saw his chest heave with a sob as he began to break down. And I heard the snarling of the bearskins increase in volume, in response to his emotional pain.

And just as he collapsed to his knees, I felt the anger heave within me.

If he died, if he got us killed... I would *not* let him ruin my life.

Fuelled by a swelling fire deep within me, I raised my sword and leapt at the nearest bearskin. I dug my blade into the hide covering its shoulder, sinking it to the hilt in the monster’s flesh before the bearskin began to scream. It writhed, turning its head and snapping its teeth where I clung to it, and our eyes met. The creature wore the tattered scalp of a grizzly bear on its head, but beneath that was its ugly, humanoid face with the crooked teeth and red-rimmed eyes which now glared at me with feral stupidity. Its jaws closed in empty air, failing to reach me, but then another bearskin came from behind, crashing into me and knocking me off of its shoulder.

I rolled as I hit the ground and lifted my sword to take on the new bearskin. I was surrounded now, with my own circle of bearskins closing around me tighter and

tighter as I slowly stood. My anger roiled, slamming against my ribs in an effort to get me to move, to attack everything that threatened me, but I was struggling to think straight, rationally. I was *not* going to die. One of the bearskins—the one I’d injured, no less—finally let out an ugly roar and charged me, but didn’t get very far.

“*Stop it!*” Nolan screamed, and his high-pitched Wind Voice was edging on hysteria as he commanded a gale to sweep down, knocking the bearskin clear off its feet. A wordless shriek caught in his throat, Nolan came closer, entering the circle, churning the wind into a whistling vortex around me so that the bearskins found it difficult to keep their footing. I saw how bravely Nolan was acting, how strong his magic was, but I couldn’t ignore the tears streaming down his face. He probably intended to sacrifice himself to save me, using his magic to keep me safe but leaving himself open to an emotional attack.

I *did not* need to be saved.

Not by Nolan. Not by anyone. I could save myself.

So, losing all self-control, I shoved Nolan and pinned him to the ground, my blade finding its way to his throat. His spell died, the wind dissipating with fitful bursts, and he could only yelp as he found cold steel pressed to his skin and met my menacing eyes. “*Stop this,*” I commanded, my words barely recognizable as my own, they were so twisted with rage. “You are *not* going to die here. I am *not* going to watch you die, not after I did so much for you, do you hear me? You’re a damned coward, Nolan,” I snarled, and his deep eyes flickered with disbelief and anguish.

“Please Alex, why are you doing this?” he beseeched, sounding pitiful. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” I screamed at him, and then pain exploded in my shoulder as dagger-sized claws crushed through my armour and I was wrenched backwards.

The bearskin pressed me to the ground, claws slipping deeper into my shoulder, and then two more came clamouring closer, crowding around me so that I couldn’t see the sky. I could hear Nolan though, screaming madly, and then I felt the same thing he was undoubtedly feeling—the bearskin magic.

The bearskins could feel the dark, angry magic in me, knew its secrets and danger, and they sought to use it against me. The pain in my shoulder was maddening, blocking out sense and reason while bringing to life the powerful heat burning in my chest. It was consuming me, my anger—but even as it flooded my veins and filled my muscles, it was lending me a mindless, terrible strength. With that strength, I

kicked the bearskin off me, fighting to my feet and surveying those beasts that threatened me.

As I stood there, my own blood dripping into the grass, my chest heaving raggedly from all the pure *rage* that was washing over me, my mind struggled for control. I remembered threatening Nolan—*why had I done that?*—I remembered... losing my sword... somewhere. I couldn't focus. My anger was burning me alive, swallowing my thoughts... I had had enough of this. I was done. I wanted this all to *stop!* And that was when my anger truly burst free.

I raised my hands, giving some horrible shriek, and the dark magic within me found its release, escaping in a burst of sweltering flame. All around me, bearskins were engulfed in the blazing fire, and their howls filled the air as their fur was singed and their flesh was scorched. The fire devoured the grass in its path, leaving behind a black circle of death and ash. And I stood in the centre, surrounded by pain that was the result of my uncontrollable anger.

And worse than the pain that the bearskins were feeling was the reverberating agony that ripped through my system.

Clutching my ribs, struggling to breathe, I sank to my knees and desperately tried to focus, to think, to *stop*. My fingernails dug into the ashy soil, my breath squeezed through my gritted teeth with a whimper, and every nerve was alive with overwhelming dismay. Then, cutting through it all, was Nolan's terrified, pleading voice.

I looked up through my veil of pain and saw him shaking, held firm in the grip of a strong arm with a gleaming dagger—pressed to his throat. One of the bearskins had stood on two feet, her bear pelt slipping off her shoulders, and I saw that she wasn't a bearskin at all. She was a human, and on the edge of her steady knife hung Nolan's trembling life.

"Please, don't hurt her," Nolan begged the woman, those endless tears still running freely down his face. I realized that he was talking about me and felt the familiar anger and indignation rise, but I suppressed it anxiously. My fear sharpened my thoughts, cleared my head, because I realized that I was about to lose him. Nolan was inches away from leaving me. *No...*

"Oh, I won't hurt her," said the woman with a wicked smirk. "I only want you, dear." She then stepped back, dragging Nolan with her, while the bearskins came around me again, using their magic in a last attempt to crush me. This time, there

was no anger left to stir within me. I was empty, exhausted, filled only with an irresistible desire to *sleep*...

END OF PART 1
