The Ice Plague: Book 1 - The Forest of Fire

Summary

Seelie fae Eran Iliakambar has lost his family and his home to an unstoppable sea of ice bent on attacking the fae realm. All he has left is his will to find the person who created the destructive force, and bring them to justice. His determination leads him to Mosk Manytrees – Unseelie dryad – who takes responsibility. But nothing is ever as it seems in the fae realm. (Book one of three).

Notes

After 84 years (like a year and a half) it's finally here. I have a 10~ chapter buffer and I don't really have an updating schedule as yet, though I'll always aim to update on the weekend and it looks about every two weeks at least initially (because I have a permanent cancer problem).
I am so excited to start sharing this story with folks. Thank you in advance to all the readers who give it a chance, the lurkers, the commenters, the people who kudos and publically (and privately) bookmark. And also to the Faedom, without yall, this story wouldn't exist.
The magic around Eran’s wrist throbbed, the beetle-black ink of the months-old tattoo sinking deeper into his flesh. He imagined tiny metal hooks, sparking a kind of fire he could barely tolerate – and there were few fires that Eran did not love. He scratched hard, staring at the tattoo, heart leaping like popping coals in his chest. He felt like the ink should be crawling further over his warm brown skin. But no, the jagged glyphs were working, not claiming him.

He was close to his quarry, that was all.

The woodland around him was airy with the first cool breeze he’d felt in days. Cicadas lazily hummed, vibrating their legs, a pervasive shimmering sound that made Eran ache for the crickets of his homeland singing amongst the lava flows. Here though, everything was broad-leaved trees, open canopies and trunks with plump, red-and-white capped mushrooms growing at their boles. The summer brought with it many gnats and biting creatures. Eran caught glimpses of tiny fairies – no bigger than Eran’s index finger – flitting about and disappearing before Eran could get a good look at them.

Even after months of hunting, of grief and the endless thud of his own footsteps on unfamiliar ground, the diminutive creatures still filled him with wonder.

If only he could afford to linger.

Hatred was a flint inside of him. He struck it against his soul whenever he needed to motivate himself. Showered tiny bits of light in the despairing echo of the person he used to be. The person whose biggest concerns were once only the safety of his father, his people and whether or not he’d be a good leader.

But there was no one left to lead. And the Mage who had given him the tattoo had assured him there was someone to blame.

The tattoo itself had cost him dearly. The charm had been wrought from his shoulder length hair and two each of his fingernails and toenails – both now grown back, two cups of his blood, and a story that he’d spun into the air only to have it seized away from him, a void left where the story had been. Eran was no stranger to magical tattoos, but this was the only one that had hurt him so constantly, that shackled him to the very thing he loathed.

‘Haven’t others tried this?’ Eran had asked the Mage – a pangolicz, a fae covered in hard scales of keratin so strong that he need wear no clothing but charms and jewellery, and still be armoured better than most.

‘I’m sure they have,’ the Mage had said, tail curling around his stumpy feet.

‘And it hasn’t worked yet?’

‘The Kingdoms have not punished anyone for this thing you speak of.’
It wasn’t an answer, but Eran hadn’t cared. Now, the magic spoke to him in a nettling tongue and he only hoped it was speaking the truth.

He walked down a gentle slope, flat paving stones set into the grassy ground that were spaced too oddly to be intended for a creature his size. He’d seen regions he was unfamiliar with since the plague had forced him to leave everything he’d known behind. All his life he’d depended on the livestock to get around – the sturdy olcana mouflon, or the lithe kratel gazelle – or the ability of his elders to use their powers to teleport him from place to place, promising him that when he was older, he too would be able to disappear into smoke and fire and will himself anywhere in the world.

Instead, he hitched his pack and bedroll higher on his back, sweat making his shirt stick. He used almost all his funds on the spell, he couldn’t afford livestock. He certainly couldn’t afford to hire someone to teleport him as needed.

Around a shallow corner, a wooden alehouse came into view. No smoke curling lazily from its chimney – not in this weather – and made all of the same dark wood. As Eran got closer, he saw circular windows covered with uneven panes of glass, and the roof was all of a cheap, thin tile he’d seen in a village nearby. He didn’t know what the little town was called, only guessed that it was filled with the lowest of classes – underfae – and made up of poor folk. The perfect place for a villain to hide.

Anger made his fingers warm, his eyes burn. His teeth worked at the inside of his lip. Even the blisters on his feet seemed to be made of spite. The tattoo scratched at him, and he scratched back, tearing his skin open until it ached.

He gathered the rage to him, let it sharpen his vision, refine his senses. He shifted off the main path as he closed in on the establishment, his tattooed wrist shaking. With his other hand, he touched the hilt of his kh’anzar, the blade he would one day use to slice the creature’s throat open – with the Seelie King’s blessing he would bring justice to his family, his whole family.

Noises now. What sounded like the setting down of full and empty metal tankards. Laughter and speech in accents and languages he didn’t know, and some he did. He could speak common if he needed to, but these fae were speaking other tongues too. It sounded jovial. Full. Perhaps the fiend was drinking ale. The thought made a sharp bile rise to the back of Eran’s throat. He swallowed it down, felt like a spear point honed for this very moment.

The last thing he had left to do in his life.

Find the fae who did this. Bring them to justice. End them.

His father might be disappointed. But his father wasn’t there to tell him differently, and that spoke to a dull despair in his heart that rested beneath all the fury. A full, heavy stone that he wanted to tear from his chest and fling away.

Skirting around the outside of the alehouse, he heard a snatch of conversation and paused.

‘Aye, entertainment’s in the back room if you want it. Two coppers for your trouble and nothing to fear.’

‘Cept disease,’ another said, laughing broadly. Then a flurry of conversation in another language, and what must have been the barman cleared his throat.

‘No, no now, I swear it. He’s Court status, that one. He can’t catch disease, so he certainly can’t
give it to you now, can he?"

Not just an alehouse then, but a whorehouse too. He’d been to one before, though not so low an establishment as this. And it wasn’t **entirely** true that Court fae couldn’t pass on disease. They couldn’t sicken, but they could be a carrier for a short time, sicken others.

*Not my herd that got lost under a new moon*, Eran thought, disavowing himself from any responsibility to these people.

‘Must be good business for you, then?’ a woman said.

‘When he comes, we do well enow.’

Eran’s teeth worried at his lip, picked off tiny bits of dried skin. After so much time searching, listening to tales of the plague’s devastation, he hardly imagined this day would arrive. But his arm was *burning*, he was so close.

In the end it was his sense of honour that demanded he walk into the alehouse with his chin up and his shoulders square. Wearing his status and power for all to see, as his parents had taught him. So there was a silence when the door creaked shut behind him. When he made three steps into the place and thought his tattooed arm was glowing red, even though it wasn’t.

Dust motes danced in shafts of light. There was one bar that wrapped around the wall in front of him. Stained kegs of ale and dusty bottles of golden liquor on poor, wooden shelving. Only half of the fifty stools were occupied, a mix of fae within, none of them gleaming with the sort of power Eran expected to sense from the person he was seeking. Perhaps they were in one of the rooms upstairs. Which would probably mean he’d have to buy a room.

Eyes found his kh’anzar sabre and his ceremonial ythilok – the golden dagger at his waist. He knew they were sizing him up, deciding what to make of him. He still wasn’t sure what they saw when they took in the quality of his garb, the jewellery and rings he wore, the kohl around his eyes that all ambaros wore to accentuate the flame of their irises. Did they see someone pompous? Someone regal? Or someone to take advantage and steal from?

He walked straight to the bar and offered a stiff smile to the barkeep, trying to keep his breathing even and calm.

*They’re here, they’re here, they’re here, they’re-*

In his pack, metal shackles whispered to him. Rolled up in his bedroll, adding kilos to the weight he hauled every day and necessary for the task he’d set himself.

‘A room, if you please,’ Eran said, reaching into a pocket on the inside of his thin coat and placing a single clipak on the counter. The barkeep looked at it, his face gave nothing away. Eran couldn’t tell if he’d offered too much or too little, and realised in his excitement to find who he was looking for, he had forgotten to wait and see what the price was.

‘Ow many nights?’ the barkeep said, looking up with narrowed eyes, rounded pig’s ears twitching, a mouth cragged from work and laughter taking on a wrinkled frown.

‘How many will this get me?’

‘Two, if you like,’ the barkeep said.

Nearby, someone snorted quietly, said nothing. Eran didn’t look at them, he could afford to lose
money for something so important. He’d search the rooms, maybe the monster was sleeping.

He blinked when he heard a loud thud against the wall behind the bar. He looked to the right, where a closed, heavy door was barred to the public.

‘That’ll be two coppers more then,’ the barkeep said, eyes sliding sidelong to where Eran was studying the heavy horizontal slat of wood, keeping whoever was in there from getting out.

‘Dick-warmer’s not complimentary,’ a patron said, his voice slurring from drink.

‘Just the room. Two nights,’ Eran said, and the barkeep peered at him, tilting his head and looking not at Eran, but at Eran’s eyes.

Eran refused to look away. Held his ground.

‘What are you then?’ the barkeep said, squinting.

‘Tired,’ Eran clipped off.

The barkeep nodded, shrugged as if to say he’d meant no harm, and then rattled off the particulars; the location of the water pump should he need it – no magic here for warm water or showers, the location of candles and no extra linens among the many caveats. Eran nodded to all of it, and then made his way to the left of the bar, where a staircase creaked under his every step, and two of the slats of wood bowed alarmingly under his feet.

There was a door to open and close behind him again, effectively shutting out most of the noise below. A narrow corridor – wouldn’t fit two people side by side – and tiny doorways leading off into five rooms. Each door closed with no lock provided, the brass of the doorknob weathered and a section of ceiling missing, so that he could peer straight up into a cobwebbed attic. This place would leak in winter, be draughty.

_Underfae_, he thought scathingly, frowning. Underfae who didn’t know how to treat their betters. But he’d be done with the place soon enough.

He walked as silently as possible on old floorboards to the final closed door – his room, according to the inn-keep – and let himself in. Stared at the sagging thin mattress, looked at the window so thin it would be better served as a balustraria for bow warriors in a military stronghold. He eased his pack off his shoulders, ignoring the damage he’d done to the skin of his wrist where the tattoo had been etched into him. He quickly undid the ties of his bedroll and placed his fingers on the chains so that they wouldn’t clink. Then, he closed his eyes and looked for the core of power inside of himself and lifted his other hand, only opening his eyes when he knew his skin was glowing, a heat haze coming off his fingertips.

The pangolicz Mage had asked Eran if he were strong enough to catch such a criminal. Eran had assured him he was.

Or he would die trying.

He extinguished the heat in his hand with a thought, swallowing as it dispersed like smoke into his lungs. Then, he left his own door open as he went to the door closest to his and placed his hand on the doorknob. His heart fluttered and leapt, his breath caught.

Soon, it would all be over.

But the crack of room he saw through the barely open door was empty. Smelled musty and unused.
Onto the next door, his heart beating harder now.

This room too, empty.

Eran forced himself to take deep, slow breaths. Reminded himself of years of hunting and hunting lessons. But this was nothing like his usual prey – finding gazelle or leopards or the finely scaled almeucs – there would never be another hunt like this one.

If the tattoo on his wrist could make a sound, he thought it would whistle like one of the old kettles, boiling away.

The third room was also empty. This one held a larger bed – it was the only thing different about the room itself. So far, all the mattresses sagged. The heavy air stunk rich and thick of mouldering straw. Normally fae buildings took care of themselves, but it depended on how much energy was put into them. This had no beloved guardian protecting it.

At the final door he placed his palm flat and looked at the reddening rash around the tattoo. Here. It had to be here. A sound like a growl crept into his throat, but he swallowed before it was voiced.

He turned the brass doorknob – battered and dented against his hand – and opened the door.

Another empty room. Another sagging mattress.

He stared at his wrist.

Was the spell wrong? It couldn’t be. Not with what he’d paid for it. No. He hadn’t gone after some cheap street-mage, but a Mage respected by his entire clan. The pangolicz wouldn’t have lied to him. Maybe the villain had an enchantment on them to deter seeking spells. But the tattoo was supposed to circumvent anything of that nature, Eran had been clear.

Eran squeezed his eyes shut, his breathing ran away from him. Unbidden, he heard the distant sounds of shrieking and the odd crunch, pop and crackle of ice that would not listen to flame. He felt the ground rumbling and heard the high hiss of extinguished lava, rendered basalt in but moments. He felt his brother clawing at his forearm, could see the furrows appearing in his flesh. Saw determination on his father’s face and waited for him to survive to tell Eran what to do.

Because that was what his father had always done – survived and told him what to do. Survived his horn being sawn off by the Traitor King. Survived imprisonment. Survived the dirtiest wars and the dirtiest Seelie military in history. Survived.

And so the ice had swallowed his father whole, and the determination hadn’t left his face, and Eran could feel the shuddering cold in his lungs as it crested like a wall above him, containing the dark shapes of his family who even with the fire living inside of them, could not make it crack or open or melt.

A tiny piece fell from the wall of ice, touched him. Seared him with an agony so fresh and cruel that his mind had gone white from it and all his training evaporated as he wailed.

He looked down at his wrist, tried to brush that endless cold away, and then his vision cleared and he saw not ice, but the tattoo. The dark band of glyphs covering the odd scar the ice had given him.

The anger returned. He felt heat chase away the shakiness. He hadn’t had an episode for days. He was sure he was done with them. He touched fingers to his throat and looked around the upper level of the alehouse and bit at the inside of his lip again, trying to think of what to do.
He walked into each of the rooms, and in the very last room, the sensation in his wrist was strongest. He checked every corner. Finally, he lay flat on the floorboards and swung his wrist around until he felt it like a magnet pulled to its lodestone. There, on the first level. Right below him.

Whoever the cause of that wall of ice was, they were behind that barred door. Getting some relief from a whore, like they’d done nothing wrong at all.

Eran went quickly downstairs – the slats shrieking at one point – and placed two coppers on the sticky bar. The barkeep looked at them, and Eran tilted his head towards the door.

‘You want to wait? Or you like to watch?’

‘Watch,’ Eran said, ignoring the low whistle behind him. He’d come too far to feel embarrassed. The episode had left him with a steeliness in himself. A fire behind his eyes that flickered bright and gold. The barkeep was staring at him again, at his eyes, he seemed paler than before.

‘All right,’ the barkeep said slowly. ‘You’ll be barred in after. Knock three times once you’re done. As you like.’

Eran nodded, stared as the heavy bar was slid sideways and the door swung inwards. He blinked into almost complete darkness. A reek unlike any other washed over him. A patina of days of sweat and come, the salts of sex intermingling and gone stale and rancid, rotting in the shadows. The room itself held no windows, and as he stepped into it – his wrist hurting almost as much as it had when the ice touched it – he saw the faint outlines of two people.

One, the prostitute with his back on a low bench and his head tipped back so that his face couldn’t be seen. Tired, weak breaths pushed out of his throat as the other – the cur he had been looking for – rutted into him.

Eran hadn’t been anywhere so revolting in his life, and when the door was barred shut behind him, he resisted the urge to whirl around. Because he was a warrior, and a chieftain’s nephew, and a War General’s son, and he did not flinch.

He called fire to his hands and grabbed the man humping away – still fully clothed but for his pants pulled lower on his hips – and began to snarl, a deep, beastly hunger inside of him; and then he felt it.

His little finger brushed against the quivering body beneath. The tattoo sung. No longer a scratchy, itchy animal trying to burrow out of his skin but a lucid drop, azure in his mind’s eye, as cool as fresh water after hunting beneath the desert’s blistering eye.

Eran stared at the limp form on the bench. Then grunted as fingernails dug into his shoulders and he was flung against the wall. He turned, withdrew his kh’anzar. The metal humming free of its sheath.

‘I paid!’ the man growled. ‘I fuckin’ paid!’

There was no time for this. Eran shoved at the barred door, and it burst off its hinges at the force of his Court strength. He grabbed the man’s upper arm with a hand that glowed red, and the man shrieked in pain even as his flesh burned.

‘Get out!’ Eran shouted.

Then yells of alarm. Eran made out the word ‘fire’ in the common tongue, amongst other alarmed
sentences in languages he didn’t know. The barkeep was staring at him in horror.

‘I knew it! I knew it! Fire fae!’

Eran stared at them in confusion. Gaze darting between the patrons hurrying for the exit, and the figure on the bench who didn’t seem to be in a state to go anywhere.

The barkeep had skirted around the outside of his bar and was heading towards the exit himself.

‘You’ll bring it here!’ the barkeep said, hysteric making his voice thin. ‘You’ll bring it here! The plague! The plague!’

In minutes, the alehouse was evacuated and Eran was left standing, his own breath audible in the silence. The breath of the person behind him also audible, a slight wheeze to it.

Eran’s hands glowed as he walked back into the room. A reddish-dull light cast onto the wood around him.

‘Nn,’ the figure on the bench said, a kind of protest. ‘N-no f-fire. I s-said.’

‘Why?’ Eran said, reaching out and wrapping a hand that was too hot around the fae’s ankle. ‘Can’t stand to see yourself?’

The fae made a warbling sound of panic and pain, tried to yank his ankle away, animal sounds of distress coming from his throat. It was a good act, but one Eran didn’t buy for a second. The Mage’s spell had worked. Eran yanked him from the bench and the fae fell heavily to the floor, didn’t even try to fight him. Perhaps he’d bled out all his magic when he’d made the ice that devoured without end.

Eran grabbed his ankle with a cooler hand and dragged him into better light and then stared down in revulsion.

For the creature – whatever it was – was covered in a crust of filth that spoke of days locked away in that room. Layers of come and other fluids, clustering thick and foul. Eran swallowed hard and saw – where the caked fluids were not too thick – bruises in the shape of handprints, fingers. Saw bite marks both fresh and old.

‘You can fuck me,’ the fae said, though he’d rolled into a ball now. ‘Just no fire. P-please. Fuck me. Please.’

‘You think this is funny?’ Eran said, staring at him. He placed his boot on the creature’s shoulder and rolled him onto his back, pinned him there and stared at a fine-boned face that was hardly recognisable underneath what covered it. ‘You think I’ll pity you? When you’re the one responsible for it? The ice plague?’

At that, the fae opened the eye that wasn’t completely glued together. A grey-green iris stared at him, eyelids red-rimmed and bloodshot, from alcohol or…something else.

‘I did,’ the fae said. ‘I did cause it.’

Hearing the admission – even in that frail, weakened voice – stole his breath, a hand reached into his lungs and took away his ability to breathe. For seconds he just stood there, feeling the beast of fire inside of him stir and turn, desiring only to burn. Then he gulped down air, and the flames in him stirred hot and huge and then guttered.
‘You did,’ Eran said, echoing him. ‘I’m here to kill you for it.’

‘Yes,’ the fae said. ‘Kill me for it.’

The creature wasn’t even struggling. Nude, affected by some bark-like skin condition on his arms and shins, battered and stinking like refuse and he wasn’t even giving Eran the fight that he’d earned. Instead this…this boy. He looked even younger than Eran was, and Eran had only matured ten years ago. Two hundred and twenty two now, and still considered a boy by his father when he’d died in the ice.

‘Fuck me first,’ the fae said, and then in a grotesque shift, an odd smile slid across his face and he started laughing. Though the wracking sounds didn’t sound quite like laughter, the smile made it clear what it was supposed to be.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

But the fae didn’t answer him, and Eran didn’t care. He felt no pity for the thing before him.

So Eran found rope behind the bar and tied the fae to it by the wrists, looping the rope through a metal rung before running up the stairs to the second level and getting all his belongings. Everything he had left. He sprinted back down, taking the stairs three at a time, worried that this creature would affect such a pitiable state in order to make hunters underestimate him. But no, he was still there, wrists slowly changing hue with how tight Eran had made the ropes.

At the first click of the metal shackle around the creature’s wrist, Eran felt the startle. Saw the way the fae turned his head to look at him, thick brows pulling down.

‘Wh-?’

‘You’re coming with me to the Seelie Court, where you will stand trial for causing this malicious plague of ice that has killed so many, and then so help me, you will see justice and be killed.’

Eran expected a fight. He expected outrage. He’d even adjusted – in the past few minutes – his hopes to factor in a weary acceptance of one’s fate. Even that he was ready for.

What he didn’t expect was the way the fae’s eye fluttered shut to join the one next to it, followed by the nod of acceptance.

‘Okay then,’ the fae said. ‘You can fuck me on the way.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'I'll Not Feel Pity':

‘I mean he’s empty,’ the brownie whispered. ‘Scoured out. I’ll not…I’ll not. Aye. Tak tent o’ time ere taks tent of thee.’

‘What are you talking about? Is that even the common tongue?!’ Eran exclaimed.

But the brownie stared between them both in dismay, then spun slowly counterclockwise on the tip of one toe until he vanished into thin air. Teleporting away.
‘What in blazes was that-’

‘Take care of how you spend your time, before you die,’ the fae behind him said, his voice a monotone.
I'll Not Feel Pity

Chapter Notes

Hiya folks, since I'm keeping up well with my buffer of chapters, I can afford to update this week! There'll be an update next weekend too, and then it should settle into chapters once every two weeks again. The benefits of not having a fixed schedule! :) (Also your feedback has blown me away, I hope you all continue to enjoy this journey! In that angsty/hurt/comforty way we all do.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

The fae was pliant and unresponsive. He didn’t make eye contact, he didn’t attempt to talk, he didn’t try and cover his nudity. Didn’t look like he cared a whit about the heavy shackles, when they had to be hurting him.

It was tempting to begin dragging him to the Seelie palace immediately, but that was at least a week of travel away, and Eran couldn’t stand the reek.

Behind the alehouse he found an old water pump tucked into a corner of wooden panelling. Around it were stacked old kegs that had once held ale, ready to be rolled away and reused again, no doubt. On a rickety set of shelves screwed into the wall, he found rags and unlabelled stained bottles that were filled with liquids that didn’t look like alcohol. There was also a broken clock and half a horse sculpture, sawn in two, the back legs nowhere to be seen.

Eran primed the pump and the water began to splash heavily into the bucket made available. He turned to look at his prey.

The fae just stood there – not staring at Eran, nor at the forest where escape might beckon. Instead, he looked at some of the panels of wood that made the walls of the alehouse. He didn’t even seem to see them. A gnat flew onto his face and crawled in circles on his cheek, eventually stopping. The fae didn’t bat it away. And when the gnat flew off again and left a red mark on his cheek from a bite, Eran frowned. The fae hadn’t even flinched or blinked at it.

There was something off about him, and it went beyond his odd and unpredictable behaviours. Eran’s own innate power, that gift of fae sense and ability, felt like it wanted to crawl away from the fae. There was something unnatural about him. Eran’s skin was pimpled with gooseflesh. If the fae had reached up and dug his fingers into his cheek and peeled off his face, revealed some kind of underworld demon beneath it, Eran wouldn’t have been surprised.

The chain clanked and rattled as Eran shook it, gaining the fae’s attention finally. The creature looked at him, eyes empty.

Eran pointed to the rags and the water pump.

‘Wash yourself. I’ll not deliver you to the Seelie King looking like you do.’
There was a part of Eran that just wanted to be done with it. Now that the tattoo was no longer shrieking at him, he felt the wetness of it oozing where he’d scratched it. He was tired from having pushed himself so hard, from the months of travel that were quite unlike the short hunting expeditions he’d experienced back home.

It would be so easy to wrap his palm around the hilt of his kh’anzar, slide the sabre free, cut the creature’s head from his neck.

Would the ice stop then?

Eran didn’t know. He grimaced. That was why he needed to take the fae to the Court. Not just for his own honour, but to understand what was happening. If it could be undone. If those dark shapes of bodies in the ice could be removed and have life breathed back into them. If the ice was sentient as some claimed, if it was alive, then maybe the fae it ate could be alive too.

A wash of shame moved through him when he startled at the fae’s slow movements. He dropped one of the chains, holding onto a single chain that connected to the fae’s wrist. Watched as the fae grabbed several of the rags and then stared down at the water bucket, as though trying to…as though trying to figure out how it worked.

Eran stared at him.

Maybe the fae had made the plague of ice because there was something wrong with his mind. Maybe he’d burnt through his magic and created this horrid evil mass, because his own thoughts were corrupted.

But eventually the fae started wringing out one of the rags and then running it over his skin. Slowly. Weakly. He didn’t even look at what he was doing, and he was missing great tracts of dried semen and sweat.

A few more minutes and Eran battled with the irritation that bit at him like tiny sparks.

He stood abruptly – the fae didn’t even flinch – and yanked the rag from his hands. The fae went pliant again. Didn’t even lean away or fight him when Eran started scrubbing.

Once he started, he couldn’t stop. And he watched as the water in the bucket got murkier and dirtier, felt like he would be rinsing and scrubbing for hours. It was everywhere – and every now and then he’d see flecks of red or pink or brown; blood dried and fresh. The floor around them was a mess of watery filth, and Eran frowned at it. Then he drew his concentration back to the task. He had to pick up the bucket and empty it three times, the water got so dirty.

He hadn’t intended to clean the fae’s genitals, but he started doing it without thinking – perhaps because the fae acted as though they were no more important to him than the rest of his body. He didn’t hiss or flinch, even though Eran had to be hurting him. Instead, he kept staring ahead at the wooden panels. Staring through them.

Even the fae’s hair got a seeing to, Eran shoving him down to his knees and scrubbing the sweat out of it that had made it straw-like. That was when Eran realised that the creature’s hair was two-toned. A pale brown at the base that terminated in a bottle green that could have been dye growing out. Eran splayed it over his fingertips and stared at it.

‘Are you a dryad?’ Eran said. He’d never seen a dryad before, only heard stories about them. But the green hair and the bark-like growths made him think that perhaps that’s what this fae was.

Weren’t they pacifists?
‘Answer me,’ Eran snapped.

‘Aur,’ the fae said, his voice empty. ‘Aur dryad.’

Eran wracked his brain, thinking where he’d heard that word before. Then he remembered that Aur dryads were the custodians of the Aur forest – the mythological world forest. And Unseelie. Well, that was definitely another tick in the column of this creature being guilty. Eran kept washing his hair until the water ran clean, and then dragged a newly dampened rag over the fae’s face several times, eventually needing to rub at one of his eyes to unstick the dried come gluing it together. The stuff was awful to clean away.

By the time he was done, the fae’s skin was pinked from the scrubbing. The bruises stood out in stark relief against his paleness. Eran pursed his lips and realised the fae would burn in the sun in a way that Eran didn’t have to worry about.

‘Where’s your clothing?’ Eran asked, picking up the second chain where it coiled on the floor and dunking that into the refreshed bucket of water for good measure.

The fae laughed. The sound weak and empty at first, then gaining strength. It lacked all humour, and Eran stared at him, perturbed. The laughter petered off, and then the fae took a breath and it started again, weak but not dying away. Breath after breath of that laughter, and Eran’s skin crept in response to it.

But the fae moved wherever the chains pulled him, and he followed without complaint. He stared off – silent again – as Eran rooted around in the alehouse and found a threadbare shirt and pants that seemed like the right fit for the fae, so perhaps they were his clothes after all. Then, he set out on his journey.

A couple of hours later, Eran’s body felt colder and at first he blamed the strangeness of the fae and whatever his creepy magic was, then realised he was being paranoid. The sun was going to set soon. That was all. They’d have to make camp – but he didn’t want to make it near the village. Even if there were beds and beer, villagers that ran away with that much fear in their hearts tended to be the ones that would find weapons later.

And they’d fled from him. Perhaps it was true then, people really were blaming fire fae for the monstrous ice that crept preternaturally fast along the ground and sought out fae to devour. Eran felt an ache in his chest. The fire fae themselves all knew that the ice was attacking them. Why would they call that upon themselves?

His bedroll and belongings were on his back again, and he carried both of the chains in his hand. They hurt his palm. The iron in them made his muscles ache. If he got a chance, he’d swap the chains out for ones that were tungsten made. But the chances that he’d find a metalsmith who worked in tungsten, the chances that he could afford it…

Eran sighed and made his way back through the broad-leaved forest, trusting his internal compass to orient himself in the direction of the Seelie palace. He’d studied the maps, and he had a crude one drawn. But his sense of direction was good.

Behind him, the fae followed. Chains clinking with every step. Sometimes his steps faltered and Eran would tense through, thinking he was feinting and getting ready to escape or lunge – but it never happened. Every time Eran looked over his shoulder, the fae just stared ahead, looking weary, face empty.

His features were fine, not crude. His long-lashed eyes were large and Eran wondered if they had
ever been expressive. His nose was strong, the bridge of it sharp. His hair dried stiff, not limp, mostly sweeping in a wave away from his head, occasionally tufting here and there. He was lithe. His ribs showed too much to be healthy. He’d been neglecting himself.

That night as Eran set up camp and left the fae chained to a boulder, he learned something more about his quarry.

Eran unthinkingly thrust his hand into a pile of sticks and branches he’d collected and called heat and fire to his fingers, feeling that powerful burn that never hurt him. The wood smoked, then lit with a jumping, cheerful flame that combatted the growing dusk.

The fae shrieked. His voice broke and he shrieked again, and then he was screaming over and over, horrible animal sounds as he stared at the flames and yanked at his wrists. Eran stared in bewilderment, then realised that the creature was going to dislocate his joints if he didn’t stop. That wasn’t a reasoned escape attempt, it was irrational instinct, and he withdrew his hand from the fire, extinguished the heat from his hand and ran over-

-And made things worse.

The fae stared at him now. Not with hatred or resentment but with terror. He’d already cut his wrists on the shackles, blood staining his skin.

Eran reached for him and the fae scrabbled backwards, unable to get his feet under himself properly. Everything Eran tried made it worse. Until finally Eran grit his teeth together and slapped the creature hard across the face. His head snapped sideways, temple knocking into the stone. But he stilled, slumped.

Eran breathed hoarsely, afraid the creature was unconscious. But no, eventually the fae looked up at him, eyes glittering with tears, cheeks wet. Pupils far too wide – terrified. The creature’s breathing was ragged and he moaned under his breath, still trying to lean as far away from Eran as possible.

It was hard not to laugh then. Not at the creature’s misery. But at the absurdity of it. The whole world growing scared of ice and glaciers, and here was a fae who was terrified of fire.

Then a sudden, spasmodic swallow. Eran took a step backwards and stared at the fae in horror.

What if he’d made the plague of ice because he was scared of fire? Because of a stupid phobia?

‘What in all fires is wrong with you?’ Eran said, his voice a rasp.

The creature turned into the boulder and shuddered, said nothing. He covered his head with his arms protectively, and leaned as far away from the fire as he could.

Eran spent the evening as close to the heat as possible, recharging the fire in his own body, sometimes placing his hands within the flames and breathing in the smoke directly. He thought of the rituals he’d be doing back home. The votive candles he’d be lighting with the tips of his fingers and the prayers he’d be whispering, but he felt like he’d betray something of himself and his people to share those things with whatever he’d captured.

So he whispered the words in his head and tried to think of nothing more than flames and heat – because all his other thoughts hurt too much.

*
The second day he foraged for food as he walked. He could eat almost anything provided it was charred first, and he was shamed by how it pleased him to hold snails and tubers in his hands and burn them as the fae behind him faltered and tried to tug away during those moments. Because now Eran knew he was much stronger than the fae. Those sharp pulls on the chain – even as they upset his gait – gave him tiny slivers of vindication. Little moments of pleasure which burst through him to know that he was making the fae afraid.

They were followed by a slinking, cold feeling. He imagined the look in his mother’s eyes, if she knew he was taking pleasure in someone else’s pain.

‘You might have an Unseelie father, Eran. But you are not Unseelie, remember that,’ she’d say.

But he couldn’t help himself. He’d had months to think of the torture he wanted to visit upon the one that had ruined everything. And the creature had admitted his guilt. As unlikely a criminal as he seemed to be on the surface, Eran’s instincts screamed at him that this creature was at the core of it, he was somehow – in some way – more awful than anyone could understand.

That evening, Eran handed the fae some uncooked plants he’d pulled up from the ground. Unseelie dryads ate plants, didn’t they? The fae took the food and ate it without looking at it, chewed mechanically, didn’t say thank you, and didn’t seem to mind whether he was being fed or not.

*  

Eran didn’t dare sleep, secretly hoping he could wait out the week and sleep once he’d delivered the fae to the right hands. Then, perhaps, he’d sleep forever. Maybe his mother and father would be waiting for him.

Summer had swelled fat and hot once more, the air thick with steam and insects, the sounds of many grasshoppers and cicadas, along with the occasional chirrup-chatting of birds filled his ears. The grass was green and verdant beneath his feet. This wasn’t a desert summer, but one that belonged to the boreal forests, and it felt strange. He kept on a long-sleeved shirt and his coat, and he kept the worst of the heat at bay by circulating it towards his feet, where it would ground into the earth.

They stopped by a babbling river, where Eran drank mouthful after mouthful cupped cool in his hands. The fae did nothing at all until Eran told him to drink. Then he obediently scooped the water up and licked it off his palms, even as he lost most of it through shaking fingers.

Other fae didn’t stop them. Seeing one fae leading another by chains was unusual, but intruding on the business of others was considered the height of rudeness amongst the Seelie. And these were mostly Seelie lands, filled with fae that cared for honour and justice and what was right. So he got some strange looks from odd creatures peering out of burrows, or between branches, or even sharing the same deer path that he was using. But no one spoke to him, and he spoke to no one.

That was how it went until mid-afternoon, when a shrub before them danced with activity – Eran freezing, hand on the hilt of his kh’anzar – before a small brownie slipped out from behind it. He was four feet tall, wore a pointed pale brown hat with a wide brim, and had eyes that seemed alit with good humour. He pranced directly into Eran’s path, then capered back and forth, pointing at Eran.

‘Who are you, then? With a prisoner that…ooh, ooh now!’

The brownie looked behind him and stared, his dusky brown skin blanching, turning bluish.
‘Ooh!’

‘What is it?’ Eran said, staring at him. For the brownie’s eyes had gone unusually wide and his lips peeled back and revealed tiny, stubby teeth.

‘He’s empty! He’s empty!’ the brownie shrieked. ‘Ow’d you find- Nae- Horrors, Sir! What horrors! Years of war old Luridan has known. Years. Ne’er has I seen someone who’s empty. He’s nothing! He’s nothing at all!’

Eran looked back at the fae, who was standing there in chains, not watching the brownie who was clearly distressed, but looking at his own feet.

‘What do you mean?’ Eran said.

‘I’ll boak!’ the brownie – Luridan – said. Then he turned and retched and nothing came out. But he paused for several seconds before straightening. ‘Then I’ll not boak after all. Luridan’s made of stronger stuff than he thought. But not strong enough for this. Abandon it, Sir! Abandon it! It’s not real! Don’t be a galoot, now.’

Eran pulled on the chains hard and the fae staggered forward a step and didn’t bother looking up.

‘Michty me! Would you look at that, then,’ the brownie breathed. ‘An’ a story you’ve given me, and me nothing to give you in return now. Abandon it, Sir. It’s empty.’

‘You mean he’s an illusion?’ Eran said, frustrated. ‘What are you trying to say?’

*Never trust a brownie to speak in a straight line,* Eran thought. The stories were right then. He didn’t encounter many brownies in his homeland.

‘I mean he’s *empty,*’ the brownie whispered. ‘Scoured out. I’ll not…I’ll not. Aye. Tak tent o’ time ere taks tent of thee.’

‘What are you talking about? Is that even the common tongue?!’ Eran exclaimed.

But the brownie stared between them both in dismay, then spun slowly counter-clockwise on the tip of one toe until he vanished into thin air. Teleporting away.

‘What in blazes was that—’

‘Take care of how you spend your time, before you die,’ the fae behind him said, his voice a monotone.

Eran spun around, the chains slick with sweat in his hands.

‘What?’

‘It’s what he said,’ the fae said calmly. ‘“Take care of how you spend your time, before you die.”’

‘What was he talking about?’ Eran demanded.

But the fae said nothing else no matter how Eran shouted at him. Eventually, he made a sound of frustration and yanked hard on the chains, forcing the fae behind him to walk.

He felt thoroughly shaken, even his lungs felt cold. He tried to breathe heat into them, sucking down mouthfuls of oxygen, but nothing helped. Something clammy had stolen into him, left him feeling slimy with it.
He couldn’t help but look over his shoulder at the fae behind him, rage and fear mixing together – but nothing happened for the rest of the day.

That evening, Eran gave the fae nothing to eat and watched to see what he’d do.

He did nothing at all.

But as Eran leaned against a tree nearby – the fae tied to a tree stump – he noticed the fae seemed a bit more aware than usual. Eventually, after looking around at his surroundings, and looking down at the manacles on his wrists, he looked over at Eran. The direct eye contact was disconcerting. His eyes were almost the colour of rain clouds, pale grey tinged with green.

‘Fuck me,’ the fae said, not in shock, but in appeal. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘I can’t think of anything more revolting,’ Eran said. The shaken feeling had returned, because who behaved like this? And why?

‘I need it,’ the fae said, a faint hint of desperation in his voice, though his expression remained impassive. ‘I need it. It feeds me.’

‘No,’ Eran said. ‘Now be quiet. I don’t need another reason to kill you. Don’t give me one.’

‘It’s just sex,’ the fae said softly.

‘No!’ Eran shouted.

Nearby, an owl hooted in alarm.

‘Then what’s the point of you?’ the fae said, and he shifted until he was rolled on his side.

A few minutes later, his breathing was slow and steady, and Eran stared in amazement. Had his captive just gone to sleep? After a conversation like that?

Eran shoved the heel of his hand against his forehead and groaned softly, a headache creeping up on him. He felt sickened. Queasy. The burnt food he’d eaten sat unsteadily in his gut. He watched the fae shiver in the cool evening and didn’t like how it discomfited to see him lying there on the forest floor. He deserved it – and much worse!

Eventually, Eran scooped out a depression in the damp soil and with some kindling, lit a small fire. He buried his hands in it and tried to focus on the chants that would keep him whole and grounded.

Instead, he listened to the whimpers of distress coming from nearby. The sounds that only started once Eran lit the fire, even though the fae never woke once.

* 

Thursday, and Eran roused to an irritation that made him feel like spikes and fur were brushing against the insides of his skin. He could feel a beast inside of him and he knew exactly what it looked like. Horns where he had no horns. Keratinous scales and wicked claws that curved more wickedly than his kh’anzar. The beast would breathe fire and smoke with every breath, it would lose all control, and if he set it free, it would burn the forest down and rip his captive apart.

He was angry that his prisoner had inspired this, even though Eran had spent years keeping his beast at bay. Anger at himself that he’d lost so much emotional control. He wanted to stomp down upon himself, but even the urge to punish himself in fury was the beast exerting its control over
him.

So he forced himself to breathe deeply, and he jerked the fae’s manacles by the chains until he woke with a start, and didn’t wait for him to lose that groggy expression before he pulled them both onto the deer path again.

Three days more and they’d be at the Seelie palace. Three days, he could sleep, hunt properly, and he wouldn’t know how to avoid his grief any longer. He looked forward to delivering the fae to the Seelie Court. He dreaded it with every step.

The ground changed in the afternoon. Became slippery clay and uneven rocks, and the fae behind him slipped many times, eventually his shins were mud-splattered. Even Eran had problems with the surface, not familiar with how to walk on the sticky stuff. In the summer heat, some of the organisms in the clay had started to rot, and the place stunk of sulphur and methane. His shoes were caked with a dark brown-grey that made his feet squelch with every step.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Eran muttered, looking ahead.

‘That’s why fae teleport,’ the fae behind him said, staggering to his feet after having lost his footing again. It was obvious he was physically weak. Eran had noticed that his hands always tremored, even when he didn’t seem terrified.

‘I’m sorry?’ Eran said, turning around to face him. ‘You’re talking now?’

‘No,’ the fae said, face sullen. ‘Unless you’re going to fuck me?’

‘That’s what I’m going to do,’ Eran said, staring at him. ‘I’m going to stick my cock in the thing that killed my family. Can’t wait.’

‘Me either,’ the fae said, staring at him with that blank expression that Eran wanted to smack off his face. He gritted his teeth, felt smoke building in his throat and with force of will, swallowed it down until his lungs burned.

Eran yanked the chains hard enough that the fae fell to his knees again, then almost winced at the sound of his shin hitting a rock.

All the fae did was hold steady for several seconds, his breathing shaky. Then he tipped his head slightly and opened his mouth wide, and the offering was so blatant – that mouth opening towards Eran’s waist – that Eran felt nausea crawl all the way up the back of his spine until he thought he’d throw up the meagre breakfast he ate.

‘Fucking walk,’ Eran snarled, dragging him bodily along the ground for several steps before the fae managed to get his legs under himself and follow.

But the bad mood was upon him and wouldn’t drag its claws free. Even when the ground started to change to grass and proper soil three hours later, he felt sticky and frustrated. How could the creature behind him have caused so much damage and be so flippant about it? Why wasn’t he fighting back? If he felt guilty, why didn’t he act it?

So as they passed yet another perfectly sun-dappled patch of grass, a lazy air sitting squat upon them like a toad, Eran stopped walking and turned to face his captive.

‘Give me a name, at least,’ Eran said. ‘So I can tell the Seelie King who to kill.’

‘Mosk,’ the fae said, shrugging. ‘Does it matter?’
Eran laughed shortly, shook the chains until Mosk looked up.

‘If it matters to me, it matters.’

Mosk shrugged again. The gall of it, that this creature in his ragged shirt and clay-spattered pants, this criminal, would respond to everything with this indifference. Eran’s nostrils flared and he forced Mosk closer, until there were only three steps separating them.

‘What did you do? How did you create the plague of ice?’

Mosk looked away. His face impassive. A tiny tic in his jaw gave him away.

‘What did you do?’ Eran said. ‘They’re going to interrogate you at the Seelie Court you know. They’ll have a Reader that can peer all inside your head and rip every single terrible thing you’ve ever done or thought or felt right out of you.’

A shudder crept through his body, making the first few links of the chain clink musically. He tried not to think about that time. When the Seelie Court had been paranoid of anyone connected to the Unseelie – and he’d tried to understand their side of things, and he did understand it really. But finding himself in front of the Seelie King’s interrogator because his father was an Unseelie War General, that was- Eran covered that part of his mind with smoke, hid it away. He didn’t want to remember.

‘They have Mages there,’ Eran continued, hating that he was reacting more to his words than Mosk was. ‘Stronger than you.’

Mosk’s eyebrows lifted, and his gaze slid sidelong to meet Eran’s. Then he looked away again.

‘Tell me what you did!’ Eran shouted, and Mosk didn’t react.

So Eran did the only thing he knew would make Mosk react. He called heat to his hands until his fingers were glowing, he sucked down oxygen and breathed out smoke.

Mosk stumbled backwards and Eran yanked the chains up high so that Mosk hung from his wrists, and then jerked Mosk towards him and breathed smoke into his face. Mosk’s eyes widened, Eran saw how his pupils grew until there was nothing but terror and fear sweat left. Then Mosk jerked back uncontrollably, hurting his wrists once more, screaming in a high, thin voice that made Eran feel far too powerful over this creature that pretended so much indifference.

‘Let’s talk,’ Eran said, his throat burning. ‘What did you do?’

‘Please!’ Mosk screamed. ‘Please! Please! Let me go! I’ll do anything! Please! Stop! Stop it! Stop!’

‘I’ll stop if you tell me what you did,’ Eran said calmly.

A weak wail ripped out of Mosk’s throat but had no volume behind it. Eran dragged Mosk’s body higher and then closer until there was nothing but inches between them, and he let fire lick out of his mouth. Mosk trembled so violently that Eran’s arm was shaking.

‘Okay!’ Mosk shouted, trying to twist away from the fire. Blood dripped down his wrists. ‘I don’t- I can’t- There’s- I was standing there when it came. Talking to my brother. My father was nearby tending to his mace and he put so much care into it and I wondered if he would ever look at me like he looked at that weapon oh I know he loved me but he loved me like a War General, fierce and strong, and then the ice came and there was so much screaming oh gods...’
Eran stared at him, feeling like some weapon had planted itself in his chest and left him cold. The
fire and smoke disappeared from his mouth. Mosk was staring at him, a horror on his face that felt
like it was taunting Eran’s own fear.

‘I tried to pull my brother free,’ Mosk gasped, ‘but the ice had him and it wouldn’t respond to my
fire, it wouldn’t respond to my fire! And my father looking so determined because he was
invincible, invulnerable, we all knew it, so determined. The great One Horn who would have been
chieftain if it wasn’t for his brother and I knew he wouldn’t die so how- so how-’

The fear snapped and before Eran was aware of it, he had a hand on Mosk’s shoulder and was
squeezing, and Mosk was yelping over and over again like a beaten dog. Eran smelled burning
flesh.

All at once, Eran flung Mosk away from him, bits of fabric and flesh sticking to his hand. He
gulped down mouthfuls of air and then sunk to his knees, staring.

Mosk was curled up in a ball, sobbing, arms over his head and his hands clutching at his neck. His
shoulder was raw. His wrists were dripping blood into his hair.

‘Just kill me,’ Mosk cried. ‘Just kill me.’

Eran kept staring at him, rooted to the spot. He had no idea what had just happened. But those
words weren’t what Mosk had done. And Eran hadn’t told anyone of what he’d experienced. No
one – even the Mage he went to for the tattoo to find the criminal responsible. There was no one
left alive who had experienced what Eran had experienced that day. He was the only one.

He could still feel his brother clawing at his wrist, trying to pull himself free from the groaning,
creaking ice. He could hear his shouts of alarm and of pain and he placed his hand over the place
on his wrist where his brother had clutched at him.

A cold, uneasy feeling slunk through him as he watched Mosk crying upon the ground. His
mother’s disapproval echoed through him, and he thought it might be guilt then, how easily he’d
hurt this fae, and how vindicated he’d felt doing it. How it ached inside him to be more like his
father than his mother, when he was not Unseelie, but Seelie.

He stared down at Mosk and felt powerful and without power all at once.

Eventually, he leaned down and picked up the chains.

‘Please,’ Mosk whimpered. ‘No more. No more.’

‘Don’t do that again,’ Eran said, his voice unsteady.

‘Then don’t ask me,’ Mosk said, and then his breathing began hitching and he reached trembling
fingers down to his raw shoulder. ‘You burnt me. You burnt me. You burnt me.’

And so it went, Mosk saying those same words over and over again in disbelief, and Eran felt the
nausea in his chest flip and flip, until he dropped the chains and walked to a nearby tree, bent over
and threw up everything he’d eaten that morning. None of it had digested properly. He spat bile
until his mouth was clear, and then looked over at Mosk again. At his shoulder wound.

‘What status are you?’ Eran said.

‘I’ll heal, if that’s…what you’re asking,’ Mosk said, his voice feather light and shaking.
It was what Eran was asking, so he didn’t push for more. He didn’t want to hear more of those awful words spill out. How had Mosk done that? And why had he looked terrified instead of triumphant while doing it?

Later, they began walking again. They were both silent, and Eran felt a gloom inside of him. When dusk finally came, he thought the light perfectly matched whatever had happened within.

That night, he didn’t light a fire. He whispered some prayers and felt like the words were dead stones in his mouth. Mosk started crying unbidden as the moon crept into the sky – silent, shaking motions and tears tracking down his face as he stared ahead. Eran watched him and rubbed at his mouth and his beard, feeling the length of the hair on his face and thinking that he needed to shave.

‘You’re not well, are you?’ Eran said, and Mosk shuddered and buried his face in his knees, whimpering in pain as the motion stretched his slowly healing shoulder.

‘No one’s well,’ Mosk said.

‘Are you dying?’

‘Everyone’s dying,’ Mosk said.

‘That’s helpful,’ Eran said, leaning his head back against a smooth-barked tree and biting the inside of his lower lip. ‘You know what I think?’

‘No,’ Mosk said.

I bet you do, being able to read me like that, Eran thought. He’d assume the fae was a Reader, if it weren’t for the fact that his eyes were all wrong for it.

‘I think guilt can kill a person. And I think it’s killing you.’

‘Here’s hoping,’ Mosk said after a beat, and rolled onto his uninjured side and covered his face. Then, as though he’d willed it – and maybe he had – his breathing went heavy and slow, falling into sleep.

Eran stayed awake, turning over the events of the day, not understanding any of it – feeling more lost now than he did in the week following the loss of everything he’d come to know and love.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'The Not-Quite Incubus':

‘You’re good for nothing, you are. Get out then. Go sleep in a gutter, for all I care.’

Eran turned and then stilled, for Mosk was looking straight at him, a frown pinching the corners of his mouth.

‘Me,’ Mosk said. ‘Me. I’ll do it. Let them fuck me. For a room.’

‘You didn’t say you were no pimp now,’ the woman said, and Eran turned to her, then looked between them.
‘I’m not,’ Eran said, scowling.
The town of Summervale began with sleepy wide roads and homely cottages and farmsteads with walls of bright cream stone with painted white window frames and fences. They looked like they belonged in picture books. The citizens were almost entirely Seelie, and Eran wished it made him feel more at home than it did.

Mosk seemed less vacuous than before, but his attitude had become sullen. He cooperated, he’d not tried to flee, but he always required several jerks of the chains to get up, and he stared at Eran sometimes like he wished him harm. That was more along the lines of what Eran expected, perhaps all that had been needed was more time for Mosk’s true colours to show themselves.

Still, it was eerie. The deadness that clung to Mosk hadn’t quite left. Eran found himself thinking about curses and ghosts, about the malevolent things that could cling to creatures. It didn’t seem so much of a stretch to imagine that Mosk was tainted somehow. That malice had scrubbed his soul of some animating force.

They passed white fairy cows with red eyes and musical golden cowbells about their necks, so that the impossibly green valleys sent up chimes and rung deep notes from meadows near and far. Every field not growing golden grain was verdant with flowers smelling of honey and spices.

Small pink rabbits chased each other along green paths they’d stamped down with broad hind feet, occasionally leaping free and twisting their bodies in carefree delight. Butterflies in impossible jewelled colours supped at nectar, and bees buzzed in major scales.

‘It’s almost too Seelie,’ Eran muttered to himself, shifting his bedroll and transferring the chains to one hand so he could stretch the other. His fingers and palm ached fiercely all the time now, the iron in the chains a fractious pain in his blood. He just wanted to let them go for a few hours, but during the day he had to hold them. At least at night he could tie Mosk to something and have a bit of a break.

As the day went on, the farmsteads and cottages gave way to proper streets with roads in the centre, carriages pulled along by finely coiffed and shining horses. At one point, he saw a brilliant jewel-green carriage pulled by horses shining teal and black, and he had to stop at the shaft of pain in his chest. There were no kratel gazelles here with fine warriors on their backs. No olcana mouflon with packs on both sides and little chubby children rolling around in a sturdy protective crate on the back, learning how to ride while laughing.
And if there was no one to tame the kratel and the olcana, then they’d become wild again, and the
secrets of their domestication would vanish, swallowed up by the sandstorms of time.

He did see animals other than horses pulling the carriages, but he didn’t recognise them.

Mosk, standing two paces behind him, didn’t say anything about both of them just standing there
on cobblestones, listening to the clip-clop of hooves and occasionally hearing the cries of those
selling their wares closer into the town.

Eran knew he’d not be able to simply sleep outside here. There were no forests amongst the tracts
of trees and flowerpots, the terraced homes and palatial apartments. His pride wouldn’t let him be
seen as a vagrant.

But travellers of Court status used inns, and the coinage in his pocket didn’t feel like enough. Still,
he had other items of possible appeal, and he decided he’d press on in the hopes that maybe they’d
reach the other side of the town by nightfall.

The town only got larger. The one and two-storey homes and shopfronts resolving into crooked
and straight buildings with ribbons draped outside. There were plaques everywhere beside quaint
or regal doorways, denoting the names of who lived inside. Badger Silverfoot. The Marquis of the
Tiniest Streams. The Hero of Walden. The Once-Queen. Some of the plaques were burnished until
he could see his reflection in them. Others were aged. One copper plaque covered with so much
verdigris that the original colour was lost.

Shopfronts sold fantastic items at fantastic prices. Eran was shocked to realise he couldn’t even
afford a simple bread roll here. If he’d been here on his parent’s wealth, he could have bought all
he wanted. But their wealth was swallowed up in the ice like they were, and anything in other
accounts...he was too young to have access to that. He worried at the inside of his bottom lip as the
sun began to set, knowing he’d need to find accommodation soon. He supposed they could walk all
through the night, but he felt odd if he didn’t stop and at least say the prayers that were part of his
family’s rituals.

More and more people stared at him and his charge here. No one recognised him, even though he
was sure they’d recognise his mother in a heartbeat. There were a surprising amount of sea fae in
human form. Mers with their tails vanished so that they might walk upon land still had sticky
webbed appendages growing from their faces and arms. The smell of salt water in the air was
present, as though Eran wasn’t inland, but near the sea.

But no one stopped him. Eran hoped some of that was at least because he bore himself like a Court
fae, even if he didn’t look like one.

He walked into the third hotel he passed, this one not quite as fancy as the other two. But even as
he walked up the creamy stone steps onto polished floors, he could feel his heart in his throat.

Still, he made himself walk to the counter where a fae with three pairs of antennae beamed up at
him with a smile that didn’t reach his bright blue eyes.

‘Can I help you, Sir?’

‘How much for a room for a night?’ Eran asked.

‘That would be fifty five clipaks for one, and an additional twenty for a guest.’ The fae’s eyes slid
to Mosk, and his eyebrows rose in a curiosity that wasn’t strong enough for him to say anything.

Eran didn’t bother reaching for the pocket that he kept his coins in.
'Do you allow supplementation for fees?' Eran said quietly.

The fae smiled at him, the expression more forced than before.

'Depends on what you’re offering, Sir?'

'Everfire,' Eran said quickly. ‘I can offer Everfire.’

‘Ah,’ the fae said delicately, tilting his head and peering more closely at Eran’s eyes. ‘I see. You’re a refugee?’

Eran blinked at him, frowned. Was he? A…refugee?

‘I…’ He thought to the village they’d been in just days ago. Everyone fleeing the alehouse when they’d realised he was a ‘fire fae.’

‘We have no need for Everfire, you see, Sir,’ the fae said with the scantest sense of apology needed to seem solicitous and professional. ‘We had several of your kind in here about three weeks ago, ‘supplemented’ their fee with Everfire. We have plenty.’

‘Were they- What kind of fae were they?’ Eran said, thinking that perhaps they were family, perhaps they were-

‘Gabija, I believe, Sir,’ the fae said, beginning to get a look in his eye as though he was tired of humouring him. ‘Hearth-fire wights.’

‘Oh,’ Eran said, deflating. He rubbed at the back of his neck. Gabija were from the fae side of Lithuania. Had the ice pushed its way so far? He hadn’t seen any signs of it in the past month but…that was too close for comfort.

The fae stared at him for long moments and then his antennae stiffened all at once, his face brightened. He bent down and started writing quickly upon a notepad with a feather quill.

‘Perhaps you can try these establishments, Sir. They are…cheaper, perhaps more inclined to take folks like yourself. The Seelie Court is, of course, taking on those who seek asylum. But we’re not obligated to- Well, I’m sure you understand.’

‘I believe I do,’ Eran said, taking a piece of paper with several names written upon them.

The fae seemed to take pity on him, one pair of antennae wilting, the ends glowing blue for a few seconds. He frowned, made a whirring noise.

‘It’s a difficult time of year for accommodation. Midsummer soon, you see. Everyone here for the Summervale celebrations. It’s quite a spectacle. Perhaps if you’d come at a different time of year…’

‘No, I get it,’ Eran said heavily. ‘Thanks for your help, really.’

‘Of course, Sir,’ the fae said, smiling in dismissal.

Eran turned, capturing a glimpse of Mosk’s face before he walked past it. As usual, Mosk’s expression was blank, he stared ahead, he followed with a jerk on the chains. Eran’s hands ached, and he found that it was harder to hold onto the energising anger that had kept him going for so long.

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The second tavern was full and decorated with flower garlands, smelling of mead and filled with raucous, bawdy songs. Eran stood in the doorway for several seconds, filled with longing for the way he and his brother and sisters – the times they were all together – would be around a hunting fire with his father and uncle, and they’d raise their loud, brash voices to the perfect night sky and listen to the rangy wolves in the distant dunes howl along with them.

Then two fae covered in scales brushed roughly past him, glaring at him for standing in the way, and he glared back but stepped out of the way.

The next place – also a tavern – was full. It was dark now, the lights lit with werelight that glowed in ornate streetlamps. Here and there, garlands of dancing bright lights. Fireflies floated through the streets. The air was redolent with a rich softness he didn’t often associate with summer. For him, summer was sandstorms and the bleaching of water from plants, it was crackly shrubs and grasses that splintered and caught fire even without sparks. It was his skin burning if he didn’t cover it with silks, and shading his eyes with a transparent veil to stop the dust.

Here it was richness and sweetness, it was blossoms and bright green leaves and lissom youths dancing down the cobblestone path in front of him before twirling out onto the road, narrowly avoiding a coach and continuing on, hand in hand.

He didn’t understand how these people could do these things...care so little. Didn’t they understand? He rubbed at his mouth and beard, gooseflesh crawling over his skin. The kohl around his eyes felt grainy, and he wished for a bathroom to remove it and reapply it.

It was past midnight when Eran found the last tavern, the place attracting a rougher element, the sign unkempt, the steps leading in smelling like vomit. Eran looked down the street and gave serious thought to just walking until they finally reached the Seelie Court.

Instead, he took a deep breath and lifted his chin, walking into the tavern and refusing to wince at the smell of stale beer on the floor, the sediment-heavy scent of spirits that prickled at his nose. Behind him, Mosk coughed and then was silent again.

Even here, the rooms were too expensive. An old woman with eyes of stone looked at him a glittering way that made her seem constantly calculating. When he offered Everfire, she thumped the tankard that she was drying with a dirty rag down onto a scuffed, burnt wooden counter and sneered at him.

‘Not such a rare commodity these days, love,’ she said, her voice rough considering she was only about three feet tall and standing on a stool. ‘What about them sparklies around your neck. The gold on your fingers.’

Eran didn’t touch the necklaces he wore. He didn’t touch the rings. They were worth a great deal, yes, but he’d already traded enough of his heritage away to know that he didn’t want to do it anymore. It was never worth as much as he knew it was in his homeland. He stared at her for a long moment, and then gasped when she actually spat on the floor in front of him.

‘You’re good for nothing, you are. Get out then. Go sleep in a gutter, for all I care.’

Eran turned and then stilled, for Mosk was looking straight at him, a frown pinching the corners of his mouth.

‘Me,’ Mosk said. ‘Me. I’ll do it. Let them fuck me. For a room.’

‘You didn’t say you were no pimp now,’ the woman said, and Eran turned to her, then looked
between them.

‘I’m not,’ Eran said, scowling.

But Mosk looked at him in desperation, and maybe… Maybe he needed it? Mosk seemed to be getting weaker and weaker. He wasn’t sustained on the grasses and green things alone. He’d not asked for anything except to be fucked, claiming that he ‘needed’ it. Maybe he did? There was an angrier, blacker thing inside of him that wanted to see the sullen thing brought low – lower. Wanted to hand the chains over and tell the woman to find whatever clients she could.

‘He’s pretty, and we got rooms for it,’ she said.

‘Please,’ Mosk said, and though he begged, his eyes began to look dull. ‘Let me.’

Eran knew what it was like to hear lovers begging him for more, and they’d never sounded lifeless. But there was a desperation there. Eran had seen it himself. The tiny part of him that wanted to say ‘Are you sure?’ was swallowed up by a hungry, fiery rage.

‘Yes,’ Eran said, turning back to the woman. ‘But he doesn’t leave my sight. And I don’t want it public.’

‘Wait here then,’ the woman said, putting the tankard and rag down properly and making a hideous snorting sound, as though she was trying to suck down her entire nasal canal. Then she jumped off the stool, more spry than she seemed at first glance and took off into the throng of people in the crowd.

Eran looked back at Mosk. ‘Do you feed on it or something?’

Mosk looked down at the manacles at his bruised wrists. It was the first time he’d given an indication that he’d noticed them at all. When he looked up, he was placid.

‘Yes,’ he said, his voice dull.

‘Don’t try and escape,’ Eran said.

The corner of Mosk’s lips tipped up. ‘You think I’d try and escape dying?’

‘Like any animal,’ Eran said.

Mosk said nothing at all to that. The expression faded from his face and he was back to looking like a blank slate.

Eran stood there holding the chains so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He wanted to shake Mosk until real emotions fell out. Wanted to call fire to his own hands and see that shrieking thing that he’d found before, because at least that creature had been alive and shown something that mattered. This…

He didn’t know what it was, and it turned his stomach. He opened his mouth to speak, only to get a short jab to the thigh. He looked down and saw the stone-eyed woman grinning at him, before pointing towards the far side of the tavern.

‘We got rooms, we’ll set you up. Two clients willing to pay for it. It’ll get you a room for the night. You can even watch.’

‘He keeps the chains on,’ Eran said, his voice harsh.
She winked at him. ‘They’ll like that even more, I suspect.’

Eran’s stomach turned, but now wasn’t the time to show his feelings on the subject. So he followed the woman into the yelling, chattering crowd and dragged Mosk along behind him.

*

The room was dark, lit only by three candles. Mosk stripped absently, leaving his mud-caked, grimy clothing on the floor where it fell. He seemed numb to what he was doing, and Eran – who sat nearby, on a splinterly wooden chest – felt torn between the part of him that wanted Mosk to hurt, and the part of him who didn’t want to be involved in this. Who didn’t want this be etched into his history, burned upon his mind.

The first client looked like a nobleman, except that he was here, instead of one of the finer establishments. He looked at Eran once, nodded in acknowledgement, as though they were co-conspirators.

After that, he didn’t look at Eran at all.

Eran didn’t know why he’d expected some kind of preparation. He didn’t know why he’d expected the fae to use lubricant, or to be patient. Instead, Mosk was roughly pulled into position – shoved over a roughly hewn desk with a fist pushing hard into his lower back to force the downward arch of his spine.

A thin sound from Mosk when the nobleman roughly pushed a finger into his hole. Then a high, strangled gasp when he pulled his finger out and shoved his cock in. The rutting that followed was callous. Mosk’s eyes stayed open, but he gazed at nothing. It was as though expression had been wiped clear of his face, and Eran swallowed down a queasiness that spread through his whole body. Mosk’s chains clattered against the table, the manacles thumped dully.

In only minutes, the man finished with several vicious thrusts and drew away. It was too dark for Eran to see if there was any blood, but he suspected there was. His heart pounded.

He’d had lovers in the past. He enjoyed the feeling of helping others to yield to his will, loved being rough with a partner who wanted it, who would surrender to him and let him hold them afterwards. This was nothing like that. Mosk stayed where he’d been pushed over the table, even as the other fae pulled up his pants and walked out without looking at Eran again.

Anger that he couldn’t just enjoy this. That his spite – that his visions of torturing this fae who had caused the ice plague – wouldn’t come. He wanted malignant heat, and instead, he found his spine pressing too hard against the wooden wall, even as he scratched at the tattoo the Mage had placed on his wrist. Fingers brushing over the scar the ice had given him even as it took his family.

The second client entered, and Eran watched, wordless, expecting another near silent display.

‘Not a lively one, is he?’ the fae said to Eran, gesturing to Mosk, who hadn’t moved. This one’s accent was rougher, his body thick with muscle. He smelled of smoke and sweet herbs. He slapped Mosk’s ass like one might slap a cow into action. But Mosk only ducked his head, didn’t make a noise. Another slap and Mosk’s hands clenched where they were draped over the table. Eran saw it, his own hand twisting on his wrist, before he forced himself to relax. They needed the room. He needed to commune with the fire, to say his prayers.

Paying for it with this. He thought of his mother. But he wasn’t the one hurting Mosk. And Mosk had asked. He’d said he’d do it, he said it fed him. He’d not protested once.
More slaps, and then the fae dropped his trousers and ground up behind Mosk’s hips, the table pushing a few inches forward. This fae never looked away from Eran, his eyes luminous in the darkness. After a minute of waiting for the fae to look away first, Eran dropped his face to Mosk’s, whose expression was hidden in shadows. The room smelled of badly rendered tallow, of sweat and come. Eran thought back to Mosk as he’d first found him, covered in a crust of semen, and lifeless.

‘No lad,’ the fae said. ‘Look at me.’

Eran blinked, realised the fae was talking to him, and stared at the fae in outrage.

‘You’re not paying for me,’ Eran snapped.

‘Look at me,’ the fae said, ‘or I’ll leave.’

‘So leave.’

The fae stared at him, and then his irises flared white. Eran tried to blink, realised he couldn’t, and then tried to look away, realised he couldn’t. A thick sound of anger in his throat, and in that moment, the fae thrust violently into Mosk, who jerked, whose arms pulled in, hands wrapping tight around forearms.

Eran tried standing, but whatever magic or ability the fae had used was immobilising. At first, the anger was strong enough to mask the fear as Eran struggled against the fae’s magic. He fought to look away from those eyes, from the lewd expression he could see in the candlelight. Behind it though, fear curled through him like building smoke, painting his insides sooty-black, making him feel dirty; mortified to be made vulnerable in this way.

He was Court status, and he’d thought himself invulnerable to most magic. But whatever power this fae had, it had wrapped a fist around Eran’s very being.

Eran’s eyes watered – unable to blink – as he was made to watch. The fucking went on much longer this time, and Eran felt a part of it somehow. No longer just someone waiting for this to be done, so he could have a room to sleep in. It crawled upon him like ants, until his breathing shook in his lungs. At that, the fae grinned at him, and the blaze of anger that followed made Eran’s hands glow ruddy in the dimness.

Mosk whimpered then, kept whimpering, and the fae seemed to realise what was causing it, and laughed.

‘What an odd pair you are,’ he said, in breathless time with his own thrusts.

Eran quenched his fire, so that his hands would only feel warmer than usual, and tried to break away from that eye contact once more. He put his might against it, hissed when the strange magic held.

Eventually, it was over. The fae shuddered and came and closed his eyes and it broke the spell, and Eran sagged back against the wall and only then became aware of the clammy sweat that covered his body. He was gasping almost as hard as the fae was, and it disgusted him to hear the both of them straining for breath in the room, even as Mosk made hardly any sound at all.

‘Lovely,’ the fae said, stepping away and smacking Mosk’s ass so hard that the sound hung in the room for a long moment. ‘Just lovely. Stay another night, and I’ll come back for the two of you.’

‘Get out,’ Eran said, his voice shaking.
The fae pulled up his pants and fastened them calmly. Then, with an unexpected burst of speed, he advanced on Eran and touched calloused palms to Eran’s face. The touch was tender, even loving. Eran jolted back, but he was already pressed hard into the wall.

‘Be careful now,’ the fae said, his voice rough but soft. ‘I’ll happily fuck you while you can’t move, but I like some fight. I’ll be by tomorrow. Wait for me.’

Eran clasped one of the man’s hairy wrists and burned him, smelling the flesh searing even as the man gritted out a sound of pain and Mosk whined behind them. Eran refused to look into the fae’s eyes, and said:

‘I will burn you to death.’

He let go of the fae’s wrist, and the fae stepped away calmly. He held his wrist to his chest, but otherwise, seemed unbothered. Was he Court status too then? Would he heal from his wounds quickly, uncaring?

‘Like I said…I like the fight. Bring that spark tomorrow evening, I’ll see about dousing it.’

Eran opened his mouth to retort, but the fae left, the door clicking shut behind him.

Mosk stayed in place for another minute, and then he slid off the table to his knees, the chains clattering across the wood, then falling to the floor. Mosk slumped, and Eran stood, a vicious irritation clenching at his skin. None of that would have happened if Mosk hadn’t asked for it. None of it.

Eran reached down and yanked hard on Mosk’s chains.

‘Get up,’ he snarled. ‘Don’t pretend you didn’t want this. That you didn’t beg for it. You’ve fed now, so get up.’

Another yank, another, and finally Mosk pushed himself clumsily upright, swaying for a moment, before looking around for his clothes. He walked hesitantly towards them, as though unwilling to test the chains. Then, he dressed mechanically, staring down at the floor. Eran only let go of the chains to let Mosk put on his shirt, even as his wrists and hands throbbed to be holding the iron again.

Mosk seemed to have even less energy than before, which didn’t make sense. If he needed it so badly, fed from it, then he should at least be energised, even if both fae had hurt him.

A few minutes later, the woman who owned the establishment came in with her hands on her hips. She sniffed twice at the room, her nose wrinkling, and then she made that hacking, snorting noise.

‘You’re lucky that last client paid up, with what you did to him like.’

‘But he paid,’ Eran said, resisting the urge to defend himself.

‘You’ve got yourselves a room. A bed. A bath too if you want it, though maybe use it for them clothes first. Here’s your key. It’s got the particulars on it. Don’t expect nothing fancy now.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ Eran said, and for a moment, the woman held back the key and glared at him. Eran schooled his face to blankness, because he couldn’t afford to have the room taken away now, even as he felt something cold swirling in his gut, to have that piece of metal placed into his palm. He’d never paid for something in this way before. He felt like the last fae had taken far more than Eran had ever agreed to.
With the exchange complete, she turned and left, and Eran dragged Mosk along, not liking the way he hung back in the chains, an additional weight at Eran’s already aching arm.

*

The room itself was serviceable, and nicer than Eran expected. For some reason, he’d thought it would be like the rooms in the place where he’d found Mosk – sagging, mouldering straw mattresses, and rot all through the ceiling. Here, the straw in the mattresses was fresh, the pillows smelled of bird musk, though were pokey enough to be filled with feathers more than down. Still, this place had been loved once, the magic placed into it good enough to keep it sound for some time.

Eran tied Mosk to a wooden support post in the middle of the room. Mosk only sat there on the floor, staring dully ahead, not looking like he’d fed at all. Eran almost wanted to kick him, to spite him for putting Eran through that, when it seemed he’d hardly gotten anything out of it at all.

Down in the communal baths, Eran found a trough to clean off their clothing, rinsing away the stinking, dried, stubborn mud and standing in only his necklaces, gold and the belt that carried his kh’anzar. He was ready to defend himself if need be, though the only two people down here were elderly fae leaning over the edge of a large bath and playing some kind of tile game with each other. One had huge, spiralling horns that reminded Eran strongly of his father, of home, and he grit his teeth and forced himself to concentrate on scrubbing.

After squeezing the water out of the cloth and hanging it, he waited on a wooden stool and pressed his fingers over his eyelids, gently massaging, knowing he was making a mess of the kohl. Though the kohl had been a mess for months anyway. An ache in his very eyeballs, where the fae’s magic had taken root and paralysed his whole body. Eran listened to the shaking of his breathing and reminded himself that he was a warrior, he was brave, he was going to be the next chieftain.

But he felt young, and the inner flames felt weak. He thought he’d feel stronger at this point, more resolved. He had the fae he’d hunted for in his grasp. He was so close to the Seelie Court. Everything he’d ever wanted…

Eran looked up at the dripping of the clothing – his and Mosk’s – and knew he’d not expected it to be like this.

*

It was a scratchy, dark red fire in him that had him withholding Mosk’s clothing and tossing it on the bed instead, leaving Mosk naked in his chains while Eran walked straight to the fireplace. He placed blocks of wood in the hearth, bypassing tinder. At Mosk’s pre-emptive whimper, Eran bared his teeth into the darkness of the chimney.

He couldn’t even pray in peace.

A wave of fatigue washed over him and he sagged, squeezing his eyes shut. All his life, the evening communion with fire was a sacred act, to honour his ancestors, the sacred flame, himself. Tonight, he’d paid for it with another person’s body, only to listen to that fae hate whatever fire Eran would bring forth. The truth of it was bitter on his tongue, he thought he’d be sick again.

Eventually, a slow shaking breath, and desperation had his fingers hooking into the wood placed in the fireplace. Flames licked out, the fire grew, and Eran tried to blank the sound of Mosk’s chains clinking as he pulled as far away from the heat as possible. Eventually, all he could hear was Mosk’s tremulous breathing, slight whines on each exhale.
There was no sacredness in bringing the fire forth. At this point, he only did it to know that he could, to remind himself that he was a being of brightness. He thought of his mother’s smooth, gentle hands, and the roughness that hid beneath her palms – hundreds of years of holding the reins just so, when she went hunting into the dunes with her desert hounds. He heard her voice, soft, as she talked of the fire’s beauty and gentleness, of its love and fierce ability to protect.

The feeling of paralysis didn’t leave him, and he felt himself wrapped still in the spell of that other fae, bound and threatened and told that the fae would be returning to douse his fire. It was as though he’d been trapped in a spider’s silk. It made him shudder. Those were no light words, there was nothing comforting about the way the creature had been unbothered by Eran’s flame. They would have to wake early, leave as soon as they could. Eran didn’t even know if he’d sleep.

Wood became ash far too quickly, Eran’s flames too hot and harsh, unable to stay steady and comforting. His fingers became soot-stained, and before he cleaned them, he painted a small glyph of self-protection on the lintel of the fireplace. It didn’t soothe him.

* 

Later still, he couldn’t sleep. He lay on the first comfortable mattress he’d felt in months, and stared up at the ceiling feeling his heart pound hard in his chest. It was like he’d shifted, and the beast’s heart was what lay caged behind his lungs, and he hated that too.

Mosk was slumped, still naked, against the wooden post. Eran turned to look at him, and was surprised when by the light of the moon he saw two glints facing him. Mosk awake, watching him in the dark. It made his skin crawl.

‘What is it?’ Eran said.

Mosk said nothing at all.

‘Of course,’ Eran said, ‘you’re saying nothing. Just watching me in the dark.’

Nothing but silence. Eran couldn’t even hear Mosk’s breathing.

Eran rolled over to his side and stared. Mosk didn’t even seem to feel the cold. He didn’t look well. Eran had seen bruises on his hips when he’d chained him to the post. Even smears of blood.

‘Why don’t you have more energy?’ Eran asked finally. ‘You said you fed on it. But you clearly haven’t. Are you an incubus-dryad hybrid? Or…’

He made a scoffing noise, because it hardly mattered. But then he stilled, because the chains had shifted, and Mosk moved up to his knees, showing more energy than he’d shown since being frightened of the flames. His eyes were fierce in the darkness.

‘I’m not an incubus,’ Mosk said, his strained voice venomous and nothing like what Eran knew it could be. ‘I’m Mosk Manytrees, seventh son of a seventh son, the last Aur dryad for all I know, keeper of a forest that’s still smouldering and will be char unending, as far as the eye can see, forever. I’m an Unseelie Court fae, member of the Unseelie Court noblesse. I eat sap. If you won’t fuck me, how about you go fuck yourself.’

With that, Mosk turned towards the post and was silent, and Eran stared at the line of his back, shocked beyond speech.

Chapter End Notes
In our next chapter, 'Splendour':

‘Do not get distracted now,’ Davix said, replacing his wand back at his side. He leaned back in the chair and winked. ‘Teach me. I’m curious to know what wisdom you’ll share.’

‘I am telling you he’s the one who created the ice plague. He admitted to it! He told me.’

‘Tch,’ Davix said. ‘He’s Unseelie. What do the Unseelie do? Was it…tell the truth?’
Splendour

Chapter Notes

*bounces quietly* The Seelie Court makes everything better, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

Eran lay in bed, eyes open, staring at the ceiling and feeling the shadows press against him. Rage seethed in his blood. He gripped the hilt of the kh’anzar so hard it was sweaty against his palm. He wanted to spill blood for what had been done to him, that fae’s eyes paralysing him. Mosk had asked for the sex. But Eran hadn’t asked for whatever that was.

‘I’ll be by tomorrow. Wait for me.’ Eran squeezed his eyes shut and turned to face the direction of the door.

What did that mean? Eran wanted to wait, wanted to ambush and slide his sharp blade across the creature’s throat. No one treated him with such blatant disrespect.

The memory of his eyes being locked in place rattled through him, a cold desert wind. What if he waited, and the fae caught his eyes? What then?

What’s more important to you? Getting revenge on some stranger? Or getting justice for your family?

Eran turned back and stared up at the ceiling again. He let go of the hilt, his fingers aching, days of holding the iron chains digging deep into his knuckles. Mosk seemed unaffected by it, but if Mosk was a seventh son of a seventh son, and strong enough to create the plague of ice, then perhaps iron didn’t impact him.

Sleep stayed far from him. He didn’t even want it. He kept expecting a knock on the door, for the fae to say it was past midnight and therefore it was ‘tomorrow.’ He kept expecting that white flash and then that awfulness, unable to pit his fire against it. That low, mocking voice. The sounds of Mosk in pain haunting his thoughts. He turned to see Mosk asleep, slumped against the wooden strut in the middle of the room, chains still wrapped around it.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. But he’d set himself a task, and he was so close. He could return if he really wanted to, stalk down the fae whose name he didn’t know and murder them. Thinking that far ahead was an open wound in his heart. There was no future after the Seelie Court. What did it matter if he’d had an uncomfortable night?

He had the strangest feeling that Mosk wanted it to be the end of the road too. Could someone that awful be that tired? Or was it an act to play on Eran’s own exhaustion?

Fingers glowing dully with heat, he pressed the warmth over his closed eyes and imagined his mother was there, placing her hands over his face and comforting him after a bad dream.
Before dawn, Eran got up, rubbed at his gritty eyes – they felt as they had after a bad dust-storm – and then shook the chains a few times to rouse Mosk. Grey-green eyes looked dully up at him, then around the room.

‘We’re leaving,’ Eran said. ‘Quietly.’

He wouldn’t risk that fae coming back and doing something worse. Any fae that joked about ‘dousing a spark’ to a fire fae… Eran was furious, but he also felt slimy and cold in his gut, and he couldn’t afford to ignore his instincts when he was so close. If his father had always been proud of Eran’s single-minded determination, then he was going to make his father proud today.

They slipped out of the tavern through the back entrance. Mosk was unsteady on his feet, but seemed disinclined to talk, though he glared whenever Eran looked at him. But he cooperated, he let himself be led through the darkness, the streets of Summervale lit with the last of the fireflies, and little owlets whose eyes glowed blue and gold.

By the time the sun spread its fingers over the green farmland, touching everything with its blissful yellow, Eran was beyond the city of Summervale, listening to the lowing of faery cows and their ridiculous enchanted cowbells.

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The day was filled with walking. Eran followed what looked to be a deer trail through the grass, instead of sticking to the broad road that was filled with more and more travellers. Folks with wagons and carts. Nobles on horses and other animals he couldn’t be sure of. Servants walking hounds, and at one point, what looked to be a farmer walking a lion with great feathered wings. Eran squinted, looking over his shoulder to watch them go. It wasn’t one of the black lions of his homeland, but he still felt a pang of homesickness to see a lion.

Trees became grander, their boles impossibly wide. The flowers were large, and some petals even glistened like crystals, or shone metallic bright. Sometimes, in the woods, he could hear singing. Beautiful voices that made his steps slow as he turned to listen. He worried for a moment that they were sirens; but weren’t they only found in the sea? The voices charmed his heart. Even Mosk slowed and turned his head towards those voices, troubled face turning briefly peaceful.

They walked on, Eran’s hand and wrist aching where it held onto the chains, and eventually the land became cleared of farms and was filled instead with fields and meadows, winding golden roads all leading to the same forest at the top of a hill. Eran paused by the last thick stand of oak trees and rubbed at his face to see it. The Seelie Palace, spelled to look like nothing at all until one got closer.

The last time he’d been here, it was at the invitation of the Court. He’d expected to be treated finely, and instead they’d put him in a small room with a fae that seemed non-descript. That was, until the Polemarch entered and Eran was interrogated. But they’d cleared him. He hadn’t done anything wrong. His father didn’t confide Unseelie strategies in him, didn’t tell him much at all about the Unseelie Court.

And he can’t tell you anything now.

He startled to realise that Mosk was watching him. His face seemed clear, his eye contact steady. Eran stared back, arrested by a need to say something, to fill the moment with words. Mosk blinked at him and then looked back to the heart of the Seelie Kingdom, and Eran’s hands clenched down
on the chains.

Fatigue and hunger wove through him, but he walked on.

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Time reversed upon itself. As they got closer to the central woodland, the dusk rolled back to the
midsummer laziness of late afternoon. It felt unnatural, the intensity of this magic, the Seelie Court
never experienced night, and the spells that lay upon the woodland – the unseen Palace – stole the
stars away from sight.

Soon, cobblestone roads diverged upon a central road made of gold and jewels. Eran had been
stunned by it all last time, but now he tried not to let it affect him. He was a serious warrior, he had
a mission, he didn’t stop and stare in amazement at fields of flowers bathed in golden light. He
didn’t pay attention to the small fae who peeped up from the flowers to look at everyone, before
disappearing in small rustles of greenery.

This land was sacred. No wars could be made upon it. The Seelie had broken this rule upon the
wide circle of land that surrounded the Unseelie Court a decade ago, but it was warranted. Eran had
felt for his father, been afraid for him, but he’d also wanted to see the Traitor King put in his place.
He didn’t deserve that Court.

Half an hour later, Eran felt small as he approached the huge double gates that led into the Seelie
Court. Eran knew that beyond those gates, a Palace would appear. But as he stood before it now,
all he saw was a single, huge tree at the top of a hill, bathed in light.

Mailed and armoured guards stood at the gates, heavy spears barring the way. Eran looked around
and found that despite all the traffic of before, he was alone but for Mosk standing behind him.
Another enchantment?

The guards were grimly silent, and Eran stepped up to one of them, meeting fish eyes that betrayed
no emotion. Sea fae. Eran had met hardly any at all until the last time he’d come to the Court.

‘I am here to seek audience with King Albion of the Seelie. I bring with me Mosk Manytrees, an
Unseelie fae responsible for the plague of ice. I am here to see justice done.’

A long pause, and then the spears were pulled back. The double gates opened and Eran’s head
tilted back as he took in the spires, the smell of saltwater piqing the back of his nose, the towers
filling him with awe. He’d seen them before, but he couldn’t pretend it wasn’t amazing. More than
that, the entire place felt like a certainty inside of him. He’d never felt anything like it, and he knew
without a doubt that he was Seelie. This place would support him, and he would see the world
changed for the better when Mosk was finally slain and the ice plague stopped.

The woman that came to meet them had no hair, but opalescent scales that overlapped instead. Her
eyes were like pearls, her hands webbed. She wore a translucent silk that Eran almost asked about –
his mother was always looking for translucent silks and other fabrics.

He swallowed when he thought of her imprisoned in the ice, all of them gone.

‘Come with me, please,’ the woman said, her voice filled with a gurgle as though she spoke
through the sea even now.

Eran followed, pulling Mosk over the large bridge that crossed a moat filled with the sea, even
though they weren’t close to the ocean. There were many more fae here, so many different species,
and many dressed so beautifully. All the fae were pretty or handsome. This was the Seelie Court,
where beauty was a principle. Eran felt his lack of grooming keenly. He’d been doing his best, but he didn’t have the time to make sure that every hair was properly in place, the right length, the beard not too long. He hadn’t even applied his black liner to his eyes since Summervale.

He needed to start doing it properly again. He’d been neglecting himself after his parents were taken.

They entered the Palace, but bypassed the throne room where the Traitor King’s armour was on display for everyone to see how the Seelie could be betrayed if they lost sight of themselves. Instead, long corridors and perfect marbled floors. The sound of water was everywhere, even though Eran couldn’t always see it. A hollow roar like a whirlpool waited beneath them. Trickles and drips, the gushing of a waterfall. A background cacophony, and Eran was almost tempted to touch the walls to see if they’d be wet.

It made him uneasy. A lot of water always did.

‘Wait here, please,’ the woman said, gesturing to a room that thankfully wasn’t the interrogation room of last time. This was some kind of lounge or foyer. A table and multiple chairs. A carafe of what looked like water – hopefully fresh and not salt – on a lower table. ‘You will be attended shortly.’

‘You have my thanks,’ Eran said imperiously, though his shoulders sagged when she left.

He didn’t sit. He wanted to pace, but that would mean dragging Mosk behind him with every step, and Mosk was clearly flagging. Eran hadn’t fed him, and he still seemed sore from the night before. Mosk had said he was Court fae, but he didn’t seem as hale as one. Eran had no way of knowing what time it was, or how long it had taken them to get here. As soon as they’d fallen within the range of the Seelie Court, he couldn’t tell if it was early evening or past midnight.

Five minutes passed, then ten, then what felt like twenty. Eran clenched his hands on the chain and anger began to simmer inside of him. Didn’t they realise how serious the situation was? He should have asked to go straight to the throne room, should have gone straight to the King.

More time passed, and Eran reluctantly sat on one of the chairs. Mosk sank to the floor beside him, leaning against the wall, eyes closed.

It had to be at least another hour when Eran closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. He wanted to call the flames to him, but he wasn’t sure if it was allowed, and he knew Mosk would panic. He was looking forward to one last prayer to the flames without Mosk there, terrified, blocking his pathway to honouring his ancestors, the life-fire inside of him.

Another hour, and Eran dropped the chains and walked to the door, turning the knob. Except it wouldn’t turn for him. He tried it again, and it rattled, but wouldn’t budge. His jaw ached from gritting his teeth as he marched back to his chair, sat down and folded his arms, agitation sparking through him.

Mosk was dozing, but Eran was tempted to set fire to the room when the lock finally clicked. The door opened, and Eran stood quickly, prepared to meet the King.

Instead, he was surprised to see the King’s Mage, Davix. He recognised the white and blue motley that he wore, had glimpsed him last time, and knew him by reputation. He met those cold blue eyes, and caught a tail of amusement there.

Mosk made a choked sound, instantly awake, pressing himself back into the wall. He stared up at
the Mage, the whites of his eyes showing. His bruised wrists shook in the manacles.

Finally. He’s finally scared. He’s finally realised what’s happening.

‘Greetings, Mage Davix, I am here to see the King,’ Eran said clearly.

‘King Albion is not here at this point in time,’ Davix said smoothly. He offered a charismatic smile, and then walked over to the table and sat down, immediately steepling his fingers. He had only one piece of jewellery – a thin silver necklace, the pendant a thin metal circle contained within a triangle. Beneath the harlequin fabric of his robe, a black shirt, black pants, and black boots. It matched his curling hair, which sheened blue in the light, but was still clearly black.

He radiated power, and Eran was glad that at least he was being seen by someone important. The King-in-Waiting would have to do.

‘My name is Eran Iliakambar. I am a Court fae, I am ambaros. My family were taken by the plague of ice,’ Eran said, having imagined saying these words so many times they were etched into his mind. ‘I was the only survivor. I approached another Mage for a charm to help me find who had committed this act, and it led me to Mosk Manytrees, an Unseelie Court fae.’

‘Ah,’ Davix said, passing his gaze to Mosk. His lips curled into a smirk.

The chair jerked as Mosk tried to hide himself behind it. Eran tightened his grip on the chain he was holding, and then listened to the sound of Mosk hyperventilating and a rush of irritation found him. He opened his mouth to say something, but Davix held up a hand and tilted his head at Mosk, watching him for a long time without speaking.

Mosk quaked on the floor, refusing to make eye contact.

‘Eran Iliakambar,’ Davix said, turning his chilled gaze back to Eran, ‘you are not only ambaros, are you? But afrit too. True hybrids are incredibly rare. What conflict you must feel, caught between Unseelie and Seelie.’

‘I am Seelie,’ Eran said coldly.

‘And yet you are,’ Davix said, smiling.

Eran decided he didn’t like him. But soon, he wouldn’t have to see him again.

‘That plague of ice is an annoyance,’ Davix said. ‘It responds to no magic, and it is mighty and fierce. It has a life of its own, did you know? And you think this dryad created it? Show me the charm this Mage made for you.’

Eran shifted the chains into his other hand, and proffered his wrist. Davix drew out a wand of sleek black wood, and Eran flinched when it touched his skin. A sharp sensation, not quite pain, and the ink shifted as though uncomfortable. It *squirmed* on his skin.

‘Do you want this removed?’ Davix said. ‘A pity, because it’s permanent. Also, incorrect. The best Mages in the world have been seeking the genesis of the ice plague, and the Mage that assisted you is not one of the best. I know not why the tattoo brought you to this fae – look at him, pathetic and hardly more than a wriggling babe, with how he behaves.’

Mosk wasn’t hyperventilating anymore. He had both hands over his mouth, and quivered, refusing to look at anyone. There were wet tracks on his hands, where tears had been shed. Eran could *smell* the terror of him, metallic and sharp. He couldn’t remember if Mosk had ever been this terrified
around him, except for when he’d created fire.

‘No,’ Eran said firmly. ‘No, I am telling you—’

‘-Oh? You’re telling me? You’ll tale-weave a lie for a Seelie Mage, because you do not tolerate the truth? Fascinating. Tell me then. Teach me Magecraft, oh wise ambaros-afrit, hybrid, with nowhere to truly call home. There’s no hybrid Court, is there?’

‘I am Seelie!’

‘Do not get distracted now,’ Davix said, replacing his wand back at his side. He leaned back in the chair and winked. ‘Teach me. I’m curious to know what wisdom you’ll share.’

‘I am telling you he’s the one who created the ice plague. He admitted to it! He told me.’

‘Tch,’ Davix said. ‘He’s Unseelie. What do the Unseelie do? Was it…tell the truth?’

‘I know he did it,’ Eran insisted. ‘If you take him into the prison here, and check for yourself, you’ll be sure.’

‘What are you now? Two hundred? Three hundred years old at most? No longer a teenager, but the barest of bare adults. Do you know how old I am?’

‘Old enough to be blinded by the truth,’ Eran snapped, his anger getting the better of him.

Davix laughed, and then raised his eyebrows in rebuke. Eran felt himself grow warm, a mix of mortification and embarrassment. He’d told himself he’d be polite, but after waiting for hours, after travelling for so long…it wasn’t supposed to be like this.

‘And you propose to me that this other barest of bare adults you drag with you, is a criminal of the highest order? Did you seek to find the safest Unseelie fae you could? Aur dryads are pacifists. Aren’t they? Come now, are you going to look at me at all, Mosk Manytrees?’

A wheeze of breath, and the hyperventilation started again. Eran looked down at him, and then looked at Davix, frowning.

‘Do you know him?’

‘He is a seventh son of a seventh son,’ Davix said benignly. ‘You’d be hard-pressed to find a Mage that didn’t track them, or take note of them at the least. But no, I know him not. He is nothing more to me than what I see here, a shaking wretch. You have seen this plague of ice. You know its wickedness. Look at that, crouching there. You think it was him? Truly? Shall I teach you now?’

Eran could feel the beginnings of it in his body – shaking in anger, but also exhaustion.

‘This is not—’

‘It’s not what you came for,’ Davix said, ‘the disappointment, of course. Take him to the Unseelie Court, and see what they can do for you.’

‘The Unseelie Court?’

‘He is Unseelie, is he not?’ Davix said. ‘Also, their King is far stupider than Albion, and he might listen to your story.’

The insult was so broad that Eran was momentarily speechless.
‘You want me to take him to the Traitor King?’

‘To say ‘I want’ it to happen is hyperbole at best, because I do not want anything from this situation, I am past caring about it. If you want this foolish journey to continue, take him there, that is what you want.’

Eran tried to gather his thoughts together, and was surprised when Davix kept talking.

‘Are you aware that the Aur forest has been destroyed? Or do fire fae not pay attention to the ways of the world?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Eran said, staring.

‘It was burned to ash,’ Davix said coolly. Mosk moaned and then pressed himself into the floor, like he could make himself disappear. ‘It is nothing more than char. It was not known if Mosk Manytrees survived it, because his family did not. At any rate, delivering Mosk to the Unseelie Court may earn you a favour with them, as they will seek news of what caused the fire that was strong enough it could burn even the fire trees.’

‘The Aur forest…’ Eran said. He’d thought it was a myth. The world forest, an anchor point for all the forests in the world, both here and even where the humans lived – a completely different realm. Containing every type of tree that had ever existed, outside of time, supposedly protected by the Aur dryads. Hadn’t it only been a legend? He was sure that Aur dryads were just…Unseelie dryads.

‘I’m sure you’ve been distracted by the ice, but there are many problems in the world that we are paying attention to, I do not have time to indulge your insolence.’

No sentences came to him, he sat on the chair, wondering what King Albion would have said. It felt hard to breathe. The words that Davix delivered so casually, crushed him. How could it not be over? He’d have to find food, travel back through Summervale, risk stumbling across the fae that had…

How could it not be over?

‘As it is,’ Davix said, as though no silence had passed at all, ‘I grow tremendously tired of this diversion. I will place you precisely halfway between here and your goal, and no further. If you wish to pursue this foolishness, you must work for it.’

‘How can you say that-‘

Davix withdrew his wand and flicked it once. Eran’s words died in his throat as his world was turned inside out.

*  

Gasping for breath, Eran took his bearings.

A dense temperate forest. Broad-leaved trees. Clover beneath his feet. A cool breeze. It was well past midnight. Nearby, a family of brownies were hurriedly packing up what looked like a picnic and rushing away, shooting scowls in Eran’s direction.

‘Wait!’ Eran called, his voice cracking. Had he been…teleported? His father had always needed skin contact to do that. What was it that the Mage had said? Halfway between the Seelie Court and his goal. ‘Where am I?’
One of the brownies turned and scowled at him. He shifted his green cap and stamped his feet on the ground. Tiny mushrooms grew where his feet fell, even though he was clearly working out some rage at having his picnic interrupted and not actually trying to grow them.

‘Which way is the Unseelie Court?’ Eran said, looking down at Mosk balled up on the ground, trembling.

The brownie paused, and then pointed. Eran turned to follow the direction, looking quickly up at the stars. Northwest. It was something.

As soon as the brownies were out of view, Eran heard them swearing at each other over Eran’s rudeness. He heaved a sigh, and was tempted to sink to his knees, but pulled instead from the fire in his belly. If life was too easy, fire grew out of control. It was only when life was hard that fire could be managed best, used to its fullest potential. Cage it, and it would temper weapons. Let it free, and it would burn the world.

He looked down at Mosk again, thought of what the Mage had said. The Aur forest burned down… Perhaps then, the plague of ice had been revenge? The ice was driving itself towards fire fae, after all.

Eran swallowed down bitterness and eased himself onto the ground, keeping a tight grip on the chains. A few moments to breathe, to think, to sort out his priorities. It was all he needed. He wasn’t defeated yet. Even a quenched fire could send forth flames if the coal was kept warm.

So Eran kept himself warm.

*

An hour later, Mosk finally unfolded and looked around with huge eyes. His lips looked darker than normal, and Eran wondered if he’d bitten them, or if they had bled. His reaction to Davix had been strange. It wasn’t as though Mosk had shown any fear of dying. He’d shown no fear of the Seelie Court even, looking at it with wonder.

‘Did you know him?’ Eran said. ‘Davix?’

Mosk froze, fingers pausing on his cheek where he’d doubtless been rubbing dried tears off his cheeks.

*Is it possible? Davix said he didn’t know Mosk…*

‘He’s…’ Mosk said, his voice thin. ‘He’s…’

More silence, but for the occasional, haunting calls of night-birds. Eran thought of how tempting it was to just threaten the truth from Mosk with flames. But he was too scared of hearing his own past echoed back to him, the worst moment of his life framed in Mosk’s mouth. He couldn’t bring himself to do it again.

‘I’m taking you to the Unseelie Court,’ Eran said. ‘Get up, we’ll find food on the way.’

He stood, and the chains went taut. For the first time, Mosk didn’t try to cooperate. He wasn’t even slow in getting up. He just didn’t move.

‘Didn’t you hear him?’ Mosk said, looking at Eran sidelong. ‘I’m innocent.’

‘You’re not innocent,’ Eran said, incredulous. ‘You admitted to it. You did! The charm led me to
‘You heard him. The charm was wrong. And I am nothing more than an innocent wretch. You heard him. Leave me be.’

‘No,’ Eran grit out. He yanked on the chains so hard that Mosk cried out, trying to clutch his wrists back to his chest. ‘Get up.’

‘No,’ Mosk said, gripping the chains with hands that Eran could see were weak. He tugged ineffectually.

Eran marched over to him, a blaze of satisfaction when Mosk reared back, bleating a small sound of fear. Eran grabbed him by the shirt, twisted his fist in the fabric and dragged him upright.

‘You’re punishing yourself for something,’ Eran snarled, unable to stop the sparks in the back of his throat, feeling a small amount of triumph for the first time all day when Mosk closed his eyes and winced. ‘And I’ve given too much not to get to the bottom of this.’

‘The Unseelie Court won’t care,’ Mosk whispered. ‘Because I’m innocent.’

‘I will make them care,’ Eran promised, before hauling Mosk along behind him. Mosk found his feet, stumbled along, and Eran didn’t care. He was prepared to drag Mosk on the ground, if that’s what it took. He was grateful for the anger, clinging to it as hard as he clung to the chains he held.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Animosity:’

‘So you have nothing to live for,’ Mosk said.

‘One thing,’ Eran said, looking up at him. ‘Which I’m doing now. Then, nothing.’

‘Do you know what people who have nothing to live for are really good at?’ Mosk said, his eyes narrowing.

‘What?’

‘Dying,’ Mosk said. His lips lifted on a cold smile, and then he laid down and closed his eyes, and said nothing else.
Animosity

Chapter Notes

Woo! I'm hoping to put a chapter up next Saturday as well. :D Thanks so much for your comments and stuff! They're so appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

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For the first time, Mosk fought him. Not every step, not every moment, but enough that Eran’s wrists burned from the sharp yanks when Mosk tried to get away. Enough that his shoulders had jerked in their sockets, when Mosk planted his feet. He’d proven that he would drag Mosk if he had to, and Mosk had dug his feet into the rich soil of the forest and scored out clover by its roots, fighting him.

The afternoon of the following day, Eran’s teeth clicked as his jaw snapped together, and he summoned flames.

‘No!’ Mosk shouted.

Eran turned and bore down on Mosk, who had already dropped to his knees. Eran knew he could drop the forsaken chains now, letting them go in favour of pushing Mosk to the damp floor and leaning over him. He placed both hands by Mosk’s head, and let the fire singe the moisture from the soil, steaming around them.

Mosk screamed.

Bits of flame in the back of Eran’s throat, and it felt so good to call it forth after days of aborting it out of respect to whatever Mosk’s fear was. Like he should respect it.

‘It’s as though you forget what I am,’ Eran said, his voice thickened by the flames. He could feel them brush his teeth, lick out from the corners of his mouth. He knew from the burning sensation that his eyes were glowing, instead of their regular amber. Mosk wouldn’t see it. He had his eyes squeezed tight and was holding himself rigid, as if he could make himself vanish from the flames through sheer will alone.

‘These silly rebellions of yours, like I haven’t already wasted myself on this journey for something like you. Like you’re determined to see the worst of it. Is that what you want? Because you don’t even know how much fire lives inside me.’

Eran pressed closer, his mouth open over Mosk’s cheek, and let the tiniest flames cross Mosk’s skin. Not enough to burn, but enough to threaten.

Mosk stopped breathing. His trembling continued. Eran was too angry to care. His wrists hurt. Even where they were bent – his palms on the dirt – they felt gritty. It was as though sand had infused his joints. The iron of the chains was weakening him.
‘Are you going to cooperate?’ Eran said.

No answer, and Eran snarled. It wasn’t good enough. He pressed his fingertips to Mosk’s shoulder and the fabric singed immediately, smoke rising into the air. A moment later, skin crackling.

Eran removed his fingers when Mosk keened.

‘A glimpse then,’ Eran said, ‘of what I can do to you. Now, are you going to cooperate? Or not? Answer me.’

Sharp exhales that sounded more like sobs, and Mosk nodded hurriedly, eyes still shut. Eran waited another few seconds, and then pushed himself upright, looking in disgust at the way Mosk stayed on the ground like he couldn’t move. Like he’d been bound there.

A few seconds later, Eran’s fingers curled into fists and he had to look away. He’d never done anything like that in his life. But it wasn’t like they could go on the way they had been. He’d never make it to the Unseelie Court if Mosk kept fighting him.

It took a long time for Mosk to calm down enough to push himself into a sitting position, and when Eran walked over to collect the chains he’d dropped, he didn’t miss the way Mosk blanched. The way his hands and fingers trembled now, a constant shaking. His shoulder wounded, but Eran knew the marks were cauterised, had ensured it himself. And Mosk was Court fae. So he’d heal.

Mosk didn’t jerk on the chains anymore, except by accident, when he stumbled; something he did increasingly.

Eran told himself he didn’t care about that either.

*

Four days passed, and they were in a forest of thick trees that had woven their canopy branches together until the sun was blocked out. Everything was dark, and the ground was covered in a phosphorescent blue fungus that spread across the ground like dropped threads. Eran had seen it pulsing new filaments across tree roots even as he watched, and it unnerved him. The trail here was made of white stones that glittered with some inner light. Occasionally, a bird made a bell-like sound three times, and then was silent.

Their steps seemed loud, and Eran saw no other fae. He was tempted to light a flame in his palm to give them more light to see by, but he had a feeling this wasn’t the kind of place where one drew attention to themselves.

Mosk was sullen, and he glared at Eran often. When Eran woke, Mosk was already awake and staring at him, unblinking. When Eran looked for food to char between his fingers and plants or weeds that Mosk could eat, Mosk was watching him. He watched Eran as Eran ate. When Eran tied him to a tree and bathed, Mosk watched. His gaze was deadened, but Eran felt the animosity there. A hatred that seemed as eldritch as the forest they walked through now.

‘You could fuck me,’ Mosk said, speaking for the first time since the day Eran had attacked him with fire.

‘Not this again,’ Eran said, his voice hushed. If a forest could feel Unseelie, or malevolent, this one managed both. There were places in the desert like that too. The colours would somehow change, the wind would bite, the creatures of death and blood would live there, even if one never saw them, the truth of it rattled deep in the bones. ‘Be quiet.’
‘I’m just saying,’ Mosk said. ‘You could-’

‘You’re not even an incubus. You don’t need it.’

‘I do,’ Mosk said. He wasn’t even trying to soften his voice.

Eran opened his mouth to reply when he heard a cracking sound nearby, a twig snapping perhaps, in the pitch dark of the forest. Eran went still, Mosk taking two more steps before stopping. Eran’s fingers strayed to the hilt of his kh’anzar, and he looked in the direction the sound had come from. He saw nothing. Not even the shinelight of an animal’s eyes.

‘Be quiet,’ Eran hissed under his breath.

They walked on and Eran’s skin crawled. He knew they were being watched, his senses alert to it. Were they being stalked? Or was it just some fae watching them benignly? Or something else?

Hours passed, the forest hardly changed, and Eran hoped the brownie hadn’t pointed him in the wrong direction. The path beneath their feet forked off sometimes, but Eran trusted his inner sense to lead him northwest, and he only changed path when it seemed it would keep him better oriented. The blue filaments of fungus never touched the path, and Eran had no sense of who had lain the stones. Perhaps it was ancient. There were steps carved into a volcano he’d known as a child, and his father had said the steps had been there for so long, no one could remember who had made them, or why.

‘People die in forests like these,’ Mosk said finally, sounding almost cheerful. It was the most life that Eran had heard in his voice for some time, outside of terror.

A rustle in the canopy above them, and Eran’s eyes snapped upwards. He could see nothing. Whatever wasn’t lit with a blue unearthly glow, was black beyond his view.

When he looked down again, he had the sense that whatever was near them was closer. His heart wouldn’t stop racing. He looked around, and saw a tall, lanky, shadowy figure standing on the path behind them, right where the light of the blue fungus died and turned the forest to darkness. It seemed to shift and bulge in the dim light.

It took one shuddering step towards them. Even Mosk tensed then, having followed Eran’s gaze.

To Eran’s right, the sharp cracks of twigs breaking, except it was too hollow, too loud. Maybe branches, or possibly bones.

His instincts had him clenching his hand on the chains and running forwards. Mosk followed clumsily behind him, gasping straight away from the exertion, but he didn’t hesitate. That alone told him what he needed to know – even if Mosk played with the idea of dying, he didn’t want to die.

Every time Eran looked over his shoulder, the creature was there, always in exactly the same place, as though Eran wasn’t making any headway at all. He was fleet too. Afrit and ambaros could run if they had to.

More cracking sounds in the darkness of the forest around them, and then a high pitched wheeze of laughter that echoed.

‘Curse it,’ Eran muttered, withdrawing his kh’anzar and focusing on the path ahead of them. It seemed very important to stay on it. He had a horrible image of the fungus coming to life if he stepped off the path, dragging him down into the cold dirt.
Just as Eran began to flag, he heard footsteps pounding behind him, distant and then growing closer, like something had finally decided to make its attack. Eran didn’t dare look behind him, his heart feeling like it was thick in his throat. He put on an extra burst of speed.

**People die in forests like these.**

Eran would burn it down if he had to, though he’d sworn an oath not to do any such destruction when he’d come of age. But if he had to…

Until then, he ran. Mosk followed, both of them gasping now.

Eran grabbed the chains harder and pulled Mosk in front of him, sensing Mosk’s confusion. He sheathed his kh’anzar quickly.

‘I’m using fire!’ Eran shouted. ‘Stay in front of me!’

How Mosk found the energy to keep running, Eran didn’t know. But he summoned a ball of flame to his hand while Mosk stayed three steps ahead, the chains rattling between them. It made every breath in his lungs sharper, painful, to call that much fire. Aiming instinctively, a lifetime of knowing he had to be accomplished in these powers as much as in any other skill, he flung it towards the pounding steps gaining on them.

An unearthly growl that tailed off into a shriek, and the pounding steps flagged, then stopped entirely.

Eran didn’t feel comfortable slowing his pace, and he and Mosk ran until they reached the end of the forest hours later, where it abruptly stopped and they spilled out onto a meadow, underneath a bright, sunny morning. Mosk fell to his knees, clutching at his chest, a second before Eran did the same.

* 

Winterwest was the Unseelie equivalent of Summervale, and Eran was so relieved to see it that he felt his eyes prickling. He couldn’t seem to control himself as well as usual, which wasn’t good. He would never risk his true fae form, and the less control he had over himself, his flame, the more he felt that fur shifting beneath his skin, the more his teeth felt uncommonly large in his mouth, crooked and jagged, canines like scythes.

So he took a deep breath, swallowed down the exhaustion, forged ahead.

He was surprised to see that Winterwest was as richly looked after as Summervale. It was different, the cobblestones beneath his feet were black and grey, but they sparkled with mica. In the sky above, gryphons whirled, for no other reason than they seemed to be enjoying themselves, dressed in long flowing capes and play-fighting with each other. There were more animal shifters on the streets too than in the Seelie town of Summervale, many in hybrid form, twitching large furred ears or lashing tails, animal eyes glinting.

The buildings were a mix, some built with marble or limestone, other stones he didn’t recognise, there was even one that seemed entirely made of a huge seam of amethyst. The streets were lined with streetlamps that each had an iron gargoyle sitting upon them, looking down with watchful eyes. Chairs along the pavement were shaped like sleeping animals, as though inviting those who needed rest to recline against a lizard’s belly, a cat’s side, in the crook of a bear’s mighty forearm.

In the middle of the town he saw a huge water fountain, a large sculpture of the Traitor King wielding a sword and glaring down, above a confection of sculptured animals; a raven, a stag, a
stallion, a mouse, a swan, and others still. At the base of the fountain, in the huge pool of water, a fae with huge round eyes, a tiny mouth, and bits of waterweed growing out of her head swam back and forth in it, and occasionally folded her arms on its edge and watched the people going by. There weren’t as many as in Summervale, but there were still the nobles on horseback, the carriages, the servants carrying items to and from their rich employers.

The one thing Winterwest had in abundance that Summervale didn’t seem to, was a large military presence. There were soldiers about, in plate-mail, in scaled armour, in leather and felted vests. They walked about in pairs or groups. They’d stop at intersections and talk to each other, pointing in different directions. Even though their armour didn’t match, they wore the colours of the Unseelie Court – black with minimal white. Some had peculiar golden badges or armbands, and those who wore them seemed more authoritative.

Eran sometimes felt an emptiness in his chest where his father refused to tell him almost anything about the Unseelie military, like he didn’t even trust his own son. Did his father know about this? Would he have suggested it? Helped organise it? He was one of the Traitor King’s most trusted War Generals – alongside Zudanna, the Wolf of War – even after he’d been unfairly punished. Ifir had hated that Eran had never called the Traitor King by any other name except what he deserved, after the great betrayal against the Seelie fae. Even being interrogated by the new Seelie Court hadn’t swayed him. They were right to do that, even if Eran had hated every second of it.

The Unseelie were supposed to put family first, and Ifir was dedicated to his family in so many ways; but the rift between Eran being Seelie, and his father being Unseelie, was sometimes too large to bridge. Especially once Eran had made it clear that he had no love for the Unseelie, regardless of how loyal they could be.

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That night they didn’t sleep, but continued through the town.

Mosk, who was looking more gaunt by the day, shadows beneath his grey eyes and a pinched tightness to his mouth, said:

‘You could sell me for a room again.’

‘No,’ Eran said. Not here. If he’d encountered the fae who paralysed him in a Seelie town, what would he encounter in Winterwest? It wasn’t worth it.

‘I’m tired,’ Mosk said.

It was the first time he’d properly complained of anything at all. He’d never said he was hungry, when he was clearly famished. He’d never said that he was sore, even when he’d been burnt or fell too hard to the ground. He’d not said a word after he’d paid for their other room with his body, when Eran knew he’d been hurt.

Eran had begun to believe that Mosk didn’t actually feel things that normal fae felt. Not properly.

‘You’re tired,’ Eran said.

‘Yeah. If you won’t let me go-’

‘I’m not letting you go.’

‘Aren’t you tired?’ Mosk said, his voice weak.
‘I’ll find you some more plants.’

‘I need sap,’ Mosk said, and then laughed weakly, as though he’d made a joke.

‘We’ve passed a million trees. I’ve chained you to them. I’m not stopping you from feeding.’

Mosk laughed again, and then the sound trailed away. A clink in the chains, and Eran thought he was going to escape again. Instead, he looked over his shoulder to see Mosk grasping his own arms and looking down at the road. He had singe marks in his shirt now. Eran’s own eyeliner was smudged. He’d reapplied in the reflection of a shop window, but smeared it without thinking after too many days of not enough rest. He’d spent decades knowing how to touch his eyes so as not to affect the eyeliner; but fatigue ate at his awareness. He was making stupid mistakes.

‘I need sap,’ Mosk whispered, almost to himself.

‘Plants have it, don’t they?’

Mosk shrugged and went quiet. Eran had the impression that maybe it wasn’t enough – he could see that it wasn’t. But didn’t the sap-eating dryads just have special teeth for tapping trees? Couldn’t Mosk just eat normally?

Does it matter?

Eran rubbed at his forehead and looked around. They’d have to rest soon. But he knew they were so close to the Unseelie Court. Once they’d reached Winterwest, it wouldn’t be long until they reached the moat of sacred land around the Court itself. Two days maybe.

Could he manage two more days of walking without rest?

‘We’ll stop soon,’ Eran conceded, transferring the chains to his other hand and looking down at his wrist and hand. They were flushed dark, looked bruised. Iron couldn’t hurt a Court fae in the short term, but over time – Eran had never experienced anything like it. Mosk’s wrists were showing constant signs of bruising. Eran’s palms looked poisoned.

Two more days. Then he’d be done.

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They made a sort of camp at the outskirts of some farmland that had been cut back and was waiting to be tilled. The earth smelled of the sweet decay of what wheat had been left behind, and the earth was wet even here. Eran put his fingers into it, amazed. Where he lived, even when it rained, the sand didn’t hold the water properly. The dust covering it repelled the water, and it would funnel towards lakes and dams and rivers, or it would flood out into plains that would flower brilliantly for a week or two, before becoming as dry and dusty as if the rains had never been.

Here, the soil was *soil*, it was damp and cool, it smelled as though it would grow life without any nurturing. It didn’t feel like home, but he liked it all the same.

Mosk had plucked up some plant matter for himself. One of his chains staked into the ground, weeds growing by a fence post. Mosk didn’t seem to care about taste or flavour. He didn’t really seem to notice that he was eating at all, and he didn’t look at the leaves, stems or roots as he raised them to his mouth. He chewed like it took effort.

That night, beneath quiet stars, Eran curled up on his bedroll and noticed Mosk watching him
again. He watched back.

‘Why won’t you have sex with me?’ Mosk said. He sat cross-legged. His hair was a paler green at the top than it had been when they’d first met. The brown at the base looked yellowed.

‘Because I don’t want to,’ Eran said, rolling his eyes and laying on his back.

‘I don’t see why that’s a reason. It doesn’t stop me.’

Eran opened his mouth, closed it again. He didn’t know what to say. Mosk had asked for it back at Summervale. He’d asked for it from the very beginning. Didn’t he want it? Why ask for something you didn’t want?

‘It stops me,’ Eran said.

‘You could forget for a while,’ Mosk said, and then his voice gained some unexpected bite. ‘You can forget about that family of yours that you think I killed.’

A spark of pain, like he’d been bitten, and Eran’s fists clenched.

‘The King-in-Waiting told you I was innocent,’ Mosk added.

‘He knows you somehow,’ Eran said. ‘Or you know him. I’m going to the Unseelie Court. The Traitor King can have you.’

A long silence, and Eran wondered if Mosk had always been like this. He’d not met many Unseelie Court status fae. Except for those in his family. He was wary of asking too many questions, now that Mosk seemed willing to talk to him. But maybe this close to the end of the journey, it wouldn’t matter as much.

‘Why did you do it?’ Eran said. ‘The plague of ice?’

‘Because—’ A sharp choking sound, and Eran pushed himself up in shock, to see Mosk leaning forwards, one hand hovering at his throat and the other pushing into his gut. His eyes were wide, and he gasped like he couldn’t get enough breath. The fit went on for another few minutes, Mosk shuddering like he was going through waves of pain.

Eran stared at him, uncertain what to do. By the time he thought he might need to get help, Mosk’s trembling subsided into fainter shivers. His head dropped. His breathing was ragged, but he was taking full breaths.

‘I can’t talk about it,’ Mosk said, his voice thick.

‘What about the sex then? Why do you ask for it, if you don’t want it?’

‘Because I need it,’ Mosk said dully.

‘You don’t need it to feed.’

‘I still need it,’ he said, rubbing at his hair briefly. Then his fingers curled into his palms and he lowered his wrists gently onto his knees. Like they hurt. Like he cared that they hurt.

Eran rested his head on his hand and traced patterns in the dirt beyond his bedroll. Nearby, an owl hooted. Eran had no idea if it was a shifter or just a regular owl. He didn’t feel unsafe here, compared to that forest they’d fled. He always thought the land close to the Unseelie Court would feel like poison, but it wasn’t like that at all.
‘Are your family really dead?’ Mosk said, without looking up. ‘Are they all gone?’

Eran’s finger paused in the ground, and he looked at the flames he’d been patterning, and closed his eyes.

It was evening. If he’d been back home, they would have already prepared multiple fires. One for cooking, one for the fire gods, one for home and hearth, and one for purification and warming the soul. His mother would make the one for the fire gods, his father – if he was back – made the one for cooking, and the one for home and hearth. His sisters would help. His brother – lazy – would do nothing but pretend he was somehow busy with something, and everyone would let him get away with it. Eran made the fire for purification and warming. He spoke the words over it that would turn the flames briefly blue, and he would plunge his hands in it and declare it fit for the family.

And his little sisters would come up and place their hands in the fire and tell him it was a good fire, even when it wasn’t one of his best. He was still learning. His mother made the best fires.

Eran looked down at his forearm, but the furrows his brother had made as the ice had taken him, hadn’t scarred. Eran almost wished they had.

‘They’re dead,’ Eran said. He sometimes hoped they were living in the ice, but he knew they were gone. He could feel it. There was no spark in any of them. He could feel their sparks going as he felt them going from everyone else in their village.

‘So you have nothing to live for,’ Mosk said.

‘One thing,’ Eran said, looking up at him. ‘Which I’m doing now. Then, nothing.’

‘Do you know what people who have nothing to live for are really good at?’ Mosk said, his eyes narrowing.

‘What?’

‘Dying,’ Mosk said. His lips lifted on a cold smile, and then he laid down and closed his eyes, and said nothing else.

Not that Eran asked him anything else. He was finding that he preferred when Mosk didn’t speak at all.

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A blaze of pain that was so huge, so sharp, that Eran bolted upright before he even knew it as pain. A strangled gasp, a flash of gold metal. A short blade coming towards him. A gout of heat from his gut into his clothing, and a rusted, bright snap of agony that reverberated through him and then built upon itself, and then again.

Eran moved without thinking. His hand coming up to try and fend off the blade, foggy with sleep and pain. He caught a wrist and twisted, but could already feel that he was weaker. A slash into his gut, it had gone deep. He’d been gored once, while hunting, and the horn had nearly touched his spine through his belly. He knew this pain. But once gored, the beast had been killed, and he’d only had to recover.

He didn’t have to keep fighting.

Details filtered through belatedly. It was Mosk. Still chained, but always in reach of Eran, in case
he tried to run.

Mosk had stolen his ythilok.

The shock of realising that Mosk was using a sacred dagger that wasn’t for such crass bloodshed, that was meant to stay clean and sacrosanct, spilled through him like cold water. Was there nothing that would stay untouched by this creature?

Fury had him on his knees, despite the way his abdomen gaped, and he twisted Mosk’s wrist hard enough that the fae screamed. The golden dagger dropped to the ground. Then, Eran withdrew his kh’anzar, the blade long and vicious, and he had it up and against Mosk’s throat.

Just like that, they stilled, kneeling before each other, breathing hard. Mosk staring at him with open hatred, and Eran trying to concentrate through the pain and rage.

‘So you finally show- you finally show your true colours?’ Eran managed. He pressed harder, a line of blood appeared beneath his blade.

‘I hate you,’ Mosk said, and Eran believed it. After so long wondering if Mosk felt anything at all, he could see how true it was.

‘You’re a beast.’

‘You have nothing to live for,’ Mosk said, his voice cutting. ‘I’m just helping you along.’

‘You’re a monster. It’s not enough that you’d kill so many fae, that you’d do all the things that you’ve done – you’d escape justice? But of course you would, you’re Unseelie.’

‘Our King once had a heartsong of justice. Yours didn’t,’ Mosk said, his hand splayed like he was still seeking the dagger. Then he shoved it forwards into Eran’s stomach, and even though he was weak and thin, he was Court status. Eran moaned suddenly, the pain in his gut spreading. The skin was tearing. He needed to be still. He needed to give the skin a chance to knit together.

No, first he needed to secure Mosk. He forced himself up to his feet and grabbed the chains, and then watched in amazement as Mosk screamed at him. One long, harsh note that lasted until it died into a thin wail. No words, no syllables, something so hollow that Eran felt it echo in his own chest.

‘You are…’ Eran began, and then fell silent, his voice shaking. ‘You are exactly the kind of thing that would create that plague. That creature we met was right. You’re empty. Maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll be executed quickly. But I hope – I hope – they keep you alive so that you have to live with whatever you are, maybe then you’ll exterminate yourself. You’re pathetic.’

Mosk hunched in on himself, and then began to laugh. Eran dragged him to a tree and locked the chains around the trunk with the padlock that hung from them. It looked like Mosk was embracing the tree, he’d been chained so tightly. Mosk only rested his forehead against the trunk and he stopped laughing, breathing hoarsely.

Eran stumbled back to his bedroll, uncaring of the blood staining it. He lifted his shirt and stared at the fist-wide wound, could see a gleam of yellowy-cream among the black and dark red. Mosk had slashed through skin and fat into muscle, and probably beyond from the feeling of it. In the corner of his eye, he saw the gold ythilok and couldn’t even bring himself to contemplate what it meant, that his special blade had been turned against him. What would his mother say? Would it mean he was cursed? He knew of no story where the ythilok had been so disrespected, and he knew so many of their stories.
Once on his back, he carefully placed a hand over the wound and then bent his knees to take some of the strain off his spine. He remembered this, after being gored. But back then, his family had been there. They’d given him restoratives. Here, instead, he worried that someone or something would come for them, attracted by Mosk’s scream, or the scent of blood spilled.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘The Court of Five Thrones’:

‘What did you do?’

A choked noise, Mosk fighting the compulsion, his whole body stiffening. Eran was amazed, he knew – had seen for himself – how exhausted Mosk was, and yet he was still able to resist it? But then no, Mosk’s hands tightened into trembling fists and he lifted his head, his voice shaking.

‘I didn’t- I didn't- But he caught me anyway. I sent him away and he still caught me! His words are poison. And now, I am down here in the darkness that is like no other darkness. These unnatural shadows, this unnatural miasma, I cannot breathe. I can’t breathe.’

Augus stiffened, and behind him, the Traitor King sat up straight and alert, looking so much like a predator that had suddenly seen prey, that Eran nearly stepped backwards.
Eran
*

It had taken two more days to make their way to the common entrance for the Unseelie Court, their journey hampered by how long it took for Eran’s wound to knit properly. The entrance was a forest of black trees, a trail of blue stone. Eran couldn’t even step upon it. Unlike the Seelie Court, which had seemed unguarded to him until he reached its very gates, there were thirty soldiers here, stationed at regular intervals, their eyes facing forwards.

Still, they’d let him in easily enough after he’d announced himself; though he and Mosk weren’t allowed to travel anywhere alone. Escorted down the crunching pale blue stone, he stared up in amazement at the black trees, despite his fatigue. It was incredible that he could still feel any wonder at all, and sometimes he cursed the way it bloomed in his chest, like some defect that assured him he’d have a reason to live after all this, when he knew it wasn’t true at all.

As soon as he’d walked within the Unseelie Court he felt it – that oppressive energy that wrapped around him and settled like a dull ache in the back of his mind, even as the day had fallen immediately to night. That sensation served as a reminder that he wasn’t welcome here. He was Seelie, and the Unseelie Court responded with an ancient magic that said this wasn’t his space, this safe Kingdom wasn’t for him. Mosk would have felt the same thing at the Seelie Court, though he’d said nothing about it.

Eran feared they’d take him to another antechamber and leave him there, was full of protests when they did take him to an antechamber. He’d hardly seen the huge, black and violet towering edifice that was the Unseelie Palace. Only noticed that it was prettier than he expected, like a Court of the night and the stars, instead of a Court of evil.

Eran was only there for ten minutes when he and Mosk were fetched again. They took his bedroll, his pack, and his kh’anzar, even as Eran fought them for it. Eran had to tug on the chains several times to get Mosk moving, but he no longer felt that Mosk was fighting him, so much as fighting to stay conscious. Eran had admitted to himself a day ago that the plants weren’t enough. Mosk needed a kind of food that Eran didn’t know how to get for him. Sex, sap, something else entirely. Mosk wouldn’t say.

They were brought into a large throne room, and Eran – who had only heard of the five thrones side by side but never seen them – realised that all five thrones were occupied. The throne-room itself was busy, occupied by milling fae in fanciful costumes, some even wearing masques. It was
like the Seelie throne-room, except there were more animal tails here, more wings upon people’sacks, more fur and more clawed feet. There were those who looked grotesque, and others who
looked impossibly beautiful, enchanting by appearance alone. Animal eyes flashed sharply at Eran
and Mosk curiously, but no one approached. Some looked up from board-games at small tables
hidden behind columns. Others stayed reclined in seats, smoking pipes or cigarettes, scents of
sandalwood, tobacco and musk coiling in the air.

Underneath his feet, a black marble with violet striations, the columns made of the same stone.
Behind the columns, trees that had woven together so thickly they formed the walls, while above
them, a canopy latticed together, black, glossy leaves shivering in an invisible wind. Eran thought
he could see stars beyond them in the gaps, but he knew that wasn’t possible – the throne-room
was on the ground floor, the palace itself was huge. It must have been an illusion.

The dais upon which the thrones rested was a shinier black, with no violet at all. The throne-room
itself was impeccably clean, and though Eran didn’t want to see the beauty in it, he couldn’t help
himself. There were archways leading to ballrooms, and at one point, Eran was sure he saw an
arcade filled with carved columns, plinths with sculptures, vines that bloomed with heavy bowers
of bloodied reds and alluring whites.

Then, the five thrones themselves, like something out of a story his father had woven for him.

The Traitor King didn’t take the central position, like he rightfully should. Instead, he sat at the far
left, dressed in a pale collared shirt with glinting sapphire buttons, pants the colour of undyed
deerskin. He was barefoot. His throne was understated, even though it was wrought from some
pale golden metal, as though he still had a right to the Seelie gold. He didn’t wear the crown. But
all the same, no one could mistake him for anything other than someone used to holding positions
of great power. After all, he’d been King twice now. The only King who had ever ruled over both
alignments.

There was something leonine about him, and he took in both Eran and Mosk dispassionately. His
pale blue eyes were effortlessly cold. He looked like someone who would betray any Court
without a second thought. Eran didn’t know how anyone had ever mistaken him for anything other
than what he was. He didn’t need horns or claws or fangs to look like one of the most Unseelie
creatures that Eran had ever seen.

Eran hardly paid attention as he and Mosk were announced, feeling the huge energies in the room
clamouring. He was Court fae, and it was still intense. There, next to the Traitor King, the consort
– Augus Each Uisge – sitting there looking amused, upon a throne made of hardened twisting
vines, graceful curlicues of carved wood supporting him. He wore a dark grey button-up shirt, a
vest with a pattern of silver unicorns upon it, black suede pants and heeled boots that stopped
beneath his knees. His emerald green eyes shone bright, his black hair dripping water even now, a
small puddle beneath his throne. The water beaded on the fabric, and never dampened it.

In the centre, the swan assassin on a vicious, imposing throne of leather, bone, metal and wood.
The narrow back of the throne meant that her huge white wings could rest naturally. Eran had
never met her, but he knew that she’d tricked his father into believing that Eran’s sisters were dead,
slaughtered even. He didn’t like her. She looked at Eran like she wanted to start trouble even now,
and wore her blades of death as openly as Éran usually wore his own kh’anzar. But he was an
ambaros-afrit hybrid, and she was a swan maiden. Even the Unseelie ones were supposed to be
pacifists.

Rumours went that her heartsong – the anchor of her soul – was chaos. Eran wondered how it
could be true, how the Unseelie Court could be building in strength while someone like Gulvi
Dubna Vajat sat upon the throne. Eran’s own heartsong – determination – seemed like the only thing that had gotten him here. A concept that his father had been proud of, some abstract deep inside of him that fed upon his willpower and strength. Now, only something to hold onto like a drowning man might hold onto driftwood.

In the fourth throne, the Mage that was the granddaughter of Fluri, upon a throne of a deep red wood, sitting on a comfortable looking cushion that was a vivid orange patterned in bright blue thread. Eran didn’t know much about her, except that his father talked about her with great respect, and said that she was integral to the running of the Kingdom. She had mouse ears, a little bit of her mouse nose even in her human form. Mouse maidens were never able to complete a full shift from their true-form. She was short, but her presence was formidable. Her brown skin shone with care, her face accented with make-up that left Eran feeling like he wanted a mirror, a razor, his eye liner and a chance to set his face to rights. She had a Mage’s staff affixed to a colourful red belt, and she wore a sari and choli. Her hair was tied back in a rather severe bun. She looked upon Mosk, not Eran, and her mouth was pursed.

In the fifth throne, which was...more like some kind of artefact from the human world, was the brother of the Each Uisge. The runt Glashtyn, who didn’t look like a runt at all, unless one knew that he was a waterhorse and that he should have had long black hair; not the short red-auburn-gold curls interspersed with grass green waterweed. Even he thrummed with power.

Eran realised that he was standing before the Traitor King, but he was also standing before three others who had been Queen or Kings. The only one who hadn’t was Fluri’s granddaughter. She looked like she easily could have been royalty.

He’d somehow expected that the Court would feel weaker. He’d thought that the reception he’d get here would be nothing compared to even meeting with Mage Davix. Instead, he felt awed, and annoyed with himself for feeling it. He wasn’t the kind of person to be stupid enough to try and execute a King who was – apparently – invulnerable, but he’d fantasised about it. He’d daydreamed about making sure his father didn’t have to serve someone like the Traitor King.

Now, he felt like he was nothing more than a weak candle flame, compared to each of the people he stood before.

‘Nah, look at him,’ said the Glashtyn with a faint smile, hazel eyes taking in Eran. ‘He looks a little star-struck.’

‘He shouldn’t,’ Gulvi said archly. ‘His father was Ifir.’

*Was. Not ‘is.’ Past tense. They all know he’s dead.*

Eran felt it like a hard blow to his chest, and his boots scraped on the ground as he planted his feet. His palm tightened on the chains he held, and he held back a wince, but not the way his breath caught. He could feel eyes on him, other people in the throne room that he didn’t care about at all.

‘My name is Eran Iliakambar,’ Eran said, clearing his throat when he realised how thin his voice sounded. ‘I present Mosk Manytrees, the perpetrator of the plague of ice, so that the Unseelie and Seelie may both see justice done.’

It wasn’t as good as the speech he’d given Mage Davix, but he felt like he couldn’t quite concentrate. It was someone’s dra’ocht, surely? Or perhaps he was just so exhausted now. How could these people care about justice? Why would they ever want to see justice done?

‘Augus,’ the Traitor King said, his voice deep, and surprising in the room. It was hard, even though
he still looked calm, leaning back in his throne, legs spread to take up space. A sword in a sheath was belted to his side, despite his casual clothing. His hand was lax on the armrest. At his wrist, a leather cord, a dark grey hagstone tied to it.

The Each Uisge stood, and Eran’s eyes flew to his immediately. He swallowed, watched Augus descend from the dais, and resisted the urge to draw backwards. His skin crawled as he watched the world’s most powerful waterhorse walk calmly towards him. The Each Uisge might not eat fae, but he’d murdered enough of them.

‘What proof do you have?’ Augus said, and Eran had no time to process that they hadn’t even bothered with niceties before moving straight to compulsions. His mind flipped up an answer before he knew to fight back.

‘I saw a Mage,’ Eran said, the words falling out of his mouth. He held up his wrist, with the tattoo. ‘I saw a Mage who gave this to me and said it would tell me when I’d found the perpetrator. But Mage Davix said it was false.’

Damn it!

Augus stared at the tattoo, shrugged, and then turned to look at their Mage. Eran stared at Augus’ back with a seething, tense fear. He’d encountered creatures who could compel in the past, but they’d always had to be exceedingly exact with their phrasing, or it was easy to not give an honest answer. Not only that, but the compulsions only really plucked at a single truth. Augus had used his voice to shove an answer out of Eran’s brain before he could even think to block it, worse, Eran had felt himself giving information that didn’t even seem relevant to the question. But whatever Augus had done, it had been enough to force him to give a more complete picture than he wanted to give.

‘Okay guys,’ the Glashtyn said, speaking to the whole Court. Eran blinked, dazed, when he felt the dra’ocht – the Glashtyn’s glamour – skyrocket like fireworks behind Eran’s eyes. ‘Time to exit stage right, or whatever. Clear the throne room. Show’s over. Head over to the Winter Court if you like, drinks on me. Man, Old Pete is going to flip that he missed this.’

Eran almost thought he was supposed to leave, until he turned to see all the other fae that had been milling about, filing out in the same direction. He knew that the Each Uisge was powerful, but… that hadn’t even been compulsion. That was cheating. Even though the Glashtyn hadn’t intended the good, easy feeling for Eran, he still felt it. He wanted to drop the chains. He wanted to sigh in relief.

Except the dra’ocht vanished soon afterwards, and Eran bit the inside of his lip and thought that he was in over his head.

‘Compel him,’ Eran said, some of the authority of his heritage coming back into his voice. ‘Compel Mosk, if you don’t believe me. He admitted it himself.’

Augus turned back slowly, and Eran couldn’t miss the way the Traitor King and Augus stared at each other, some silent communication or agreement, before Augus turned his attention to Mosk.

Except it was the Traitor King who spoke next.

‘Mosk Manytrees? I haven’t seen you for a long time. You do not appear to be faring well.’

‘No, Your Majesty,’ Mosk said. He’d kept his head down after looking at the Traitor King and his Inner Court. But he wasn’t quaking in fear here, he wasn’t balled up on the floor and panicking,
like he did before Mage Davix.

‘Is it true? Did you admit to creating the plague of ice?’

Mosk hesitated for a long time, and then nodded. For some reason, Eran had expected him to lie at this juncture. He’d been so rebellious, so unhelpful. Eran also felt the bite of insult. They’d treated Eran with a compulsion straight away, but Mosk got conversation, and he was the one in chains.

_Treating their own better, even when they’re a criminal. Of course._

But then the Traitor King only shifted a little, looked at Augus and lifted a hand, saying:

‘Compel him, then.’

Mosk stiffened, and the chains clinked when Eran’s hand tightened on them spasmodically. Augus sidestepped to stand directly in front of Mosk, staring at him with something unfathomable in his gaze. Eran was good at reading people, but the Each Uisge was mercurial. Even now, Eran didn’t know if he liked compelling people, or if he was genuinely obedient, or what. There were too many rumours about him. It was hard to believe he’d been King at all, except he’d hurt so many.

Though he’d left the fire fae alone, so Eran also didn’t know much about him.

Eran was shocked when Augus didn’t ask for eye contact, when he did nothing more than tilt his head to the side and calmly say:

‘What did you do?’

A choked noise, Mosk fighting the compulsion, his whole body stiffening. Eran was amazed, he knew – had seen for himself – how exhausted Mosk was, and yet he was still able to resist it? But then no, Mosk’s hands tightened into trembling fists and he lifted his head, his voice shaking.

‘I didn’t- I didn’t- But he caught me anyway. I sent him away and he still caught me! His words are _poison._ And now, I am down here in the darkness that is like no other darkness. These unnatural shadows, this unnatural miasma, I cannot _breathe._ I can’t _breathe._’

Augus stiffened, and behind him, the Traitor King sat up straight and alert, looking so much like a predator that had suddenly seen _prey_, that Eran nearly stepped backwards.

‘It would be better if I were to die, wouldn’t it?’ Mosk continued, his voice breaking. The anguish there so bright, that Eran’s heart ached, despite the knife injury that was still healing in his abdomen. Despite the fact that Mosk had tried to _kill_ him. ‘Except he’d never know. He’d never get any sort of closure. Would he forget me and move on? I don’t want him to, I want someone to _miss_ me, but I want him to move on and _forget._ I haven’t seen Ash in so long now, I only want to see him again, why is that such a cruel-’

‘Stop,’ Augus said, eyes wide. He’d gone pale, his olive skin blanching. Behind him, on the dais, the Glashtyn had gone to push himself upright, his hands pressing down on the armrests. But he’d halted, as though the Each Uisge had compelled him too.

Mosk bent forwards, rested his hands on his thighs, and was shudder-gasping. His back heaved.

Eran realised that Mosk had done the same thing to Augus, that he’d done to Eran. Drawn out some horrific memory from the person who questioned him, not spoken the truth at all. Could he trick Augus even through the compulsions? But where Eran had panicked, Augus only took a slow breath, mastered his expression and then turned.
‘Fenwrel, what manner of curse or geas is this?’

The Traitor King settled back into his throne. He rested his arm on the armrest, then rested his chin on his fist, looking between all three of them – Augus, Mosk, Eran.

The Mage Fenwrel stepped forward, twitching her sari into place with a graceful hand, as she brought out her staff. It wasn’t a wand, like what Davix used, but a proper staff of wood. It looked well cared for, Eran watched nervously, excited that they were trying to get to the bottom of what was going on instead of just dismissing him, scared that this wouldn’t be the end, when he felt so close to collapse.

Fenwrel walked past Eran without even looking at him. She stood before Mosk and reached out and took his hand gently, where it had been braced on his thigh. Eran felt the pull of it in the chains.

‘There,’ she said. ‘It’s okay. I just want to take a look at your meridians.’

Only seconds had gone by, and then, a sharp intake of breath, and Fenwrel’s ears twitched, her mouth opened. She didn’t look like someone who had ever been as shocked as she looked now. She stared at Mosk in disbelief, who had straightened somewhat, but had his eyes closed, his face twisted in pain. Her breathing was, briefly, audible.

Then, she reached for his other hand and took that, staring down.

‘What is it?’ Augus said.

‘Feel for yourself,’ she said, as though she couldn’t quite believe what was happening. ‘Look for it, his heartsong.’

Augus’ brow furrowed and he reached out and took the hand that Fenwrel offered. Mosk didn’t move through any of it, accepting whatever they were doing, still catching his breath.

‘Is it corrupted?’ Augus said, turning to her, even as he pressed his fingertips down onto the lines of his palm. Then Augus startled and dropped Mosk’s hand like it had bitten him. He took two sharp steps back and the fingers that had pressed to Mosk’s palm twitched. ‘That’s impossible.’

It was the most emotion that the Each Uisge had expressed so far. He sounded revolted.

‘It’s not,’ Fenwrel said, keeping hold of the hand she held now. ‘Though it’s- I’ve not ever heard of it happening in my lifetime. Only read about it. And he has some manner of curse over him too. This is the work of a Master Mage. There’s only two Mages in the world – that I know of – that are capable of removing a heartsong entirely.’

‘Wait, what?’ the Glashtyn said. Even the Traitor King had tensed at that. The assassin in the centre throne leaned forwards, her sharp gaze watchful. She still stared at Eran, her eyes narrowed, like he was the criminal.

‘You poor boy,’ Fenwrel whispered to Mosk, reaching up and touching his cheek gently. Mosk only stared at her.

Eran thought of the brownie that had said Mosk was hollow. He thought of the wrongness he’d felt around Mosk. He’d almost gotten used to it, but every now and then a wave of repulsion would sweep through him and he’d know that there was something fundamentally broken about him.

But he’d never thought – the heartsong was the soul, it couldn’t just be removed. It could corrupt,
or break, or reform, or even hold in a space of stasis for some years – people would say they had no heartsong but it was just a colloquialism, even then it was still *something*. It was never *missing*.

‘Davix and Olphix,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Let me guess, this is their magic?’

‘It fair reeks of it, if you ask me,’ Fenwrel said, not looking away from Mosk. ‘He’s starving. We’ll need to fetch him some sap. Here.’

She reached forwards and lifted Mosk’s upper lip with her thumb, and then she did something that made Mosk jerk backwards in a whole body flinch.

‘They – if indeed it was them – removed his feeding teeth,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I think they’re spelled to not grow back properly. He has canines, but they’re damaged. He’ll need to see Aleutia.’

‘So they are behind the fire in the Aur forest,’ the Traitor King said grimly. ‘Unsurprising. This likely puts them in position of being the creators of the plague of ice, too.’

‘Removing a heartsong is done to create a great upswell of power,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I’ve only read about it, and there were only two recorded cases. Both perpetuated by Davix and Olphix together. Even with their power, they are not strong enough to do it without the other there. Mosk is the seventh son of a seventh son. Taking that heartsong would have been more than enough to do whatever they were intending to do. If that was indeed to create the plague of ice, then I can see why the tattoo led you to this boy, instead of the Mages themselves. Davix and Olphix cannot be traced with magic, though obviously we know where Mage Davix is. I need to consult with the School of the Staff about this. But first…’

Fenwrel grimaced at Mosk. Her hand was resting on his cheek again, after she’d checked his teeth.

‘He has a complex array of magic settled over him. I’m not sure why they let him free, but he is likely unable to talk about what happened to him. Obviously, there is a spell that makes him pull upon other’s worst memories when he’s required to recall his own. A cruel magic, for you’ll feel that too, won’t you?’

Mosk’s eyes were wide now, sheened wet, and he shook. He stared at Fenwrel like she was a revelation. Eran was hard-pressed not to do the same. He couldn’t even begin to understand what he was hearing. It was like being told that fire should be started from wet wood instead of dry.

No words came to him. His rage, his fury, his determination, it concentrated in upon itself. He couldn’t tell what he felt about what had been revealed. It didn’t sound like anything was over.

Maybe Mosk hadn’t made the plague of ice, which mean that Eran had done things that-

But no, Mosk had admitted to it, and he’d...

Eran felt like he was vanishing inside of himself. It was the strangest feeling. As though wind and rain had suddenly fallen upon the fire of him. It was eating him out, a cold, dull ache. He was like a stone that had never known warmth.

He flinched when he felt fingers on his face, eyes meeting the dark brown warmth of the Mage’s. He wasn’t sure he trusted her, but he couldn’t do more than stare. Her fingers dropped away, anyway. She stared like she was concerned, but he had no idea what she’d be concerned about. He still had his heartsong, and he had a job to do.

It was all he had left.

‘Can you remove any of the curses?’ the Traitor King said.
Fenwrel quickly passed her staff over Eran, and he felt nothing at all. He almost thought she was a charlatan, except that her reputation preceded her. Magic was supposed to be noticeable. Eran almost always could tell when someone was working a spell. So far, he’d felt not a single thing from Fenwrel.

‘Aside from the ink charm he obtained from another Mage, and some basic protection charms wrought over him likely by his parents when he was born or came of age, this one is fine.’

Fenwrel didn’t say ‘Your Majesty’ to the King. But neither had the others. Eran touched his stomach with careful fingertips. Protection charms? He had seen his parents do as much for his sisters, but he’d never been told that he had the same.

Fenwrel moved over to Mosk and raised her arm. She swept the staff down, and a bolt of terror rooted Eran to the ground. He knew not where it came from, only knew that she couldn’t do it – she couldn’t remove the curses. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but it was too late.

A boom of sound, a flash that blinded, and Mosk crying out a short, sharp sound that was wrenched out of him.

When Eran’s vision cleared, Gulvi was off her throne and helping Fenwrel back to her feet. The Mage Fenwrel had been blown a clear ten metres away, half on the steps, wincing. She still had hold of her staff, and she didn’t look away from Mosk at all.

The chains went taut in Eran’s hands as Mosk went down to his knees and bent over himself, his breaths shaking.

‘Va chier!’ Gulvi exclaimed, even as Fenwrel stepped away from her, touching a hand to her hair. A few strands had fallen out of place, and she frowned, then split her gaze between the Traitor King and Mosk.

‘Report,’ the Traitor King said coldly, and Fenwrel turned to face him. Gulvi sat down again, but she leaned forwards now, staring venom at Mosk. Eran was almost relieved to not have that gaze on him, though a small part of him wondered if it wasn’t Mosk’s fault that Fenwrel had been affected like that.

That thought blew inside of him like a sharp, cold breeze. Like the promise of a winter he didn’t want to feel. He couldn’t afford to think that. Not about Mosk. Not about any of this.

‘You saw it for yourself, did you not?’ Fenwrel said. She smiled ruefully, looking over at Mosk again, before tapping her staff upon the ground. ‘That wasn’t even an attempt at a removal. The magic cast upon him sensed the interference of a Mage, or a Master Mage, and it retaliated. Until those curses remove themselves, or the Mages Davix and Olphix see fit to remove them, they are staying firmly in place. One or both of them gave up a great deal of power to make sure they fixed into place.’

‘Mage Davix said he didn’t know him,’ Eran said, his voice weaker than he expected. ‘That’s what he said. Then he sent us here. How do you know Mage Davix or Olphix are behind this?’

‘Deduction,’ Fenwrel said, as though she was lowering himself to answer him. Then, to the Traitor King she said: ‘Your Majesty, there is no one else capable of removing the heartsong. It was one of their sciences when they were tutors at the School of the Staff, and it was too repellant for anyone else to wish to practice. Not to mention that the consequences of such an act are…’

She turned to Mosk and stared at him for so long that Augus – who had remained silent the entire
time – began to scrutinise Fenwrel instead of Mosk.

‘What is it?’ Augus said with open curiosity. ‘What consequences?’

‘I never thought I’d see it in my lifetime,’ Fenwrel said, in some mix of wonder and disgust. ‘And to my knowledge, it’s never been done to the seventh son of a seventh son. It- Even doing it to an ordinary fae, to remove the anchor point of the soul, it generates so much power. It isn’t only the plague of ice that could be created from doing this to Mosk Manytrees, but so much more. Gwyn, I think this is what we have been waiting for, if you will, I think-’

‘Yes, please,’ Gwyn said, sarcasm thick in his words, ‘let’s discuss all our plans before the two who have come here straight from the Seelie Court, Davix’s touch still upon them.’

Fenwrel went silent, her back straightened from the reproach. Still, she didn’t look chastened. She looked as calculating as he did.

‘I want to investigate this more,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Put them in the cells.’

‘No!’ Eran shouted, his hand clenching so hard on the chains he held that he felt the pain of it shoot up to his shoulder and neck. ‘You’ll not separate us! I know how you treat your own. I know.’

‘Is that so?’ the Traitor King said, smiling at Eran. He looked like a lion staring pleased at its food, before it began toying with it. ‘I seem to recall that your father’s horn still hadn’t fully grown back by the time the ice took him.’

Spite simmered then, that the Traitor King would bring that up so easily, when it was such a source of shame for Ifir. He hardly spoke of it – the day the King took his horn, the time his mutiny failed. It was true, Eran’s father would need another decade before his horn fully returned to him, and even then it would look new, it would be obvious that it had been taken. Eran forced himself to look away, before he said something he truly regretted.

‘Then put them in the same cell,’ the Traitor King clipped out. When Eran finally met his gaze, he noticed it still looked lazy, and there was something almost like a smirk on his face. Eran was shocked to see it. When his father used to talk of the King, he talked of how serious he always seemed. But right now, the Traitor King was acting like this was a game. ‘You’ll have to forgive us our lack of hospitality, but it’s not the first time Davix has sent the unassuming to us, carrying curses. Olphix, too. You say Davix turned you away?’

The Traitor King lowered his hand to his sword, like he wanted nothing more than to attack someone with it. Eran knew that look. He’d held it himself when he wanted to hunt. But from the Traitor King – the one who had permanently injured the Seelie King Albion, the one who had betrayed all the Seelie and his own mother, who was now dead at his consort’s hands, the one who used only light to kill people – it seemed not nearly so innocuous.

‘Augus,’ the Traitor King said impatiently.

It wasn’t clear why the King seemed so frustrated, until Augus stepped forwards and met Eran’s eyes. Eran looked away immediately, but he knew it wouldn’t matter. The compulsions were going to rifle through his mind like a blunt instrument.

‘You say Mage Davix turned you away?’

‘I went to the Seelie Court to see justice done,’ Eran said, the fingers of his free hand opening and closing in frustration as he couldn’t stop the words from spilling. It was like a door had been
unlocked in his mind and his tongue belonged to someone else. ‘The King wouldn’t see me, so I saw Mage Davix, who told me that the spell on my arm had lied. He said the Unseelie King would be stupid enough to listen, and then he said he didn’t have time for me and that he didn’t care. He teleported us halfway between the Seelie Court and the Unseelie.’

‘You must have been travelling for some time,’ Augus said, his voice almost gentle. There was nothing gentle about the compulsions.

‘Yes,’ Eran said, his voice breaking. ‘Months. Since the plague of ice.’

‘Did Davix leave any magic upon you?’

‘I know not,’ Eran said.

‘I’ve already checked him,’ Fenwrel said, she too now sitting back upon her throne.

‘Forgive me for being thorough,’ Augus said, though he didn’t seem particularly fussed about forgiveness.

‘What is this justice you want done?’

‘Mosk Manytrees must be executed for the plague of ice, for the deaths of my family,’ Eran said, his voice strengthening before his resolve. ‘If you will not do it, I will do it myself.’

‘Of course,’ the Traitor King said. ‘It’s almost like having Ifir back in my Court.’

Eran squeezed his eyes shut. The Traitor King referred so casually to Eran’s father, and for so long since his death, no one else had spoken his name. His memory had seemed private, and all the more intimate for it. The Traitor King sullied that with deft words, and Eran wished for a magic that would take all of the Traitor King’s memories of Eran’s father out of his mind.

‘Never met a better indiscriminate killer,’ Gulvi said, and the Traitor King laughed. He laughed. The sound was cold.

‘So,’ Augus continued, ‘you’d still kill him, even after what you’ve heard today?’

‘I can’t trust any of you. All Unseelie. Led by the Great Betrayer.’

‘Seems fair,’ said the Glashtyn. ‘But doesn’t seem all that helpful if we’re going to keep Mosk alive. You still want to put them in the same cell, Gwyn?’

‘Oh, I think that won’t be a problem at all, will it, Augus?’

Eran looked up in time to see Augus smile handsomely, and then Augus was before him, clutching Eran’s face in his cool palms. His touch wasn’t cruel, but nor was it the kindness that Fenwrel had offered.

‘Eran Iliakambar, I forbid you from attempting physical harm against Mosk Manytrees while you are stationed in this Court, unless you are genuinely defending your own life. And even then, you are forbidden from striking a killing blow.’

Eran flinched backwards, but the compulsion was there now, a block in his mind, not something that let words free, but something that squatted heavy upon his thoughts like a stone. He made a faint whining sound, and Augus hummed, pleased.

‘Now, then, tell me you agree?’
‘I agree,’ Eran said immediately. Of course he did. Eran had been locked into walls and couldn’t see a clear way to break through them. His father had intended to teach him how to fight compulsions, but Eran had only just come of age a few years ago, and learning to resist compulsions – even a little – was traumatic on the mind. His father had intended to wait another seventy or eighty years, until Eran had seen his third century.

Augus let go of his face and stepped away. A moment later, he yawned and covered the gesture with polite fingers. Eran thought there was a chance that Augus hadn’t done it on purpose, but he was almost certain he had.

‘Fenwrel,’ the Traitor King said, and then he pointed to Eran. ‘Mute his powers first, please. If Eran is here on some vendetta of justice, we’ll make sure he doesn’t see it done until the justice is true. I’ve never trusted the Seelie on such matters.’

‘What?’ Eran said, horrified.

Fenwrel walked up to him, even as Eran stared past her to the King.

‘You can’t just mute my-’

The staff knocked once against his chest, and there was a brilliant wash of colour across Eran’s vision. An azure so bright he’d only seen that in the sky once, on the hottest day he’d ever lived through. Crimson like blood. An orange like the blossoms in the desert after the rains. A magenta, like the wreath Ifir had made for Eran’s mother, because he loved her and needed no occasion.

It drove him to his knees. The colours blanketed across him, turned the fire inside of him into ash. They’d killed him. They’d-

He pressed his fists into his chest and breathed, felt none of that constant, steady warmth. The air felt chilled in his mouth. His eyes no longer felt heated – something he’d not realised he carried with him until it was gone. But he was breathing. With every shaking breath, he knew he was still breathing.

He stared up at Fenwrel, weakened, the truth of the exhaustion he’d carried with him for weeks, no, months, stealing into him. Without his fire, he couldn’t be tempered before it. Without it, he couldn’t summon the spark that kept him going. There was heat there in him somewhere, he could sense it like a distant sun, banked by clouds. Too far. He couldn’t reach his own magic, his own powers. His throat worked on a gag that didn’t pass his lips.

‘It’s temporary,’ Fenwrel said, her voice softer than her expression.

‘Perhaps,’ the Traitor King said. Eran couldn’t even look at him. His fingers clawed across his dirty clothing, like he could find Fenwrel’s magic and pull it out of him, or find the flame and strengthen it. ‘Mosk Manytrees is the only one who can get us closer to any sort of truth about the matter of the ice plague, even with his curses. He is the last Aur dryad, and he was likely the only witness to what truly happened there. Since keeping him under surveillance is important to you, Eran Iliakambar, you can share a cell. Consider that my magnanimity.’

Eran thought he’d collapse from the shock of what had happened to his mind, his body, but he didn’t. Instead, he turned to look at Mosk – who was still on his knees – and saw the same dull look of fear on Mosk’s face, as he imagined was on his own.
In our next chapter, 'A Tender Mercy':

Instead, exhausted, Mosk dragged himself up so that he was balanced on his knees, and then his hands went clumsily to the fastening at the Each Uisge’s pants.

This? This was something he could do.

‘Oh dear,’ the Each Uisge said, taking Mosk’s fingers and holding them away from his crotch. ‘No, thank you.’

‘It’s fine,’ Mosk said. ‘It’s fine.’
A Tender Mercy

Chapter Notes

No official new tags but this chapter does have interrogation components so yeah, I guess a chapter tag for that.

Will be good for a release next weekend as well! I hope folks enjoy the chapter. :) And first Mosk perspective chapter, woot!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mosk

*  

Blood trickled from his eyes. He tasted it in his mouth. Normally, he wouldn’t care. He’d tasted blood in his mouth more times than he could count, since the fire. The absence of that metallic tang was stranger, and he spat it onto the floor of the Unseelie dungeon cell and wished he didn’t care. Wished it was as empty as everything else he’d experienced ever since.

‘Tch,’ said the waterhorse, leaning down and gently touching Mosk’s hair. Mosk didn’t flinch away. Should he be intimidated? He wasn’t. He didn’t even bother wiping at his eyes. The blood filmed over them in a way that was annoying, but if the waterhorse stopped questioning him, it didn’t matter.

On the opposite side of the cell, up against the wall, Mosk could make out the blurry form of his captor. Ex-captor? Eran Iliakambar, the one who made all that disgusting fire. The one who deserved to know what it was like to burn.

Mosk couldn’t touch flames, he couldn’t make them, he couldn’t look at them, so he couldn’t be the one to burn Eran to death. Truthfully, he couldn’t even fantasise about it. No. He didn’t like to think about bodies burning, so he pushed the images away. He grew it out on a branch in his mind, until the leaves pressed through the main canopy into the sky, away from his thoughts. He didn’t have to see it, and the leaves would fall eventually anyway. They’d rot in the ground. Then he’d never have to think about it again.

‘Is it the lack of heartsong that makes you like this?’ the waterhorse said, his cultured voice so tender for what he was doing. Mosk didn’t know how the waterhorse could stand it. Mosk couldn’t stand it.

Learning that he didn’t have a heartsong though? That made sense, he supposed.

That made sense.

He knew exactly when that had happened.

He wouldn’t think about that day again either.

So many days he’d never think about again.
'Tell me how you lost your heartsong then?'

This was the part that Mosk cared about. He hadn’t expected to care about anything, but instead his teeth slammed together and he made a thin whining sound as he tried to fight the magic inside of him. He didn’t want to feel that darkness again, he didn’t want to go to that place, he didn’t know how the waterhorse could stand to hear the memories, but Mosk had to live them, and he couldn’t - he couldn’t - he- 

Then, he wasn’t Mosk anymore, but a creature made for water and lakes and rain and lilies, with the blood of humans in the back of his throat and claws that threatened to grow at a moment’s notice. Except he wasn’t in a lake, but in a place that no fae should ever visit. Deep down in the underworld, where the very miasma threatened the stability of his lungs, the integrity of his being. Being Unseelie wouldn’t save him from this place. He missed his brother, he missed his life, his fingers ached, his claws were gone. His claws, so carefully tended, now gone. Torn out? Fallen out from malnutrition? Splintered from clawing the ground?

He’d lost them in so many different ways.

Words spilled from his throat. He heard two voices. His own, and then another voice distantly, another voice which he also knew was his.

So confusing.

But instead, here in the dark, he felt only desperation. He couldn’t stop himself from-

‘Please just let me see some light again, please. I’ll- I’ll do anything at all. I’ll do anything you ask of me! What part of my body have you not taken yet, that you still want? What riches? What can I give you? A Kingdom? Do you know what I’d do? Please- Sir, Lord, whatever title you desire, please let me see some light again.’

Begging. It felt disgusting. It was the weak slimy bile he vomited up and it was the way his fingertips started bleeding again. Revolting too, the way that creature stood in the corner and stared, red eyes glowing, and he knew, he knew the Nightingale didn’t even care enough to smile.

‘Stop,’ said the waterhorse.

Mosk stopped talking. He was himself again. He had no idea how much he’d said. He dropped down until his forehead touched the floor, retched against the soil. His hands and wrists and arms ached from the manacles. No one had removed them.

‘Please,’ Mosk rasped. ‘I don’t want to go back there again. I don’t want to be in that darkness again. Stop doing it.’

This curse, how he loathed it. It had made him see Eran Iliakambar’s family swallowed by some impossible monstrosity of ice. It made him relive the worst histories of others. He heard himself sob, almost laughed, because he didn’t feel it. Not properly. Oh, he could feel fear. He could even feel other emotions sometimes. But everything was so far away. Had he ever cared about a single thing?

The waterhorse had asked him so many questions. Hours had passed. Mosk thought he should have passed out by now, but he’d learned the hard way that many things could happen to him – things that would hurt, things that would tire him, and he’d not pass out. Unconsciousness was hard to find, and he couldn’t will it.

He didn’t care to live it, so why should he bother?
He itched for someone to fuck him. He didn’t feel that properly either, but it would be something to occupy him. It gave his body something to do, and it was something the curses couldn’t touch. No one talked to him in a way that required responses. No one asked questions. It made him forget sometimes, that he’d had magic he didn’t want placed inside of him, after everything else had been ripped away.

*My heartsong is gone.*

What had it been?

*Determination.*

His heartsong had once been determination.

Mosk laughed.

Heartsongs were supposed to be inviolable, weren’t they? But so was the Aur forest. Nothing was inviolable. Even a soul could be torn from him, if someone had enough power. The mouse Mage had talked of other Mages, and those names and thoughts and images had him cowering, but he didn’t care about pride enough anymore to stop himself. What shame should he feel? Nothing mattered.

It was his fault, and they should kill him. As much as he loathed Eran for continuously burning him, for lording his flames over him, Mosk knew he was right. He could see it in the amber light in Eran’s eyes and the fixed set to his mouth. Eran had determination where Mosk had lost his.

Fingers at his chin and Mosk found himself looking up into bright green eyes. The Each Uisge’s irises had become lambent as the questioning had gone on, and Mosk knew the waterhorse wanted to hunt something. No waterhorse could use their compulsions so much and not need to hunt something.

*Eat me,* Mosk thought.

But no, waterhorses didn’t eat fae, no matter how the rumours went.

Instead, exhausted, Mosk dragged himself up so that he was balanced on his knees, and then his hands went clumsily to the fastening at the Each Uisge’s pants.

This? This was something he could do.

‘Oh dear,’ the Each Uisge said, taking Mosk’s fingers and holding them away from his crotch. ‘No, thank you.’

‘It’s fine,’ Mosk said. ‘It’s fine.’

‘Is it?’ the Each Uisge said. ‘You are such a different creature from the one I saw at the Masque Ball, years ago. What underworld have you been in, then? As you can tell, as you have told me, you know very well what it is to exist in torment, don’t you? At least I can talk about mine.’

The Each Uisge’s touch was lukewarm, and his hands were dry. It made Mosk aware of how clammy he was. He tried not to think about it. His stomach was a hard knot of pain. He’d not eaten properly for so long. He couldn’t starve to death, exactly…

Or could he?
No, he was Court. He couldn’t starve to death.

So the knot of pain where sap should be didn’t matter either. Mosk had learned that pain was only a signal, and it meant nothing more than inconvenience. Even the burns Eran had inflicted on him, they’d all eventually healed.

‘Believe it or not,’ the Each Uisge said, amusement in every word, ‘I don’t want something like you touching my cock. Your methods of seduction require refinement. I’d offer to help, but I must report back to the King.’

‘The Traitor King,’ said Eran, on the opposite side of the cell.

‘Yes,’ the Each Uisge said, unbothered, ‘the Traitor King. The one who knows more of the Seelie and its ways than you ever will. And how does it feel, Eran? Are you sore, not being able to call those flames forth? I could compel the truth of it from you, if you like.’

A stubborn silence followed, and the Each Uisge laughed quietly, and then considered Mosk’s face again.

‘Perhaps I’m not done questioning you yet,’ the Each Uisge said, and Mosk shuddered.

‘Leave him alone.’

Mosk’s eyes widened just after the Each Uisge’s did. Mosk was too tired to look over his shoulder to stare in amazement, but he could see the shock on the Each Uisge’s face all the same.

‘I do beg your pardon?’ the Each Uisge said.

‘Just leave him alone,’ Eran said. ‘Didn’t you just say you had to report back to the King?’

‘Ah, does it offend your Seelie sensibilities?’ the Each Uisge mocked. He let go of Mosk’s hands and grabbed his shoulder instead. Mosk cried out when claws dug in through his shirt, and blood spilled down his back. The pain lanced through him, and he was confused. Didn’t the Each Uisge lose his claws? But no, that had been the memory. ‘Well, Eran Iliakambar? Perhaps you wish to know the questioning techniques your father favoured, when interrogating prisoners?’

A dull flickering of surprise when Eran said nothing at all. Especially because Eran had talked back – been impudent – at the Seelie Palace, with... with...that Mage.

‘Well?’ the Each Uisge said, the compulsion in his voice heavy. ‘What bothers you about this?’

A wrenched sound of frustration, and Mosk knew that feeling all too well, hated that he had anything at all in common with Eran.

‘If it is as you all say,’ Eran said, his voice stilted, ‘and he has had his heartsong removed, and the forest has been burned, then you are obligated to show your countryman more compassion than this. But more than that, I am- I am...’ Eran’s voice shook, and the Each Uisge let go of Mosk entirely and walked around him.

‘You’re getting the hang of it? Already?’ the Each Uisge said. ‘Tell me.’

‘I pity him,’ Eran said, his voice strangled. ‘You’re torturing him. It scares me that you’ll let loose down here, and no one will ever find us. Or care.’

Eran’s rough, ragged breathing filled the cell, and Mosk sank down to the floor, rolled to his side,
and closed his eyes. He couldn’t see anything out of them properly anyway. His vision was still blurry. He felt dizzy if he stood for too long, but the room still felt like it was swimming even when he lay upon the floor.

‘Anything’s possible,’ the Each Uisge said. ‘But for now, I must report back to the Traitor King. I highly recommend you call him that to his face as often as possible.’

The Each Uisge sketched a brief, condescending bow, then turned back to Mosk, who flinched away. He didn’t want to care about what the waterhorse could do to him, but after several hours, he just didn’t understand how the Each Uisge could be so calm about hearing the memory of that place repeated back to him like that. Mosk didn’t want to think about it ever again, but he knew he’d see it in his dreams. That emptiness. That darkness that he only understood as the underworlds because when he’d bleatingly asked where those horrors had taken place, the Each Uisge had explained to him that he was reliving what it was to be in the underworlds.

Nothing was said, the Each Uisge watched him with a lidded gaze, then stepped beyond the invisible barrier that locked Mosk and Eran into the dank, underground cell and allowed the Each Uisge free reign.

His footsteps thudded dully as he walked away, and Mosk listened, only letting his body go limp when he heard them fade entirely.

‘I hate those compulsions,’ Eran said.

Mosk wondered what Eran wanted him to do. They weren’t friends. Was he just making conversation? It was like he didn’t understand how much of this he’d done to himself. If Eran hadn’t been so obsessed with finding someone connected to whatever that plague of ice was, and killing them, or taking them to the Seelie Palace, or whatever he wanted, he wouldn’t be in this mess. And Mosk…

Well, Mosk knew he’d probably still be getting fucked en masse in some tavern somewhere. Until someone decided to kill him or take it too far. No one had taken it too far. Mosk was unable to kill himself, and by the lords of the trees, how he’d tried. The magic on him was too cruel for that.

No heartsong. It didn’t seem possible. How could he still think? How did he still have opinions about things?

Luridan had called him empty, hollow. Interesting that Luridan could sense it. But brownies had powers that dryads did not.

Mosk didn’t even have the powers that dryads had. Though he tried not to think about it, he felt the absence constantly.

He knew the giant oak that limned this prison. They were in its roots underground. He knew if he put his hand to the root, instead of hearing the tree whispering wisdom and stories to him, he’d feel only cold damp. He couldn’t even sense the sap beneath the bark anymore. He couldn’t feed. He wasn’t in any meaningful way a dryad.

They hadn’t killed him and yet…they had.

‘Are you all right?’ Eran said.

Mosk laughed, his voice cracking hoarsely.

‘I suppose that answers that question,’ Eran said.
‘G-give me time,’ Mosk said. ‘I’ll try and kill you again. Now that you don’t have your fire.’

‘Be silent. You have no idea what that…’ Eran’s voice died away, and Mosk rolled onto his back and slapped his hand out to the tree root and felt it, cold and wet beneath his palm. No whispers. No stories. No wisdom. He wanted to scream. Had they burrowed into his mind and scooped out the part of him that could hear them? He hadn’t realised how important it was until it was gone.

No, he’d always known it was important. They’d doomed him. He’d never hear his Aur tree calling him. He’d never – no matter how many years he lived, hopefully not many – be an adult by the standards of the Aur. If he wasn’t paired with a tree, if his eyes didn’t glow golden-green and stayed an immature grey with that wash of pale green, he’d never be anything more than a sapling. He could live for five thousand years, he’d only ever be a sapling.

‘How’s your righteous sense of justice feeling?’ Mosk said. ‘I know why I’m in a cell, but it’s nice that you’re in one too.’

‘Oh, so now you want to talk?’ Eran said, his voice sharp.

Mosk would have liked his voice, a long time ago. It was deep and smooth. Eran spoke with the kind of command that came from expecting others to follow his authority. It was strange, Mosk had been – once upon a time – far more powerful than almost anyone in the world. Not that he’d known how to use his magic or his powers. Still, the Mages had known, and Mosk supposed the outcome of that was proof that he’d been that powerful all along.

But he’d never felt powerful. He didn’t expect people to listen to him. He was a dryad, his place was among the trees, living in an ecosystem of peaceful give and take.

His fingers scratched over the soil that covered the root and he wished he could just hear the tree. Just once. A faint mumble or whisper, even one he couldn’t understand.

‘I want to ask you about it,’ Eran said, ‘but all the questions I’d ask, that monster just asked you. It’s plain you can’t answer them.’

‘So you’ll trust the Unseelie now, when we’re all liars?’ Mosk said, not opening his eyes. ‘You’d believe him?’

‘I believe the blood coming from your eyes,’ Eran said quietly, not rising to the bait.

Mosk just wanted to make him angry until Eran would kill him. Eran couldn’t burn him to death, so maybe he’d just snap Mosk’s neck. They were both Court status, Eran could do major harm if he wanted, unlike lesser status fae, who would have to put their backs into it, and likely wouldn’t kill him anyway.

Distantly, Mosk remembered that Eran had been compelled not to harm him, and he groaned softly. If only he had compulsions. Though he doubted it would have stopped anything that had happened.

Eran said nothing else, and Mosk found himself lapsing into a heavy doze, his hand slipping from the oak root, falling limply to the ground.

*

It was the Mage next, and Mosk startled awake, panicking, staring at her as she knelt before him, holding a canister of something in one hand, and his hand in the other.

‘Ah, you’re awake,’ she said. Mouse-maiden and Mage. Before her grandmother – Fluri the
mouse-maiden – no one had ever known that something like a mouse shifter could even be a Mage, let alone train at the School of the Staff. Mosk wanted to like her. He had once admired her. But time changed all things and Mages terrified him, so he just stared, resisting the urge to pull his hand away. It hurt anyway. The shoulder with the claw wounds hurt. He didn’t like to use his hands more than he had to. The shackles were like a parasitic vine growing through the heartwood of him, he swore he could sometimes feel the iron in his marrow.

‘I mean you no harm,’ she said. ‘You may call me Fenwrel, if you wish.’

She let go of his hand and reached out to his face, and Mosk’s lips thinned, but he didn’t move back. She only touched the drying flakes of blood on his cheek, rubbing at them like she could remove them. Mosk knew that blood was stubborn. He also didn’t much care what he looked like. Semen was about the only thing that stuck like blood, worse even, depending on how much there was.

‘I have brought you sap,’ Fenwrel said, holding up the canister. ‘It’s fresh. Until we can work out why you can’t feed, it will need to be tapped for you. Sip it slowly.’

Mosk stared at her, then turned his head and stared at the canister and reached for it with a shaking hand. His fingers curled around it, slipped, and then he forced himself to lift it. He could feel the fluid sloshing inside, even as he curled his arm towards his body and held it against his chest.

The plants that Eran got for him, the weeds that Mosk sometimes plucked up for himself, they weren’t enough. But tapped tree sap, that…

Mosk couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a proper meal.

It was hard to unscrew the lid off. The whole thing was well-crafted. The wood itself was carved with different leaves. The inside was lined so it would seal properly. The sap itself – from the scent alone, Mosk thought it might be a kind of elm. His mouth prickled with saliva, and his feeding teeth ached all the way up into the back of his jaw. He half-expected Fenwrel to take it away from him, but she didn’t.

He lifted the lip of the canister to his mouth, shackles clinking, and closed his eyes. The sap was thin, raw, it hadn’t even been boiled down. It was the way he liked it. This elm tasted of health and strong roots, branches that leapt up at the sky and leaves that quivered in breezes. Too old for most woodpeckers, standing tall and formidable, yet inviting all beneath its shade. It was refreshing and faintly bitter, the sweetness a little murky, distant on the back of his tongue.

‘Careful,’ Fenwrel said sharply. ‘Not too much.’

Mosk gasped wetly, sap dripping down both corners of his mouth. He had no idea how much he’d had, and his stomach still hurt fiercely, but tears burned his eyes when he saw her reaching to take the canister away.

Still, he let her take it. Staring at her hands instead of her face. She had faintly aged hands. She was one of the few fae who had chosen to age her physical appearance past that of perfect youth. Her brown skin shone even in the faint light of the cell, like she moisturised her hands.

‘Wait a moment to see how it settles,’ Fenwrel said, shifting her sari and kneeling gracefully upon the floor. She carefully tucked her mouse tail around herself. ‘May I ask you a few questions?’

‘The waterhorse…’ Mosk said.

‘I don’t mean those types of questions,’ Fenwrel said, smiling briefly. ‘You’ve been ill. I am not
sure what happened after the Aur forest was burned down, but I am certain that you cannot tell me. But had you not realised your heartsong had been taken before today?"

Mosk shook his head. Of course he hadn’t known. They’d never said that’s what they were doing. They’d just…done whatever they wished. They’d told him hardly anything at all, unless they wanted to terrify him.

‘I think in time, it will grow back,’ Fenwrel said.

A shifting sound – Eran, against his side of the cell. Mosk ignored it, stared at her.

‘What?’

‘Of course the knowledge we have is limited, but this is what I believe. Especially that you are still alive and lucid. It may happen quickly, or it may take time. Until then, your mind turns in upon itself, and you may find yourself seeking to self-destruct, as someone might when their heartsong corrupts. There may be physical symptoms too. Dizziness. Fatigue. A sense of being separate from the world around you.’

‘How do you know?’ Mosk said. ‘You can’t know that.’

‘I have also read your meridians,’ Fenwrel said. ‘They run like poisoned rivers. Ah, forgive me, I am much more used to talking in metaphors of water and lakes lately. Perhaps it might be more apt if I say that there is a sickness beneath the surface, a cloudiness to the sap in you.’

Mosk’s brief sense of connection to her shattered. He didn’t care about any of this. It didn’t matter if he was sick or poisoned. All he knew was that he wasn’t lucky enough to be dying. No one had killed him yet.

A spasm of pain shook him, starting at his stomach and radiating outwards. He choked, and then turned sideways, for a moment fearing she’d poisoned him. But no, she looked alarmed.

‘If it has been so long since you’ve fed,’ Fenwrel said, after Mosk did nothing more than shake upon the ground, ‘this can happen. Especially if you’ve eaten too fast. Try not to throw it up.’

Mosk nodded, but he felt no nausea. His body broke out into a hot sweat that chilled quickly. The pain throbbed inside of him, like his stomach was remembering how to work again. Eventually, the worst of it passed, and he sighed. It wasn’t even close to the worst pain he’d ever felt. It was just unexpected. That was all.

He pushed himself up to an awkward sitting position, and was surprised when Fenwrel handed him the canister again.

‘I think you’re safe to have a little more,’ she said.

Mosk risked looking over at Eran, who was watching them both. It was a surprise to realise that Eran looked exhausted. He had a curious, awake light in his amber eyes, but there were shadows beneath them, and his face looked gaunter than it had at the beginning. Mosk hadn’t been paying much attention, but he’d known as the journey had kept on going, that even Eran couldn’t keep up his pace forever.

‘What did you do to me?’ Eran said, looking away from Mosk and glaring at Fenwrel instead. ‘Tell me.’

‘I don’t take my orders from you, young man,’ Fenwrel said evenly.
'You made me sick!'

'You are not under any sickness. Your fire has been muted.'

'That is a sickness!' Eran said, standing swiftly. Mosk held the canister closer to himself without thinking about it. 'It is torture to do that to a fire fae! Of course you wouldn’t know, being a mouse-maiden, but-'

Fenwrel held up a hand, her dark eyes glittering, even as she didn’t otherwise move.

'We don’t need you,' Fenwrel said abruptly. 'Once we have chased up the extent of your involvement in this, you will be freed, and – if you wish – the full breadth of your power returned back to you. But you are nothing more than a witness, and you have proven yourself cruel and untrustworthy. I know not what involvement Mosk Manytrees has in the circumstances we find ourselves in, but he is involved, and his life must be preserved until we know how.'

Mosk sighed to himself. So they weren’t going to help him die either. Hearing a member of the King’s own Inner Court lecture Eran like the upstart he was, lost its satisfaction.

'You are lucky I lower myself to talk to you at all,' Fenwrel said. 'Consider your fortunes, Eran Iliakambar, and consider them well. Your family have died. You have no wealth to access and your name no longer carries any value except to those who held your mother or father in high esteem, yet you slander us when you meet us, not even knowing who we might be. You cannot be a chieftain in training, when there is nothing to rule over.'

'You dare-'

'You are not our equal,' Fenwrel continued. 'You are a child. Perhaps you count yourself an adult by the turning of your years, but your two centuries of gallivanting about in the desert to your heart’s content, feeding upon the fatted riches of your parents while contributing little yourself, are over. A Mage brought you to this boy, who has also lost everything – more than you could imagine – and you determined to place him in iron, starve him further, drag him before his other captor.'

'I didn’t know-‘ Eran said, and then broke off, making a sound of sheer frustration. ‘The magic told me he did it! That he did it! He’s the reason my family are dead. He’s the reason, and he should be slaughtered for it and if you let me have my fire I would do it myself, as you’ve proven yourselves to be-'

Fenwrel did something with her hand, and Eran’s voice strangled off forcibly in his throat. Then he dropped to his knees, clawing at his neck. He stared at her, the whites showing all around his eyes.

'My Grandmother was Fluri the mouse-maiden,’ Fenwrel said. ‘She studied with the Raven Prince, who mastered all magic to do with language and the killing of it. If you cannot speak to an elder with more respect, you will not speak at all.’

Eran had scratched red lines into his throat, but his fingers faltered at her words.

Mosk decided that he hated all Mages. Even this one. Just because her magic wasn’t turned in Mosk’s direction, didn’t mean it wasn’t still evil. He knew the magic she used. He’d felt it himself. Knew what it was to have words building upon his tongue only for someone’s hand gesture to keep them locked instead like hooks in the back of his throat. It hurt. They were only words, but somehow it was agonising.

‘The charm took you to someone involved in the making of the plague of ice. We have already deduced that he was involved. Someone burned down his forest, destroyed his family with the
express purpose of stealing him and taking his magic and his heartsong to create the very thing that we cannot stop. We even know who those people are. And they are strong enough to make sure that your tattoo never locates them. Meaning that it took you to the only other person connected, even though I believe he is not truly at fault.’

No, Mosk thought. You don’t know anything at all. Even if you are a Mage.

‘You, Eran, are hanging onto these beliefs because the alternative hurts you too much to contemplate,’ Fenwrel said.

I could have told him that, Mosk thought to himself. Except that where Fenwrel seemed to think Mosk was only some kind of victim, Mosk knew better. He knew with slinking dread that Eran’s charm had found someone truly at fault. Mosk didn’t like to think about it, but he’d long ago let go of hanging onto beliefs that soothed him.

‘But we do not have time for your denial.’ Fenwrel stood, dusting off her knees with elegant swipes of her hand. Her mouse ears twitched once. ‘Do not tell me that I have extinguished your fire or made you sick. I know how to do both, and you would know if I had done either.’

She placed a hand on Mosk’s shoulder, and Mosk stared up at her.

‘We will return with more food. I am hoping you should not need to be in the cells for much longer.’

She, too, stepped through the invisible barrier. As she left, she made a quick, twisting motion with her fingers, and Eran slumped back against the cell wall, sobbing weakly, holding his hands to his mouth and throat. Mosk knew he could talk again, but he also knew that there was a period of time where it was sometimes more tempting to wait, because of the fear that maybe the words would never return.

Mosk drank some more of the sap, taking it more slowly, thinking that if he didn’t drink it at all, maybe he’d eventually fall unconscious. But no, probably no one would kill him while he was unconscious.

‘If you like,’ Mosk said, side-eyeing Eran, ‘we can fuck.’

‘What?!’

Mosk resisted the urge to smirk, and kept sipping delicately at the sap. There, Eran knew he had his voice back. It was clear that Eran was never going to touch him with anything except hatred in his hands. Mosk didn’t want anything else, anyway.

‘When the compulsion wears off,’ Mosk said, ‘you can kill me yourself.’

‘I don’t need your permission,’ Eran said.

He sounded upset. Like he’d been crying. Mosk didn’t want to look at him.

‘Maybe you feel too sorry for me now,’ Mosk said. Damn it, how could it still hurt this much when he didn’t care?

‘If they don’t kill you, I will,’ Eran said. ‘After all of this.’

There, Mosk thought, feeling something like peace for the first time in months. There. Thank you. Hold onto it, please.
But if Mosk wanted Eran to hold onto it, he had to make him.

‘Until then, if you like, we can fuck.’

‘We’ve been over this,’ Eran said, exasperated.

‘It was pleasing, listening to you say nothing at all,’ Mosk said. ‘Do you think I could get her to do it again?’

‘I see the truth of you.’ Eran sounded truly venomous, and Mosk closed his eyes in relief. ‘I see you. You’ve convinced everyone else of how innocent you are, but we both know you’re not. They can try and cast me aside, they can insult me, my family, but no matter how much I pity you, I still know the truth.’

Mosk looked over to Eran, wanting to goad him, but he stopped at the look on Eran’s face, at the scratch marks on Eran’s neck. If Mosk could foster his hatred, it would be a mercy in the end. Even as he distantly loathed Eran and wanted the shackles off his wrist. Those things weren’t as strong as the certainty in his heart that he deserved to die, and his torture was being cursed into living this half-life.

He was terrified of fire, but being burned to death would be a terribly poetic justice for someone like him, in the end.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Hand of God':

‘I regret you,’ Kabiri said, turning with a grin to the Traitor King. ‘Almost. Rude and recalcitrant little charge. You beg for a god to save you and I answered. Whose fault is it that you didn’t ask for a god of healing? Not mine. You wanted fire, look at what you got. More than you could handle, fussy Gwyn. Stop tempting me with all your ‘he doth protest too much.’ So many ways I could fuck you up, Your Majesty, so knock it off with the bad attitude.’

‘Then by all means, please get to the point. You’re obviously here to claim your second debt.’
Woo! Next update will be around December 2nd! Huge thanks to the commenters, you give me life, and also to the folks who are bookmarking / leaving kudos / subscribing etc.

I mean I had to bring Kabiri back, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

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It might have been about twelve hours, or sixteen. Eran was quietly marking the time as best as he could without access to daylight. He could monitor his own need to sleep, but he suspected fatigue misled him. It was getting harder to ignore the cost of the journey, harder to see the point of what he was doing. Without a proper sense of his fire, he felt lost. Just smoke dispersing in the night, becoming nothing at all.

His feelings towards Mosk were changing. It frustrated him, and he fought it. Watching someone repeatedly tortured with compulsions would make anyone look sympathetic, even the person who had killed his parents, his family. Maybe it just proved Eran wasn’t heartless.

Sometimes he was relieved that his parents weren’t around to see what he’d become in their absence.

They’d brought Mosk sap three times now. Mosk was protective of it, Eran felt guilty every time he saw the way his hands shook when he drank. If he’d known exactly what Mosk needed...but would he have tapped a tree for it? He couldn’t have afforded the time, he didn’t have the tools. He didn’t even know where to buy sap.

The Unseelie pall in the Palace weighed on him heavily. It was a headache that lurked heavy and squatting in the back of his mind. He could feel it upon his skin, a cold cloak that didn’t belong. Underground, away from the sun, his blood seemed to curdle. Nausea was thick in the back of his throat even though they brought him burned things to eat, understanding his appetite and providing him with charred flesh and grilled fruits.

He was terrified of seeing the mouse-maiden again. He’d never known anything like it, the words locking up in his body at a motion of his hand. It wasn’t like losing his voice, which had happened when he was learning how to speak flame as a child. It came with a strange, deep fear. A knowledge that he’d not even be able to sign or write what he was thinking. All he had was his fingers at his throat, trying to make the magic go away.

So this was the lay of his life now. Away from the sands and dunes and rocky mountains of home. Away from the incubating heat of the active volcano and unable to even see the sun. He thought he’d known heartbreak once, when a lover had left him behind, or the day his first kratel gazelle – a perfect, lithe steed – had died during his second hunt. Instead, he felt as though everything that
had gone before the ice had been a pleasant dream; even the hazy, hurting moments.

Would he ever stop wanting to go home?

They called him a child and it made him bristle to hear it, but sometimes – especially in this cell – he felt every inch of his youth. The world was far different than what he’d been raised to know. He felt himself as stubborn and uneducated and a fae they looked down upon, even though he was noble and Seelie.

He blamed it on his missing fire, occasionally rubbing at his chest. He couldn’t pray. He couldn’t honour his ancestors. The words of worship felt hollow in his mouth. He knew this was the time when he should apply himself with more diligence to his faith. Instead, he felt faithless, and knew he’d lost whatever strong sense of self had guided him here.

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It was some time later – maybe half a day – Eran watching Mosk idly picking dried, flaking blood from his cheek, when he felt a shift in the atmosphere. There were no footsteps approaching, but a frisson of something prickly and strong. Mosk didn’t notice, but Eran’s skin crawled.

A blaze of light directly in the cell, and the Traitor King appeared, his face grim. Eran tried to bury the bolt of terror that followed.

‘You,’ the Traitor King said, without even looking at Mosk. He stared down at Eran, and then grasped him by the upper arm, hauling him upright. ‘With me.’

Eran didn’t even have an opportunity to fight back or struggle. One moment he was in the dark of the cell, and the next he was blinking, dazed, in a throne-room that seemed deserted. They’d teleported in a rush of light. Eran was used to his father’s teleportation, which was harsh, coarse fire. Or his mother’s, which was warming and orangey-yellow, leaving a feeling of having been cradled by flames. Gwyn’s was…surprisingly gentle, but otherwise, it felt like nothing at all.

Gwyn didn’t remove his grip from Eran’s arm, and it wasn’t like Eran had any weapons anyway. Even if he did, he wasn’t stupid enough to take them up against one of the greatest sword-masters in the fae world.

He was marched down a long corridor, past archways that led into other rooms or vaulted halls. There were decorative columns here, sculpted with gargoyles or Unseelie satyr, merfolk and wyrms. Eran tried to take stock of his surroundings, thinking of all the times his father must have spent here, walking down these very halls with the Traitor King by his side.

Then, Eran was pushed forcefully into a room intended as some kind of lounge or place of relaxation. He didn’t quite fall to his knees, getting his feet under himself, glaring at the Traitor King who wasn’t even looking at him.

‘There,’ the Traitor King said, sounding forbidding. ‘Clearly alive.’

‘Doesn’t look too happy about it,’ said a cheerful, tired voice.

Eran turned slowly, surprised to see a young man who only looked about nineteen, except he carried an impression of ancientness that sunk into Eran’s bones. The colourful orange, red and violet furs. The olive brown of his skin, the black and red bone ridges of his forearm and cheeks, the red-black nails and the wild yellow eyes were immediately recognisable, even though Eran had never seen him before. Not in person. But he knew those ringlets of black hair, the rough wildness to him, though it looked wilder and sicker than Eran could have imagined.
He sank to his knees immediately, placing his forehead upon the ground, almost basking in the presence of that eternal, volcanic fire.

‘Son of Hephaestus,’ Eran said, his voice shaking.

A god. His god. *His god was here.*

‘Kabiri,’ Eran dared, feeling light-headed.

Even his mother had not met Kabiri. There were legends and old stories, a time when gods might have walked more freely in the fae realm. Everyone knew they didn’t belong anymore, so how was he here?

‘See?’ Kabiri said to the King. ‘This is how you should be treating me.’

‘I’ll take that under advisement,’ the Traitor King said, as though he talked with gods all the time. Was that true? Could that be possible?

‘Look at what you’ve done to him! His poor fire, quenched like that. How cruel. And after all we’ve lost.’

Footsteps shuffling closer, but they weren’t light or spritely, they dragged. Eran’s forehead furrowed, even as he felt a blisteringly hot palm rest on the back of his head. It was blissful. He sighed with ragged relief. Kabiri would save him from all of this. He didn’t know why he was here, but Kabiri would help. Patron of the ambaros, saviour of their people.

‘Up you get,’ Kabiri said.

Eran got to his feet, surprised to see he was taller than Kabiri. A fair bit taller. Kabiri looked *ill*, if that were possible. A pallor to his skin, the bone ridges at his cheek looking pale and chalky in sections. A tightness in the youthful corners of his mouth.

‘Are you well?’ Eran said automatically.

The Traitor King made a disparaging sound, and Kabiri’s narrowed yellow eyes flicked to him, before meeting Eran’s again.

‘It is a blow to me, you see, when almost all the ambaros are killed. My beautiful people, who—’

‘-Aren’t even Unseelie,’ the Traitor King finished.

‘Do you *mind*?’ Kabiri snapped. ‘Do you want a matching set of screwed shoulders? Because, my little thing, I will happily give you all that and more if you keep treating me in such a way. I am a *god*, and you owe me another life debt. Two, remember? Count yourself one of the fortunate ones that I don’t simply demand your *life*. You live at *my* mercy.’

Eran stared between them in amazement.

The Traitor King owed Kabiri *two life debts*? What had happened? What stories about the King had he never heard, even though they concerned his people, his god? A matching set of ‘screwed shoulders?’ What did that even mean?

‘I’ll not have you interfering with what’s happening right now,’ Gwyn snapped, clearly unhappy with Kabiri being there at all. Eran wanted to quail before the show of power. Who talked so to a god that threatened? The god of the volcano, at that? Was he just a fool?
Kabiri turned to Gwyn, eyes flaring with heat, and even Eran caught the way Gwyn tensed in response.

‘You think Davix and Olphix have only ever acted against you and your Kingdom?’ Kabiri said, rolling his eyes. ‘No, please. What a flaming idiot you are. Do you think this plague of ice is only an affront to the fae realm? There I am, minding my own business, when those people who give me life are almost all torn from me. Do you think I enjoy this? Looking like this? No sign of my former glory?’

‘You are still so glorious,’ Eran said sincerely, unable to help himself, beguiled by that fiery perfection. Kabiri would be wondrous no matter how he appeared; whether as the terrifying, soul-destroying Cadmilus, or his youthful counterpart.

Kabiri turned and smiled at him fondly. His eyes were so tired, and Eran wished he could light candles for him, offer him fire, even find the lava where it lurked and sing the songs of molten rock.

‘You are one of mine,’ Kabiri said.

‘Only half,’ Eran replied helplessly. He wanted to lie, but he couldn’t.

‘It doesn’t work that way,’ Kabiri said, raising an eyebrow. ‘You think it does? If I say you’re one of mine, that is what you are. I don’t care what your true-form is, or who your father was. If I claim you, I don’t half do it.’

‘Thank you,’ Eran said, bowing his head.

‘This is lovely,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Shall I leave you two to it?’

‘I regret you,’ Kabiri said, turning with a grin to the Traitor King. ‘Almost. Rude and recalcitrant little charge. You beg for a god to save you and I answered. Whose fault is it that you didn’t ask for a god of healing? Not mine. You wanted fire, look at what you got. More than you could handle, fussy Gwyn. Stop tempting me with all your ‘he doth protest too much.’ So many ways I could fuck you up, Your Majesty, so knock it off with the bad attitude.’

‘Then by all means, please get to the point. You’re obviously here to claim your second debt.’

‘As it so happens, I am,’ Kabiri said, turning back to Eran. ‘It’s simple, really. I’m unwell. I’ve taken a blow. So I’ll ask for something easy. Put your life on the line for this one, and keep him with you.’

A silence in the room that lingered, and Eran saw the calculating look on the Traitor King’s face. He wasn’t even masking it. Kabiri also watched, then folded his arms impatiently.

‘If you think that’s enough detail,’ the Traitor King said finally, ‘you’re mistaken. Elaborate, please.’

‘I could do that,’ Kabiri said. ‘But I could also just show you.’

Eran had never seen two people move so quickly when not on a hunt. The Traitor King drew his sword even as Kabiri leapt towards him, one impossible movement of blurred brown, red, yellow and orange. The Traitor King shouted, dropping his sword and using his arms and hands, both of them struggling, until Kabiri did something that had the Traitor King grunting like he’d been hit.

In less than a minute, the Traitor King was on his back on an expensive looking rug, and Kabiri
was straddling him, one clawed hand digging into the Traitor King’s shoulder. Eran could see it was no normal hold. He couldn’t tell how, but the shoulder was injured or lame. Had Kabiri done that? Was that what he’d meant?

‘Gwyn ap Nudd,’ Kabiri hissed, ‘if the life of Eran Iliakambar is threatened, so too will yours be. If he finds himself abandoned by your intent, so too will you find yourself abandoned by the world. Consent to the debt, or I will take your other arm and it will not grow back. I have grown too weary of showing patience, and I have lost too much for you to mock me. I can hardly do what I wish up here, and I will not be talked down to by someone like you.’

It would have been satisfying to see the Traitor King treated this way, if it weren’t for the fact that Eran still couldn’t wrap his mind around what was happening. A god and a King, familiar with each other, and the god asking that the Traitor King protect Eran? Eran didn’t want to be bonded to him!

‘I’ll not give him back his fire,’ the Traitor King hissed. ‘He has threatened to kill the last of the Aur dryads. An integral witness to the antics of those you apparently despise.’

‘Then don’t give it back,’ Kabiri snapped, smoke curling from out of his mouth, the inside of which glowed a dark, dirty red. Eran wanted to argue that point, but he could only watch. The Traitor King’s legs were tense, both hands curled into fists, his pale blue eyes cold and hard.

‘His life is already bound to Mosk’s.’

‘Then you’ll be bound to both of them, won’t you?’ Kabiri said.

The Traitor King tried to flip Kabiri off him, then cried out shortly when Kabiri did something to the Traitor King’s shoulder.

‘It doesn’t have to be just one,’ Kabiri crooned. ‘I could do this to all of your joints. Imagine what it might be if I picked five pieces of your spine at random. Enjoy fighting your wars then.’

‘You need me,’ the Traitor King said, and Eran stared at that daring. He would be impressed if it was anyone else.

‘I do,’ Kabiri said. ‘So consent to the debt. Until such time as the plague of ice is no more, your life is bound to his. You will keep him with you where possible. I don’t care if it’s all of you in this Palace, one unhappy little family, or out there on the road. You will seek him out if he becomes lost or threatened. You will undertake to keep him safe and well. You will protect him as though he were one of your loved ones. I’ve seen what you’re willing to do for them. Your consort lives well for such a killer, doesn’t he?’

The Traitor King remained silent. Even in obvious pain, he still looked considering, tilting his head and staring directly up at Kabiri, as though unafraid.

Into that tension, Eran spoke:

‘Can’t you use his debt to rid the world of the plague of ice?’

‘No,’ Kabiri said. ‘Though I like the way you think, little flame. No, I can only work through fire, or my people, or those connected directly to my people. You know that well, don’t you, princess?’ The last he said to the Traitor King, reaching up with his other hand and caressing his cheek. There was real tenderness there, and Eran was shocked to see it. They acted like enemies, but there was something…
‘And you find yourself ill,’ the Traitor King added. ‘Are they winning? In whatever it is they intend to do?’

‘Yes,’ Kabiri said. ‘Of course they are. Gods cannot walk this realm without sickening, but these Mages are still fae, even if they have stolen from us and countless others. Mages are shockingly good at theft. If you stopped fighting me at every turn, you’d realise what allies we are. Remember when you disliked me because I was Unseelie? What a day that was.’

‘You cannot tell me what they’re doing,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Really?’

‘I’ve said before, but there are magics that can stretch through realms. Some become far too powerful for their own good. What a shitty world it is, but it’s the only one we have. I miss when we used to flirt.’

‘We have never flirted,’ the Traitor King said flatly.

‘Lies,’ Kabiri laughed, flames licking out of his mouth. ‘Liar. How good you are at being Unseelie now. But I can still smell it on you, all those years you spent with your Seelie kin. You’re just the honourable kind I need. So I almost regret you, but not quite. It pays to have debts with a King.’

‘Will I actually die if he dies?’ the Traitor King said testily.

‘Not quite,’ Kabiri said. ‘But I’ll be unhappy, and trust me when I say that you’ve not seen me truly unhappy. Don’t fail me.’

‘It is only that people around me tend to die,’ the Traitor King said, raising his eyebrows. ‘Take him yourself, if you want him so badly.’

‘To the underworlds?’ Kabiri said. ‘What a nice little holiday for a Seelie fae that would be.’

‘It’s not so bad,’ the Traitor King said blithely.

‘Now, did you think I’d forgotten that you stashed your poisonous fae down there? That’s a fun game to play, isn’t it?’

Kabiri leaned forward, and a moment later, the Traitor King back arched and he almost managed to unseat Kabiri entirely. Kabiri’s hands were glowing, the smell of smouldering, burning flesh hit the air, and Eran looked on with a fierce longing, for the fire that Kabiri could call so effortlessly, for the ability to make his enemies sink so low.

But watching wasn’t terrible.

‘I need specific parameters,’ the Traitor King grit out from between his teeth. ‘Then I’ll consent.’

‘Absolutely. Let’s see what wriggle room exists in this debt you owe me, hm? Can’t wait. It’ll be a shame to call it. I’ll have less reason to visit you after that. Unless you fail, and then I’ll visit a great deal. Might even take you down into the underworlds for a ‘not so bad’ visit.’

Kabiri sat back on his haunches, and then finally he stood, putting a hand to the ground like he wasn’t sure he could get upright on his legs alone. The Traitor King stood up quickly, picking up his sword and sheathing it. His shirt was seared and blackened, but he looked completely unaffected. If it hadn’t been for the hitched breaths and the hisses when Kabiri had hurt him, Eran would have assumed he didn’t feel pain at all.

The negotiation between King and god went swiftly, and Eran learned of everything the King could
and could not do. Eran wasn’t getting his powers back any time soon, but otherwise, he was under the formal protection of the Unseelie Court, ward of Gwyn ap Nudd the Traitor King, to be extended respect and taken on investigations into the plague of ice, and the missing or dead fire fae. He was to be involved.

Not released. Not let go to join his parents. Not given a chance to truly rest. Involved. His life bound to Mosk’s, and the Traitor King’s life bound to his. Eran watched as the Traitor King consented to the debt, shaking Kabiri’s hand, then he had to drag his eyes away and stare at the doorway.

Every time he thought of how crushing his circumstances felt, he thought of Mosk without a heartsong. He thought of the Each Uisge interrogating him, hearing those bleated confessions of a horrid place that he couldn’t even fathom. And there the Traitor King was, talking about the underworlds like they weren’t that scary at all. Was he so unafraid?

Eran wished he could be unafraid.

He remembered being younger, a child, standing around while his father and his people discussed war or strategies. It felt a lot like this. Listening without really paying attention, trying not to intrude or get in the way, looking forward to the day when he would be included among his peers, even though some of them looked down on him for being born Seelie. Most of his father’s men and women didn’t live in the mixed Seelie-Unseelie clan, and a lot didn’t approve. Eran looked to a day when his status didn’t matter, and he would prove himself on his merits alone.

A day that would never come, and his status mattered more than ever.

He was surprised when Kabiri started walking towards him, Gwyn sitting in a high-backed chair, watching like a predator. A lion. Not hungry enough to attack, but considering all the same.

Then his god was before him, and Eran couldn’t help himself. It was the first burst of love he’d felt since his family had gone that wasn’t marked with only sorrow. So he went to his knees again, he bowed his head, not daring to let his forehead touch Kabiri’s furred feet.

‘Your mother obviously taught you true,’ Kabiri said, sounding warm and affectionate now, like an uncle or brother. Fingers on the back of Eran’s head, and he held back the shudder, standing as gracefully as he could when Kabiri drew him upright.

‘Is she alive?’ Eran said, knowing it was stupid to ask. Hating the way Kabiri’s yellow eyes closed like even he couldn’t bear it.

‘Nothing survives the ice,’ Kabiri said. ‘I have tried to pit my fire against it, and so you see I have burned myself thin with no more fuel behind me. First they take the coals from my heart, then they take the flames from my fingertips. That’s when it all goes to shit, my little flame.’ Kabiri leaned closer, daring to slide his finger beneath Eran’s chin. ‘But you know all about that, don’t you?’

It cut to the quick of him, and he closed his eyes, strangled up in that gentle voice.

‘They took my fire,’ Eran said, hating that he sounded like a child amongst these people who talked about Mages and life debts and ruled Kingdoms.

‘So they did,’ Kabiri said, leaning forward and kissing his forehead. ‘It’s not truly gone, Eran. You have to get over that. I don’t care how you do it, but try. I’d not call anyone a little flame who didn’t merit the moniker, so warm your heart with that. It should give you some solace to know that Gwyn cannot simply dispose of you when all is said and done.’
Not quite, but Eran didn’t say anything. He felt like he was being cossetted by the sun, aware that even he could be burned in the force of Kabiri’s fire. For now, it was that warm touch at his chin, those yellow eyes searching his. It was impossible to doubt the love he saw. Also impossible to ignore how sick Kabiri looked up close. Could gods die?

‘What do you need?’ Eran said.

Kabiri’s eyes flamed a brighter yellow, but he only smiled in response. He stepped back, and Eran wanted to follow, wanted to go wherever he was going. He didn’t belong in the underworlds, but it was hard to believe Kabiri would live somewhere that Eran wouldn’t thrive.

Eran watched as Kabiri exchanged a few more words with the King – dismissals, farewells, something that could have been affection, as though Kabiri somehow cared for him, which made no sense at all. The god turned and met Eran’s eyes, became a writhing mass of smoke and flame, and was gone.

‘You’re obviously important to him,’ the Traitor King said, sounding unimpressed, but more thoughtful than annoyed.

‘He’s sick,’ Eran said.

‘He is. Gods don’t belong here. I vastly prefer it when they stay where they should.’

‘You prayed,’ Eran said. ‘He said you prayed for him.’

‘Not for him,’ the Traitor King muttered.

‘Then for who?’

Who would the Traitor King pray for? What dark god existed for the one who pretended to be Seelie for thousands of years?

But the Traitor King didn’t respond, and after a while he got up and gestured that Eran should walk over to him. Eran knew he was going back into the cell. Kabiri had fought to get Eran free of it, but the Traitor King was a canny negotiator, and not intimidated by Kabiri’s threats. At least, not as obviously as most might be. Eran couldn’t imagine saying ‘no’ to Kabiri as often as the Traitor King had.

Eran walked over, eyes drifting to the Traitor King’s shoulder, the one that Kabiri had suggested was injured. Now that he was looking for it, he could see it wasn’t held properly. It wasn’t obvious, exactly, but it was there… Had Kabiri done something? Was it permanent?

The Traitor King stiffened at Eran’s gaze, but said nothing.

‘Mosk is more responsible for the ice plague than you think,’ Eran said, staying just out of the Traitor King’s reach.

‘I have no doubt of that.’ Eran stared at him in surprise, and the Traitor King only smirked. ‘What, did you think we would believe him to be truly innocent, because he’s Unseelie? Because he’s lost all? Desperate people do desperate things, Eran. Something I’m sure you understand. I don’t know the extent of Mosk’s involvement, but the plan is to get to the bottom of it.’

It was almost possible to believe him. The Traitor King didn’t saturate his words with false glamours, he didn’t spell his meaning with dra’ocht. Somehow, it made him more believable. But that was the very thing that had made the entire Seelie Court give him power and even idolisation
before the end. He could never be trusted. That was why King Albion had put the Traitor King’s
glowing, white armour in the Seelie throne-room, as a reminder of how low they’d all fallen, how
gullible the Seelie could be.

‘My father never trusted you,’ Eran said.

‘I never trusted him,’ the Traitor King said, like he wasn’t particularly bothered whether or not he
had anyone else’s trust. ‘That’s the way it goes, sometimes.’

_He respected you, though._

Eran didn’t say that part.

‘I liked him,’ the Traitor King added. ‘He was a great man.’

Was Eran so desperate for moments of connection that he’d take them even now? He couldn’t
decide who he was angrier at. But he was here now, wasn’t he? His father would want him to take
advantage of it.

‘Davix I know,’ Eran said. ‘Who is Olphix?’

‘His twin. They are both Mages. More powerful than likely any one of us truly understands. The
more I learn of them, the more I dislike them.’

‘Davix told me to come to you. Maybe he’s…’ _working for you._ No, that wasn’t right. ‘Why would
he do that?’

‘He once told me that he enjoys creating wrenches to insert into his plans,’ the Traitor King said
with a faint, hollow smile. ‘I suspect he gets bored and he behaves as bored Mages are wont to.’

‘If it’s made of magic, it should respond to magic. The plague of ice, right?’

‘Right,’ the Traitor King said, tilting his head. ‘Except that Davix and Olphix are two of the most
powerful Mages in existence, their powers strengthened by their familial bond, and twins on top of
that. They took a seventh son of a seventh son, and severed _his_ powers too. What we are dealing
with is a culmination of magical power of the likes we have never seen, and if your god cannot
make a dent in it with his fire, think of what our fae Mages have managed alone.’

Could it even be stopped? It seemed far away now. Eran had outrun it, though he still dreamed of
it. If ice could be alive and malicious, that was what had killed his family, his friends.

‘So what do we do?’

‘You go back to the cell,’ the Traitor King said.

‘You have to treat me with respect.’

‘And so I am.’

A hand around his upper arm, that strange rushing movement through a gentle, warm light that
wasn’t made of fire at all, and then he was back in the cell. Mosk looked up at them both, seemed
almost curious, but then he went back to picking at his cheek, and seeming disinterested. Eran
didn’t know what to believe with him, but he knew now that the emptiness Mosk displayed, the
wrongness of him…a missing heartsong would explain all of that.

The Traitor King vanished without another word, and Eran blinked rapidly, but his eyes were slow
to adjust to the lack of light.

‘Have fun?’ Mosk said finally.

It was always strange when Mosk started a conversation, and it rarely ended well. Eran was beginning to think Mosk enjoyed baiting him, even sought to incite violence. Hadn’t the mouse-maiden said that Mosk could engage in self-destructive behaviours?

‘I saw my god,’ Eran said in wonder. ‘And he claimed me as his.’

*Even though I have been without faith, and so tired inside. Even then.*

‘If you’re in a good mood, do you want to fuck?’

It was like being doused in cold water, a sensation Eran was growing increasingly used to since his fire had been quenched. He had to bite down the urge to snarl. Every time Mosk said it, Eran had to imagine it, if only for a split second. All he saw was hollowness and rage. An impossible union with someone who didn’t even protest when Eran had used him as barter to get them both a room for the night.

With that in mind, he sat down on his side of the cell and closed his eyes, trying to recall the moment where Kabiri had pressed his warm lips to his cold forehead, as if that would be enough to patch over the situation he had found himself in.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘A Meeting:’

‘Insult indeed,’ the Traitor King said, pursing his lips. ‘I should like to visit the site of the Aur forest fire again, and take Mosk with me. I suppose that means that you must come too.’ This last sentence he directed at Eran, looking unimpressed with the idea of it.

‘You’re not leaving me behind,’ Eran said.

‘I’m not going,’ Mosk said, his quiet voice drawing everyone’s attention. ‘I’m not going there.’

‘It may influence the curse you’re under,’ Fenwrel said patiently. ‘Any information you can give us will be helpful.’

‘You’re going,’ the Traitor King said, a tone that brooked no refusal. Mosk looked down at the table and closed his eyes, said nothing else.
Two more days passed in the cells. They were brought food with increasing frequency, and Eran felt like he was getting his strength back, even if tiredness still plagued him. He recognised that it was an emotional strain, and not something from lack of food. He missed the sun. He regularly tried to recall what it felt like to be kissed on the forehead by his god, but still felt like his fire was absent, even though Kabiri had told him it wasn’t.

Mosk became increasingly alert as he was fed pure sap. He still rarely spoke, but he seemed agitated, and he often scraped his fingers against the roots of the oak tree cell, or tapped fingertips on the soil. He slept odd hours, never for very long, and he showed no signs of colluding with his captors or trying to escape. At no point did he attack Eran, though it didn’t help Eran to feel any safer around him.

Then, the mouse-maiden Fenwrel came and brought them both out of the cell, teleporting them back into the Palace on brilliant colours of red, orange and vibrant blue. She led them down a long corridor of dark grey stone with golden sconces filled with dancing baubles of magelight. Wooden doors prevented Eran from seeing into the rooms beyond, but he felt – from the long rugs running along the tiled floor – that they were perhaps being shown new quarters. Framed maps hung on the wall, all finely made, many of places Eran had never heard of.

‘The King has decided what to do with you,’ Fenwrel said quietly, leading them into a room filled with weapons. Eran stared at the swords and sabres that hung on the wall. At the racks of daggers and whips. Fenwrel walked to a desk of half-made weapons, and whole ones that weren’t yet racked, and Eran startled to see his kh’anzar there, curved and gleaming. He lurched towards it, but held himself back at the last moment, uncertain what gambit was being played.

Fenwrel only took the sabre and brought it back to him with its hilt. She handed it to him, and then pointed to a rack of golden ythilok, the small sacred daggers. Eran frowned to see them.

‘You may choose one,’ she said.

He shook his head slowly. ‘I cannot.’

Fenwrel tilted her head and looked up at him, curiosity in her gaze.

‘In my family, they have to be given – parent to child. My last was sullied.’ He looked over at Mosk, who didn’t look like he was paying attention to the conversation. It made a spark of anger fly inside of him, but he quelled it down. ‘I can’t. I can take another dagger. But it cannot be an
‘You may take another dagger,’ Fenwrel said simply.

‘Why am I being armed?’ Eran asked, as he walked along the rows. These were all weapons so finely made, and some of them were clearly looted from wars. He lifted one dagger of unknown origin, a pale white metal, a nice heft in the handle. Not too large to be an inconvenience, and with a flame coloured sheath next to it. The metal looked deceptively soft, but he could feel its strength as he tested it against his wrist.

‘You are both being armed,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Mosk, do you have a weapon you prefer over others?’

Mosk said nothing, even as Eran dared him to ask for a single thing. Giving Mosk a weapon sounded like the stupidest idea he’d ever heard. But with his kh’anzar and a dagger, he was confident of his abilities to defend himself.

‘Mosk?’ Fenwrel repeated.

‘No,’ Mosk said, looking down at the floor. ‘I don’t use any weapons.’

‘Gwyn said you used to show some enthusiasm for the bow.’

‘No,’ Mosk said emphatically, flinching. ‘I don’t use any.’

Eran thought he might be shaking, and frowned.

Overall, Mosk looked healthier. The pale brown at the roots of his hair had flushed to a healthy, strong light green, like the new growth of grass. His skin no longer looked as sallow and clammy, though he would always be pale. The bark growths on his forearms were a deeper grey-brown, and looked stronger now. Eran wondered what they felt like. Did it hurt to grow bark from one’s skin? Was it defensive? Or was it too alive to be used as a shield?

‘You may take whatever you feel proficient in,’ Fenwrel said, and Eran wondered if she was pushing the matter on purpose. It didn’t seem as generous an offer for Mosk, which was strange, because surely he’d jump at the chance to have a knife to gut Eran with again.

‘I’m an Aur dryad,’ Mosk said. ‘We’re pacifists.’

Eran snorted, and Mosk’s eyes shot to his, the glare strong.

‘You nearly disembowelled me,’ Eran said, half-smiling. ‘Remember?’

‘No, I didn’t. I only-’

‘You’re the reason my family blade is ruined. You’re the reason I lost one of the last things connecting me to them, after you made the plague that took them from me in the first place. And now I’ll never have another ythilok. Because you used that knife to spill my blood. What kind of pacifist are you again?’

‘I don’t use weapons,’ Mosk said back to the ground, his voice smaller than before.

‘Give him a knife,’ Eran said, the grin on his face holding no humour. ‘He’s adept. Though really, he’d be better at stealing it from someone else before he hurts them. Maybe I should just take a second?’

Fenwrel was silent, and Eran felt chastened. She looked at Mosk with a light crease between her
eyebrows, like she was trying to solve a puzzle. Eran wished her luck. He had no idea what to make of Mosk, and he couldn’t tell what was the missing heartsong, and what was just him.

Eventually, Fenwrel sighed and clasped her hands together.

‘Suit yourself,’ she said to Mosk. Then, to Eran: ‘If you’re happy with your choice of dagger, it is time to get you both into some new clothes and properly refreshed. There’s to be a meeting between the Inner Court, and you are to attend.’

‘Why?’ Eran said, his eyes widening.

‘Because that is the will of the King.’

Eran grimaced. So many of their responses were completely opaque. His father used to be the same. Eran would ask some question, and his father would give him a non-answer. It made him feel like a child, but he decided not to gripe about it, because at least he was out of the cell. He had weapons again.

He lifted his hand to the beard that had taken hold of his face. He needed to groom himself and badly. Fenwrel noted the gesture and nodded to him, a faint smile on her face.

‘Come along,’ she said. ‘We’re not done yet.’

Eran followed, making sure to stay a step behind Mosk, not trusting him at all, despite the fact that he had no weapons and appeared defenceless. Mosk was talented at seeming defenceless, but Eran knew better.

* *

While Eran trimmed his beard down to stubble, shaving the parts that had grown in disarray to shape it better, he occasionally flicked his eyes to Mosk in a dark stone bath behind him. Mosk cleaned himself slowly, but with a focus that he lacked the first time Eran had found him. Eran remembered scrubbing him, using multiple buckets of water, the endless amount of muck from repeated sexual encounters that had clung to him like bone glue.

It was strange though. Even though Mosk could go through the motions now, even though he could obviously clean himself and took the gels that Fenwrel handed to him to clean his hair and his body, he still seemed to be empty. He showed no sense of modesty, or even awareness that his nakedness should matter. He hardly made eye contact. He didn’t spend any time lingering over one part of his body or another, and he touched it like it didn’t belong to him. It still made Eran’s skin crawl to see it.

Eran stared back at his own reflection. He looked like he’d aged. His brown skin wasn’t like Fenwrel’s, it didn’t glow with health. His black hair had grown a little, and it had lost some of its glossy lustre. The curls were duller. But his eyes were as bright as always, that amber-yellow glow that could flare a vivid orange in an instant. His mother’s eyes.

Once he’d finished with his beard, stripping it back to neat stubble in case he didn’t get the chance to groom it again soon, he picked up the pot of kohl from his personal pack. A relief they’d not just thrown his personal things away. He painted the thick, black lines around his eyes, pulling out the tips on the outer corners, and then paused to just experience that sliver of goodness. An old and familiar ritual, one that had meaning for him, and even though he couldn’t use his fire, having the liner back on his face made him feel focused once more.

They hadn’t returned his jewellery to him – his gold necklaces, the rings he’d worn – but he knew
now that they’d probably not been thrown away. He wouldn’t put it past the Unseelie to sell them. That knowledge prickled.

Eventually, he was dressed in new clothing. Everything fit as it should, and he wondered if they’d taken the time to make items based on what he’d worn before. But the fabric was fresh, and they’d even used fireproofed fabrics. He could smell it in the chemical treatment of the shoes, even sense the familiar shimmering gloss of a fireproofing charm, woven throughout the shirt. Maybe that meant they did expect him to get his fire back.

He didn’t understand them at all.

He belted the kh’anzar to his waist, adding the sheathed dagger to his belt. Then he sat on one of the large chairs in the bathroom, and watched Mosk and Fenwrel.

They dressed Mosk in a green shirt that looked as though it was made of new leaves, and gave him brown pants that looked as though they were made of suede. No shoes, which Eran frowned at. Did Aur dryads not typically wear shoes? Because it was obvious that everything else seemed perfect for Mosk. The green of the finely cut shirt matching the dark shade that made up most of his hair, making him seem more like the Court fae he was supposed to be.

Mosk only fingered the fabric of the shirt absently and then dropped his hand, staring off into space.

Eran had expected him to exploit his relationship with the Unseelie, and it disturbed him that he hadn’t seen a single sign of it.

*  

A meeting at a table designed for about twenty people. There were eight of them there. The King at the head of the table, and the Each Uisge next to him. The Glashtyn beside him and Gulvi Dubna Vajat – the assassin that had once pretended to kill Eran’s sisters on King’s orders – next to him. Eran resented how much he admired those glorious, huge swan’s wings. On the other side of the King, Eran and then Mosk, with Fenwrel the mouse-maiden next to Mosk. By her side, an ancient fae that Eran knew instantly from the tales he’d heard; Old Pete, the wise Seelie storyteller who sat in on the Unseelie Court in the same way that the Spider Queen sat in on the Seelie Court.

They were there to make sure all was fair and just, progressing as it should. Eran thought it was somewhat useless, having one Seelie fae sit in on a meeting of so many Unseelie fae, but he said nothing, cowed by the large, dominating energies in the room.

Eran listened to them discuss the plague that had taken his family. They didn’t know much about it. They reinforced that no magic could touch it, and that while it could move fast when it wanted to, it was sluggish at times. It could shift its shape and cover ground quickly, but it didn’t seem to be expanding mass as fast as its speed and appetite suggested.

‘Davix will not give any of us an audience,’ Gulvi said, leaning back in her chair and half-spreading her wings. ‘Of course.’

‘Albion will not see me,’ Old Pete said. ‘It is safe to say that his loyalties are influenced by that Mage he has in his Court. He believes me corrupted by my time here.’

‘Insult indeed,’ the Traitor King said, pursing his lips. ‘I should like to visit the site of the Aur forest fire again, and take Mosk with me. I suppose that means that you must come too.’ This last sentence he directed at Eran, looking unimpressed with the idea of it.
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‘It may influence the curse you’re under,’ Fenwrel said patiently. ‘Any information you can give us will be helpful.’

‘You’re going,’ the Traitor King said, a tone that brooked no refusal. Mosk looked down at the table and closed his eyes, said nothing else.

‘So let me get this right,’ the Glashtyn said, drumming his fingers on the table, ‘you have Davix, whose main element is ice. And you have Olphix, his like, twin brother, whose main element is fire. No one’s seen Olphix since the Aur forest was destroyed with fire, and Davix has made this plague of ice that nothing responds to. I get that Mages are mysterious and ‘cool’ at the best of times, but doesn’t this seem weird to anyone else?’

‘Very,’ Fenwrel said quietly.

‘Not actually as helpful as I thought it would be, getting your confirmation on that,’ the Glashtyn said, scratching at his ridiculous curly hair. Eran only knew that his dra’ocht – his glamour – was extremely powerful, and he was good at putting people at ease. To look at, he just seemed moderately attractive, with wild, multi-coloured red hair. Nothing like what a predator waterhorse should be, and nothing like his older adopted brother, the Each Uisge. Eran didn’t understand quite why he was so beloved, except there were stories of him turning up to save the day for many fae. Though he usually saved it with alcohol. ‘Thanks though.’

‘I wonder if something’s gone wrong,’ Fenwrel said, looking sidelong at Mosk. ‘They acquire a boy who is a seventh son of a seventh son, and we end up with a situation where he is cursed to live a miserable existence, Olphix is in hiding, and Davix refuses to see anyone about the plague of ice, and disavows all connection with it.’

‘Because Mages never make mischief for the sake of it,’ the Traitor King said, in some disgust. ‘I have seen what they are capable of. I’ve been to the bridge. First they destroy the largest repository of old lore, then they destroy the Aur forest, which is the harmony point for all ecosystems in the fae world? What next? Shall they poison the seas too? Make the very air noxious? There is a pattern to their destructive acts, and it is that they are destructive.’

‘But what do they stand to gain from it?’ Fenwrel said, a bite in her voice that made Eran wonder if this was something they’d argued about before.

The Each Uisge cleared his throat and folded his hands upon the table. ‘Sitting here and bickering about it will achieve nothing. We will visit the remnants of the Aur forest again, and this time take Mosk and Eran with us. Fenwrel and Gulvi, you will remain behind in your capacity as Mage representative and Queen-in-Waiting respectively. Ash, as always…’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ the Glashtyn said, turning his forearm over and revealing a glittery, bright blue patterning on the softer skin there. ‘I’ll be the one to let folks know if you’re hurt.’

‘I was going to say you’ll keep the peace,’ the Each Uisge said, rolling his eyes.

‘I dunno, I kind of like being your ‘mortal peril’ barometer.’

They exchanged a look with each other, and Eran felt a pang to see it. He’d exchanged looks like that with his brother, with his sisters. He turned to look at Mosk instead, but Mosk seemed to have checked out of the conversation.
'We’ve had relative peace for some time,’ Fenwrel said, ‘but the treaty with the Coalition of the Classless is coming to an end, to say nothing of the fact that many of them are missing or unresponsive to requests to communicate…’

‘Isn’t that what the classless do?’ Gulvi said airily. ‘Show off their immense powers for a week or so then vanish without a trace?’

‘That’s what I’d like to do,’ the Traitor King muttered to himself. The Each Uisge huffed a single breath of laughter, and Gulvi simply shrugged.

‘Nevertheless, darling, I love the feeling that the axe is about to swing.’

‘More like a guillotine,’ the Glashtyn muttered. ‘It’s not just you, either. Everyone in the Winter Court is aware that something’s amiss. And I’m not just talking this plague of ice either. People just see that as one more thing, and not like, the thing. If you ask me, when that many fae have a feeling something’s gonna happen…’

‘It is a Season of Turning,’ Fenwrel said mildly. ‘It’s what they expect.’

‘This is paranoia though,’ the Glashtyn said. ‘I’ve heard tell that Seelie fae are experiencing it too.’

‘I can confirm that,’ Old Pete said, nodding towards the Glashtyn, who returned the gesture. ‘My sources says that energies are out of alignment.’

‘The Aur forest has been destroyed,’ the Traitor King said. ‘What did they think would happen? Everything is out of alignment. They’re only sensing what is already true. Now, if you’re done indulging the suspicions of your sources…’

Gwyn looked up abruptly, his eyes widening, and a few seconds later the door slammed open and another swan-maiden burst in. Her resemblance to Gulvi was uncanny, except she looked wilder somehow, though perhaps it was that her long white hair was completely unbound, flying behind her like a cloud.

‘I’m coming!’ she shouted. ‘I’m coming!’

‘Julvia! Get out!’ Gulvi shouted, standing immediately and pointing towards the door. ‘You may crave more adventures but this is not one you’ll be a part of.’

‘I have a life debt with the Each Uisge,’ the swan-maiden said. ‘I can call it in. He’ll have to take me.’

The Each Uisge’s bright green eyes widened, he glanced at the King once – who looked equally perturbed – and then turned to the swan-maiden.

‘No,’ he said.

‘So you want to make your case now, when you will potentially die immediately during what is a very dangerous situation?’ Gulvi said, her voice caustic.

Eran kept his mouth shut about what he thought regarding the fact that he and Mosk were being dragged along to a ‘very dangerous situation.’

After a long beat, Julvia’s face just settled into calm and she smiled lightly and said:
'Yes.'

‘La! I don’t fucking believe this,’ Gulvi snarled. ‘I miss the days when I was the wild, younger swan maiden and you were the one with an inch of sanity!’

‘In the name of the Swan Prince, I don’t,’ Julvia said quietly, but earnestly. She wiped her fingers down her long, embroidered apron, smoothed at her skirts. ‘What days those were. When my younger sister – supposedly a pacifist – decides to break all the moulds by becoming an assassin no less.’ Julvia wrinkled her nose and trailed a finger along the table. ‘I much prefer things as they are now.’

‘I did not save your life just for you to show me this kind of paltry fucking gratitude, and-’

‘Technically, I saved her life,’ the Traitor King said.

‘Technically,’ the Each Uisge said, ‘I saved her mind.’

Gulvi rounded on both of them, wings flaring, and the Each Uisge offered a bland smile, while the King was back to writing notes again. Eran was close enough to see that his penmanship was exacting, and very beautiful. Yet he wrote quickly, rushing his comments like anyone else would. Eran didn’t understand the language, but he thought he could pick out his and Mosk’s name.

‘She can go,’ Mosk said, ‘and I’ll stay behind.’

‘I think not,’ the Each Uisge said, the warmth in his tone belied by the coldness in his eyes. ‘Was that an attempt at negotiation? Do you think we can’t tell how terrified you are? How much you don’t wish to return? If your memory can be jogged, rest assured we’ll do it. I’d be delighted to wear you down with compulsions again first.’

Mosk hunched in on himself, and no one reprimanded the Each Uisge for his words. Julvia, the other swan maiden, leaned across the table to stare at him. She frowned. Then she met Eran’s eyes, curiosity in her black, liquid gaze.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I’ve lost my family too.’

Gulvi arched her eyebrows and sat down again, tapping clawed nails on the table until Julvia said:

‘Except for my younger, recalcitrant sister.’

Eran was surprised to hear anything that sounded like empathy. Julvia hadn’t looked away from him or Mosk, her head tilted to the side.

‘Perhaps for now I will stay here,’ Julvia said, addressing Eran directly. ‘And then later, should you have need of me, I’ll-’

‘No,’ Gulvi snarled.

‘If you have need of me,’ Julvia continued, apparently unthreatened by one of the most vicious assassins in the fae realm, ‘I can make myself available. If you need someone to talk to. It’s hard. And no one here understands. Except for my sister. And I expect you’d not enjoy confiding in her.’

‘Thank you,’ Eran said, because it seemed only fair. He sensed no dissembling from her, no cruelty. He would not behave like a monster just because he was surrounded by them, especially in front of someone who was offering him grace.
Julvia smiled at him. She leaned back in the chair, tucked her wings in behind her back and sighed.

‘Julvia,’ the Traitor King said softly. ‘You were not invited to this meeting.’

‘What?’ she said quickly. Then she looked around. ‘Oh, yes. I forgot, Your Majesty. Excuse me. I apologise for interrupting.’

With that, she stood and bowed briefly, exiting the room and closing the door behind her.

‘I know you went to an awful lot of effort to find her and rescue her, but you can put her back now,’ Gulvi muttered, glaring at the Traitor King, who only shrugged one shoulder.

‘I like her,’ the Glashtyn said. ‘She’s spunky.’

‘Forgetful, still,’ the Each Uisge said absently. ‘But we can’t have everything.’

‘Ah, no, darling, I suppose we can’t,’ Gulvi said, her voice turning sinister, even as the the Each Uisge stiffened and refused to look at her. ‘If we could have everything, my entire family would be alive or, perhaps, alternatively, you wouldn’t have fucking killed nearly all of them.’

Eran watched in fascination as the Each Uisge’s expression went blank for a moment, and then an easy smile crossed his face as he turned to Gulvi and beamed at her.

‘I can still kill her, if you’d like? It would certainly stop her from claiming that life debt she has with me, and that does seem to be putting you out.’

‘Va chier! You little waterweed-brained donkey, if you-’

‘Everyone is dismissed,’ the Traitor King said abruptly, looking down at his notes as though they were the only thing of import. ‘Ash, arrange to have Grip saddled, we’ll take him with us. Fenwrel, escort Mosk back to his new rooms. Eran, you’ll remain behind.’

Eran watched numbly as everyone left. He knew in a distant sort of way that the Each Uisge — the Traitor King’s consort — had killed many freshwater fae and destroyed many landscapes, but to see that in action, to know that those swan maidens could be around him and not try to kill him constantly for it, he didn’t understand that at all. You didn’t hold rational council with people who had murdered your family. Eran tried to imagine doing the same, and couldn’t wrap his head around it. How did they even trust each other enough to run the Kingdom?

They were running it, too. Eran had a grudging sense of respect that he rarely looked at, knowing that Ifir admired the Traitor King and called him by his first name and spoke of him like a colleague and even at times a strange friend. They’d shared marrow together on a battlefield, and mourned lost comrades. His father, who had betrayed the Traitor King, turned a mutiny on him, lost a horn to him, and then through the Traitor King’s strange ability to hypnotise people — or whatever it was he did — had become his friend.

The Traitor King was silent for some time, going through his notes, and Eran sat there awkwardly, a little worried to be left behind.

‘Mosk took no weapons today,’ the Traitor King said, pinning Eran with a pale blue stare that made Eran wish he was looking at his papers again.

‘He didn’t.’

‘Fenwrel said you related an anecdote that Mosk had attacked you with a knife. Your ythilok.’
‘I did,’ Eran said. He wasn’t the only one who could give opaque answers. He thought the Traitor King might be angry, but all the Traitor King did was stare at him for a few seconds longer, and then smirk a little, leaning back in his chair and regarding Eran.

‘Why did he do that?’

‘Why does he do anything?’ Eran said. ‘I don’t understand him at all.’

‘You didn’t provoke him? You are his captor. I am well aware that captors often do things to provoke their captives, knowingly or otherwise.’

Eran wanted to fidget – not that it was in his nature, so he refused to fidget at all – but it was hard to forget sometimes, that this was a King who had paraded around in the Seelie Court, as pretender to the throne, kept the Each Uisge captive in the dungeons there for a year, and then released what was considered to be one of the most unjust Unseelie Kings of all time. Eran wanted to feel righteously angry about it, but now that it was just the two of them, he thought he was better off taking his chances around Mosk.

‘I don’t know,’ Eran said finally, unable to find it in himself to lie, even if he was around the Unseelie King. ‘I’ve done things that have provoked him, when he’s tried to escape – which was rare – or when he badgers me about fucking him. But that night, I don’t know what motivated him. I woke up to it. I should have been on my guard.’

‘He badgers you about fucking him?’ the Traitor King said, forehead furrowing.

‘That’s how I found him, you know. Being fucked by almost every fae in some baseborn underfae establishment. He’s asked for it ever since.’

The Traitor King’s face smoothed, and Eran couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Eran stared at the table, summoning his thoughts. Had his father sat in this seat? Was this a place where the Traitor King and his father had sat and discussed war operations?

‘I think he might want to die,’ Eran said. ‘He baits me incessantly, he tells me he’s responsible for the plague, he tells me he’s the reason my parents are gone, and he tells me to fuck him, and he tells me it doesn’t matter if we enjoy it or not, because it’s not about that. I think if he could have provoked me to kill him without fire before now, he would have.’

It was a shock to hear so much coming out of his mouth. For a moment he wondered if the Traitor King was making him talk like this. Then he realised it had been so long since anyone had wanted to listen to him, he’d even open up to a traitor who could use everything against him. Eran sighed in frustration.

‘I see,’ the Traitor King said.

‘He behaves like he’s guilty,’ Eran said quietly. ‘Mage Davix said he was innocent, but…’

‘Did Davix seem trustworthy to you?’ the Traitor King said, a half-smile on his face like he already knew the answer.

‘I just wanted to see the King,’ Eran said.

‘You’re seeing one now.’

‘A real King,’ Eran said, not looking away from the Traitor King’s gaze, wanting to see that land home. Instead, the Traitor King didn’t react at all, and Eran swallowed after a minute and looked
down. ‘Preferably a King who hadn’t betrayed all of the Seelie Kingdom.’

‘That does seem like a wise preference to have,’ the Traitor King said blandly. ‘But unfortunately, those are not the circumstances you find yourself in. Given you are Ifir’s son, and blessed by Kabiri, it’s in my best interests to make sure you don’t get killed within the next day or so. I have decided to make you responsible for Mosk’s welfare. You say that you’ll kill him if given the chance, but you also pity him, you’re under Augus’ compulsion for now, and you’ve kept him alive up until now, despite – as you have suggested – his repeated attempts to harm himself further.’

But you also pity him... Eran realised that everything he’d said in that cell, everything he’d been made to say to the Each Uisge, had likely been revealed word for word to the Traitor King. It was disconcerting.

‘You should know the nature of Fenwrel’s geas that she placed upon you when she dampened your fire,’ the Traitor King said. ‘If Mosk dies, you will encounter mortal peril. If he sickens terribly, you will too. The spell behaves as a soul-bond, except that once you fulfil the requirements of the geas, the spell will lift.’

‘What requirements?’

‘I imagine you’ll find those out in time,’ the Traitor King said, looking like he very much didn’t care one way or another. ‘But just so we’re clear, if you care for your welfare, you must also care for his.’

‘The most holy Kabiri said-‘

‘He’s not here now,’ the Traitor King said with a faint smile. ‘He’s ailing. You having the privilege to attend this meeting, to speak with me now like this – as though we are comrades when you are nothing to me – is thanks to his intervention. Don’t mistake my actions for true good will, Eran. After all, am I not the King who betrayed the entire Seelie Kingdom? I’ve noticed you don’t use any of my titles.’

‘You actually like people saying ‘Your Majesty’ when you’re not really royalty at all?’ Eran said, annoyance sparking up in him like a brief, quick flame. When it was gone, Eran was mortified. ‘I apologise.’

‘You remind me of him,’ the Traitor King said, then he laughed, a shocking, loud sound that was there and gone, rousing all the same. ‘You remind me of your father a great deal. And we cannot have all the fire fae in the realm eliminated by some wayward ice. So I must investigate it myself, since my Mages and sources have little to offer me, and you and Mosk must come with me, since you have somehow found yourself in the centre of things.’

Eran thought that he’d much rather have his family back. He’d much rather be at home, under the hot sun, feeling how alive it was in the way it touched his skin with that endless warmth. He’d much rather have the cold nights, when they had an abundance of furs and his little sisters would sometimes join him, shivery and cold. Depending on the time of year, there might also be puppies seeking warmth, or a baby gazelle, and Eran was the one who lifted his blankets for all of them, while his father would shake his head and mutter that Eran was far too soft, until Eran found out that his father used to do the same thing when he was younger too.

He wouldn’t have that, ever again.

It frustrated him, to feel the way it would wash over him sometimes, this grief, the disconnection of
it. It had been months. He was a being of fire. He was supposed to burn intensely, then let it go. It bewildered him, that it upset him so much. That he could sit here in front of someone that he’d always told himself he hated, only to want that moment of connection, to crave empathy even if it were false.

‘Now,’ the Traitor King said, drawing his attention, ‘we are going to talk about your level of training, what you’re proficient in, and how to make sure you are not as much of a burden to the team as you’re likely going to be.’

Eran stared at the Traitor King in consternation, but then realised that…it made sense. If they were all going to travel off somewhere dangerous, it was something the Traitor King would need to know. Eran didn’t want to give him one iota of respect, but he found it happened anyway. If only he didn’t know how desperate he was for some approval from a father figure, then – perhaps – it wouldn’t taste so bitter.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'The World Forest:'

‘Mosk?’ the Each Uisge said, smiling up from the ground. ‘Do you need some encouragement?’

Eran wasn’t surprised when Mosk didn’t do anything except hunch in more on himself.

‘That’s helpful,’ Eran said, glaring back at the Each Uisge. ‘If you really think he didn’t do this and he didn’t kill his family, then you can’t be stupid enough to think you’ll get anything new out of him by taking him here.’
And we're off! Out of the Unseelie Court, and into the fire, as it were. I hope folks enjoy the chapter! Not sure when the next update will be, I've lost some of my buffer over the last few weeks, and December has five weekends (as well as my birthday, Christmas and then New Years). If you had a choice between like a 'two days before Christmas' or a 'day before Western New Years' update, what would you folks prefer?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

* 

Grip was not a horse.

Eran stared up at the giant beast that could hardly be called a dog. It was larger than any dog he’d ever seen. It didn’t have a saddle for one person, but a saddle for eight, with room left over. Eran could have clambered up its side if he wanted to, but he didn’t, because the creature’s shaggy black-blue fur glittered with frost. It drooled copiously, its huge mouth open, soft lips sagging as it happily panted, and beneath its mouth – metres down to the ground – stalagmites of ice had formed.

Mosk hardly seemed to care, though sometimes he swayed or twitched, and Eran felt it through the wrist that shackled Mosk to Eran, because that was something the Traitor King had thought would remind Eran he had a responsibility for Mosk’s welfare.

He’d turned up with new shackles, attaching one of the cuffs to Mosk’s wrist. Mosk, predictably, hadn’t reacted. Then the Traitor King had turned to Eran and calmly taken his wrist, cuffing him to Mosk.

‘There,’ the Traitor King had said, grinning in a way that made Eran want to step back. ‘Your enemy can’t get away from you now.’

‘But-’

The Traitor King had teleported away, and left Eran by the stables, staring at the cuff on his wrist in horror. Mosk didn’t say anything. Didn’t even mutter anything catty or mean. He’d withdrawn into himself totally as they readied themselves to visit the Aur forest.

At least the metal had no iron in it, though that was no real consolation. The chain was long, but that meant Eran had to bunch it up and hold it to stop it from trailing on the ground. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being punished for doing the right thing, and didn’t know who to take it out on. After all he’d discovered about Mosk, he couldn’t justify grabbing him and burning him in anger. But everyone else around him was too powerful. The Each Uisge could ruin him with words alone, and the Traitor King might be bound by an oath to protect his life, but he didn’t need to make sure that Eran’s life was comfortable.
Now he stood before a giant ice dog, as the Traitor King and a team of grooms and strappers worked to make sure that Grip’s girth and billets were well attached. The thickly hewn dog stood there calmly, looking around cheerfully enough, except that Eran was quite sure he could curl up in the creature’s mouth and be nothing more than a single mouthful of food.

‘We’re not going on that,’ Eran said finally. He didn’t want to go anywhere near it, or its ice. He felt a pang in his unshackled wrist, where the sea of ice that had taken his home had touched and scarred him as it killed his family. His skin crawled. The weather was mild, the Unseelie Court night sky was clear, but Eran felt as though it would be hard to move if anyone asked him to. He forced his breathing to evenness, because the Each Uisge leaned against a stable post nearby, and Eran knew that the Each Uisge was paying attention to them both, even if he wasn’t looking at them directly.

I’m not getting on that thing.

‘Is the King not strong enough to teleport the four of us?’ Eran said, loudly enough that the Each Uisge smirked nearby, even as he looked down at the ground.

One of the grooms stopped and stared at Eran in outrage. His goat ears flicked hard, and the Traitor King said something quiet to the goat-horned fae who went back to work. The team had to climb on and off the dog again to make sure the saddle was well-fitted. There was a rope-ladder with wooden rungs attached to the saddle, by which the passengers were obviously expected to mount.

‘What even is it?’ Eran hissed.

Mosk looked up.

‘It’s the King’s jaatikokoira,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘The biggest one I’ve ever seen,’ Mosk said. ‘Probably well fed. They eat fire fae.’

‘What?’

Eran took a deep, annoyed breath, wishing he could call on his fire to warm himself, feel grounded. He felt lost and empty without his fire, and he didn’t want to get on a dog like that if he couldn’t defend himself. Annoyed too that he’d reacted so strongly to Mosk’s teasing. If the dog didn’t make ice, maybe it wouldn’t matter. He wouldn’t be acting like a child.

Kabiri had said that the Traitor King couldn’t allow Eran to come to harm. Not reasonably, anyway. So Mosk was teasing him, and the dog was tame. It was just standing there. It looked happy enough, its tail wagging lazily. A huge tail. That dropped snow to the ground.

Eran refused to fold his arms, wished he would stop searching inside of himself for some flame, something to warm his hands, to stir in his belly.

A tiny voice in the back of his mind told him that he wasn’t going to the site where his parents were killed. They were going to the place where Mosk’s family was killed. But Eran didn’t know what to think. Maybe Mosk had a hand in their deaths. Maybe he started the fire he was now afraid of.

Eran wished those thoughts rung with truth.

Soon, the grooms and strappers were done, and the Traitor King stood by the ladder.
‘You two,’ he said, beckoning Mosk and Eran over. ‘Mount first.’

Eran and Mosk didn’t move. Eran knew that Mosk didn’t want to go, and so Mosk’s lack of movement made sense. But Eran couldn’t tear his eyes away from the ice beneath the dog’s mouth, spreading along the ground. He breathed cold air, his lungs were chilled. It didn’t matter when he told himself that he was strong, he was a warrior, it was just ice, it was fine.

His face burned with humiliation, it was the only part of him that was warm.

‘I still think we should leave them behind,’ the Each Uisge said, looking up finally. ‘But that’s neither here nor there. Did you not hear the King? Mount.’

Eran’s teeth grit together as he took an involuntary step forward, another, and he turned his head to glare at the Each Uisge, even as Mosk walked alongside him. But the Each Uisge had already turned to look inside a small pack at his waist. He wore a rapier too, and another weapon that was bunched up and looked like a chain. Eran took a deep breath and realised it was easier to pretend that he wanted to do this. His body was moving, he was going to mount, and as he climbed the rope ladder – Mosk behind him, the umbilical chain connecting them both – he realised the dog’s fur was very coarse. It was cold, but it didn’t make ice grow on Eran’s body.

He settled in one of the shaped leather seats, Mosk sitting next to him, his head bowed. Quickly and nimbly, the Each Uisge followed. As the Traitor King climbed Grip, the Each Uisge said:

‘I hate the smell of dog.’

‘He doesn’t smell like a hound,’ the Traitor King said.

‘I wouldn’t expect you to know the difference, given you smell the same.’

Eran stared at their backs, and then forced himself to look to the side instead, at the packs they had with them. They were higher off the ground than he thought. It wouldn’t be a pleasant fall.

‘Ready?’ the Traitor King said.

Then, without waiting for an answer, all five of them dissolved into a light that felt like mild warmth, as Eran clutched the side of the saddle in alarm.

They materialised into a place of heat and flames licking at boulders. The husks of once-grand trees that must have been hundreds of metres tall judging by the ruined boles that remained, turned to stumps of charcoal. As soon as Grip’s paws found the ground, ice spread out in a circle around them. It must have been to protect their feet. The heat of the place was fierce. Eran could feel it throbbing in his chest, something alien to even what his father had shown him could be used in battle. It made his eyes sting, but the acrid scent of smoke and char was welcome and he breathed it down, gulping breath after breath.

Beside him, Mosk hunkered down behind the Traitor King’s seat, arms over his head. The same body language he’d used around Davix. He shook in fine movements. The Each Uisge turned, noticed, and then looked away without his expression changing at all.

‘This isn’t normal fire,’ Eran said, feeling like everyone knew that already. Had this fire been burning for months? Had it been burning since Mosk’s family had been killed? That was before the ice plague had been created. Eran’s family had been killed months ago. That wasn’t even the phenomenon’s genesis, the plague of ice had existed months before then, Eran had discovered as much from word of mouth.
Horror curled into him. He’d secretly hoped that being in a forest burnt by fire would somehow stir the warmth that Kabiri said was still inside of him. Instead, he heard his parent’s words, making him take the oath that he would never do something like this to the land around him, unless it was for plants that needed it, and the animals would have a reasonable chance of surviving. Fire was bent on consumption, and so there were oaths to ensure that he would use it as carefully as possible.

Even the Unseelie afrit had their oaths.

There was nothing careful about this. As far as the eye could see, the ground was black, grey and white from ash and charcoal. It was pocked with uneven stumps, or holes in the ground where the fire had been strong enough to burn down and eat the roots. The stones were burning. There was a rise of rocks that towered to the east, and small, vivid blue flames licked at it.

‘It’s not,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Can you tell me more about it?’

‘Maybe…if I was on the ground.’

‘We’ll look about,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Stay on your guard.’

The Traitor King dismounted, the Each Uisge followed, and then Eran went forward, pulling on the chain without even thinking. But Mosk didn’t move. He pulled harder, for the first time feeling uncertain. He wouldn’t have taken Mosk here on his own. The Each Uisge wanted to find new things in his memory, but Eran didn’t see how this could be good for anyone. He tried to tell himself that Mosk did this. He’d admitted to doing this. But Eran felt certain that Mosk couldn’t create a fire like this.

Eran couldn’t create a fire like this. He didn’t care if Mosk was a seventh son of a seventh son. This was aberrant. It had no hint of natural fire about it. His sense which could tell when magic was being done, tingled so strongly that his mouth salivated, his stomach churning.

‘Mosk?’ the Each Uisge said, smiling up from the ground. ‘Do you need some encouragement?’

Eran wasn’t surprised when Mosk didn’t do anything except hunch in more on himself.

‘That’s helpful,’ Eran said, glaring back at the Each Uisge. ‘If you really think he didn’t do this and he didn’t kill his family, then you can’t be stupid enough to think you’ll get anything new out of him by taking him here.’

The Traitor King walked off, not paying attention to the three of them, his hard gaze taking in the scenery. The ground steamed beneath his boots, but he didn’t seem to care about the heat beyond the ice. Grip was panting harder, more ice had built up around his paws, along with snow, tumbling from his fur as though he was beginning to create a nest for himself.

‘Mosk,’ the Each Uisge said, ‘come here.’

So Eran was able to clamber down the rope ladder, Mosk following, though he stumbled once his feet hit the ice. It wasn’t even slippery. Mosk folded his arms around himself, caught himself as his knees buckled. He refused to look around.

The Each Uisge walked closer to him, trailed a hand down Mosk’s upper arm and tilted his head.

‘I am not particularly in the mood to hear my adventures told back to me, so perhaps a new order today. If you see anything here that allows you to tell me of the nature of what has happened here, or to you, or regarding the sentient ice, you will tell me immediately. Understand?’
‘Yes,’ Mosk choked out.

‘There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?’ the Each Uisge walked off in another direction, and then simply stopped and folded his arms, grimacing at the scene before them.

‘Mosk,’ the Each Uisge called, ‘how about you go look for your family home?’

A broken whimper, and mechanically, Mosk lurched towards the blackened ground, stepping off the ice. Eran had no choice but to follow, alarmed.

His feet sank into the hot soil, though it didn’t hurt him. Mosk’s breath wheezed in his lungs. His feet were protected by some boots he’d been given just before they left. What must have once been wet, loamy forest floor, the type of soils that Eran had experienced more often since his family had died, was now sandy and friable and pockmarked with air bubbles, where the fire had burned bits of root away. The ground sagged unevenly, and Mosk placed every foot warily, careful of his entire body around the heat that shimmered up from the forest floor.

The outcrop of rock and granite was further away than it had first appeared, as they approached. It was larger, too. Not just some stones that would be easy to climb. Perhaps it was dwarfed by trees once, but now it loomed over its environment.

Mosk’s breathing got rougher, even though the worst of the smoke had long gone, and all that was left was haze and the smell of over-burned carbon. Eran felt greedy for it, even as he knew that it might even be toxic for Mosk. After he’d displayed repeated bouts of terror at even the hint of flame, being made to come here… Eran couldn’t even imagine what it was doing to his mind. He could only hope that without a heartsong, Mosk couldn’t feel any of it properly.

Minutes passed, they still approached the outcrop. Eran stumbled once, a leg sinking deep into a puff of dust and sand and rotted wood. He righted himself, kept following Mosk.

‘Can you even find it?’ Eran said, his voice quieter, not wanting to be heard by the others, even though they were some distance away now. ‘Your home?’

Mosk made a louder choked off noise at the top of an exhale. It was neither agreement or disagreement. He kept walking. Eran looked behind him and was surprised at how much distance they’d put between themselves and Grip, the Traitor King and the Each Uisge. The Each Uisge was saying something, but facing Eran and Mosk. The Traitor King wasn’t even facing him, but Eran could tell they were having some kind of conversation, he could hear their voices in amongst the cracks, sighs and thumps that were the ground settling, though he couldn’t make out what they were saying.

They rounded the rocky outcrop slowly. For a wild moment, Eran thought Mosk was trying to escape. But no, they were moving too slowly, Mosk was under a compulsion, and Eran no longer believed Mosk could secretly fight compulsions or magic. He thought if he was as good a strategist as his father, he’d hold onto suspicion that Mosk was one of the most powerful people in the world. Now, he only believed that Mosk might have been that once. Eran had sensed emptiness and wrongness from Mosk, but there was a jagged, rotten miasma to the magic that clung here. If magic had a signature, Mosk’s felt different to what Eran felt in the fire here.

‘Gwyn said it destroyed the fire trees,’ Eran said. ‘We…have some of those. Some types. They can’t be burned in fire. They can’t even be killed with lava. There’s a grove…’

Gone now. With the rest of them.
Eran wondered if it was still blanketed with a cloak of ice.

Mosk stumbled once, and then stopped, his wheezing breaths halting as he trembled violently. Then, he collapsed to his knees and reached out, taking up something in his hands.

Eran saw by the blackened curve of the thing, that it was no piece of tree or stone, but the bowl-like shape of a piece of skull.

Mosk cradled it close to his chest, even as his hands began to steam from the heat of it. Eran’s nostrils flared on the smell of freshly burning wet wood, and then felt a lance of pain behind his eyes, and then his shins felt raw. He moved without thinking, sliding his hands beneath Mosk’s arms and lifting him up and back from the burning ground.

‘You’re hurting yourself,’ Eran said stupidly.

He realised that whatever Fenwrel had done to him, made it so that he could feel Mosk’s pain. But he couldn’t feel it all the time. He couldn’t feel the pain in Mosk’s hands in his own, even though Mosk still held the broken piece of skull. His skin was red and already blistering.

‘Don’t—’ Eran reached to take it from him, and Mosk stepped away, hunching on himself. ‘You’ll hurt yourself.’

‘So let me.’

Eran stared, that awful cold feeling that had crept into him when he’d heard more about Mosk’s story, sinking deeper inside of him. A question he’d not allowed himself to even consider, echoed quietly in his mind. It almost sounded like his mother was speaking to him.

What if he’s like you? You blame yourself for your own parent’s deaths, don’t you? What if it’s like that for him?

Gooseflesh raced across Eran’s skin, his breath felt shorter, even though the heat in the air had opened his lungs, made his body feel more alive than it had in some time. He looked across the ground and saw other bits of bone, as black and oily as those that had been left in a firepit for months. The last Eran had seen of his own family, they were whole and preserved. Here, whatever was left of Mosk’s family – his family home – was this. Bits. Scraps that could be found after a feast.

‘I can leach the heat from it,’ Eran said finally, not even knowing if it was true anymore. He held out his hand. ‘I’ll give it back. Bone can hold heat for too long, it won’t cool quickly enough to not do more damage.’

‘You could fuck me while I hold it,’ Mosk said, and then laughed, the sound empty and callous.

Eran felt a familiar flash of annoyance, and snatched the bone from Mosk’s hand, expecting Mosk to fight him for it. But he didn’t. He simply stood there, staring down at the ground. Eran thought of a retort and the words died cold in his mouth. He was a single candle, blown out.

He was holding a member of Mosk’s family.

The piece of skull burned hot, and Eran closed his eyes. He couldn’t call his fire forth, he knew that, but Kabiri had said it was still there. If he still had something in him, he could…there, he felt the heat from the skull leach into his fingertips without hurting him. It snaked down the back of his hands and forearms, and then was gone. There was hardly enough of it to warm him to his shoulders.
He could see his hands shaking, see the piece of skull trembling with it. Saw the tattoo the Mage had given him to find someone to blame. He looked up at Mosk, the way he held himself like he wanted to disappear even now. Or maybe he didn’t even want that, he was just staring down, his expression blank. But he’d bent down and taken this up, hadn’t he?

‘Here,’ Eran said, thrusting the piece of bone forward. ‘Take it.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘Yes, you do,’ Eran said, even as he felt an angry voice inside of him clamour that Mosk was nothing more than a spiteful child.

‘I don’t want to be here. I don’t want it. And you, being nice now? Does it feel like home? If there’s a fire hot enough to burn trees that can’t be burned by lava, there’s a fire hot enough to burn you. Which means you can burn to death.’

Mosk still didn’t look at him, delivered the venomous words to the ground, but Eran felt them all stick in him like burrs. It was true, wasn’t it? Eran looked at the blue flames licking at the rocks. If there was a fire hot enough to burn the fire trees, then there was a fire hot enough to kill him too. It was obvious Mosk wanted it. Eran felt angry, vengeful, but there was that doubt in his mind, wondering if he’d want the same thing, if someone chained him up, if someone…

If someone paid for a room by...

*No, he asked! He begged!*

‘Do you know…who it is?’ Eran said, feeling awkward.

‘No,’ Mosk said. Then: ‘Not Mallem.’

‘It was… Did it take your whole family?’

Mosk didn’t respond, and Eran wondered if it was something he couldn’t talk about. But asking about the piece of bone had been okay, so he tried another angle.

‘How many members of your family were there?’

‘Ten,’ he said. ‘Not including me.’

‘With…grandparents and-?’

‘Mamatree and papatree, and my brothertrees and sistertrees.’

It was an incredible number. Eran wondered if the fertility rates of dryads was just different somehow. Most fae struggled to conceive at all, and every one of Eran’s siblings had been treasured, not just for their presence and personalities, but also for the long journey many fae endured just to bear a single child.

‘So eight siblings? And you’re…the seventh? Of nine?’

Mosk turned and looked at the piece of skull in Eran’s hand, he reached for it, fingers hesitating before he took it up. He winced as it touched his burnt flesh, but it was no longer burning him.

‘I’m the last,’ Mosk said. ‘Of all the Aur, probably, with the forest gone. In the Manytrees grove I was the baby. A sapling. Im was the firstborn, he bonded with spruce. Shiel next, and he bonded with alder. They were named after Papatree. Imshiel. Then Chert, he bonded with another kind of
spruce. Then Ela, the firstborn sistertree, chokecherry was hers. Leaf, the fourth boy, but the fifth child, and so the storyweaver, connected to catechu. Himshi then, and he bonded to casuarina. Mallem, he bonded to cherry. Then Chaley,’ Mosk’s breath caught, and his fingers clenched on the bone, soot blackening his fingers, ‘who bonded to jarrah, and grew flowers in her hair. And then… a seventh son of a seventh son.’

‘What did you bond to?’

‘I’m a sapling,’ Mosk said woodenly. ‘So nothing. I was meant to… bond, but…I put it off. And now…’ Mosk looked around them, though it didn’t look like he was seeing a single thing. ‘Now there is nothing to bond with. So I am- Unbonded.’

‘There are other trees.’

‘There’s no Aur forest,’ Mosk said.

It was the most Eran had ever heard him say, about anything. Mosk wasn’t heading back to the Each Uisge, so clearly none of this was relevant, but Eran couldn’t detach from the importance in the words. It was rare to hear Mosk speak in a tone that was anything other than a dead monotone, or bitter anger. Instead, something softer, alive, like the tiny glow in the wick of a candle that hadn’t quite caught.

‘Do… dryads have lots of- It’s a large family.’

‘It was,’ Mosk said. ‘Now it’s not anything at all.’

‘The ice took my family. My father, Ifir, my mother, Adali. Vhadi, my brother, and Ada and Adalia, who were twins. And…’ precious.

He’d spoken the words, but he could still feel them in his chest. As though he’d not really spoken them at all. As though the names were trapped inside of him, now that he’d never be able to say them to the people who had owned the names in the first place. He’d never say ‘Ada’ and see her look at him with her bright amber eyes, her black curls bouncing, filled with energy and waiting for the next task or bit of mischief. He’d never call for Adalia while looking for her among the gleaming red spindle rocks that shone dully but had a subtle beauty to them. A place she went to get away from everything, as lithe and beautiful as the stones that rose from the place she went to hide.

‘And I killed them,’ Mosk said.

‘Did you?’ Eran said, his voice rough. ‘Really? Because it seems to me that you can’t talk about any of what happened to you or what you really did to the Each Uisge, even when he compels you until your eyes bleed.’

Mosk’s lips thinned, and he turned away from Eran, showing him his back.

‘You saw what happened to them all,’ Eran continued. ‘When I made you tell me about what happened to you, and you told me about… the ice. You saw it, didn’t you? Did you do that?’

‘Yes,’ Mosk said.

‘A family as big as yours… That’s a lot of people to fail at once,’ Eran said.

Mosk turned slowly. He was pale, looked unwell. Eran watched as Mosk raised the piece of skull, and then Mosk shoved the bone into Eran’s cheek, breaking his skin with the sharp edge of it and
spilling blood. Mosk’s teeth bared.

‘No one put a spell on me to stop me from hurting you,’ he said, his voice empty, at odds with the expression of his face.

Then, he took the bone away and cradled it in his hands again. Eran touched fingers to his face, couldn’t bring himself to feel angry at what had happened. He wondered if it was the mouse-maiden muting his fire, or something else, some heavier, darker thing, that made him know what it was like to carry winter in his body.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Imbalance:'

‘If you don’t start hating me again, I will make you hate me,’ Mosk said, his voice shaking and whispery soft. ‘I will make you.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m not your friend. I’m just not someone who…’ would kick someone while they’re down.

That wasn’t true, was it? Eran tried not to think about it.

‘I hate you,’ Mosk said. ‘The Seelie think they’re so good. You’re not. You’re all corrupted on a good day. But I hate you the most. I thought when someone finally caught me, they’d do the right thing, instead of- instead of taking me on the world’s stupidest adventure. Instead of- It was like following a lost child. Maybe it’s good your parents are dead, so they don’t have to be disappointed in you, knowing that you turned out like this. Or maybe they are disappointed, and maybe that’s why they didn’t fight harder to get away from the ice. Maybe they all just wanted to get away from you.’
Imbalance

Chapter Notes

Squeaked one in before Christmas, as that's where the votes leaned. Thanks so much for reading folks! I have been so excited to put this chapter up for like two weeks now, lol. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

Mosk had kept the piece of skull with him as they’d walked away from the remnants of Mosk’s ‘family home.’ Eran didn’t even know what it had been. A cabin? A tent? Multi-storeyed? He wondered if he’d ever find out.

The Traitor King and the Each Uisge stood side by side, looking unhappy, and Eran wondered if they’d discovered nothing more about the place by coming. Eran wished he could understand this place better, know what had happened. How could Mosk and this huge fire be connected to the plague? What would Mages hope to gain from such a thing?

‘You said this fire felt different,’ the Traitor King said as Eran approached, his eyes alighting on the cut in his cheek. ‘Do you have a better sense of how?’

‘I’m no expert in magic,’ Eran said, gathering up the chain that connected him to Mosk and making sure it fit more comfortably in his hand. He thought if he could draw the Traitor King’s attention to it, the Traitor King would release him from Mosk, so that Eran only had to hold the chain instead of being shackled to him. The Traitor King appeared not to notice. ‘But it feels…like there is still a lot of magic here, making the fire work harder than it should. No natural fire lasts this long, even those created by fae abilities, like those of the afrit, who make quite a hot fire.’

‘They do indeed,’ the Traitor King said. ‘What else?’

‘I think it came from some kind of magic worker. I can’t sense the same magical signature in Mosk.’

‘Nor can I,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Though given his magic and heartsong have been ripped from him, it’s entirely possible that any signature he had, has been extinguished.’

Mosk did nothing more than close his fingers more tightly around the bit of bone he held.

‘I suppose the next step is visiting the Seelie Court and demanding an audience with Davix,’ the Traitor King said. ‘I can’t wait to see the myriad ways they try and reject me this time.’

‘Davix really doesn’t like taking an audience with you lately, does he?’ the Each Uisge said, lifting a black eyebrow. ‘What makes you think things will go any differently now?’

The Traitor King didn’t respond to that and stared up at the sky instead.
‘We’d best get back. It hasn’t been entirely fruitless.’

Eran didn’t know why the Traitor King would say that, given they hadn’t found anything new, but perhaps the Traitor King had seen or found something and wasn’t about to share it with Mosk and Eran. He was probably stingy with information.

* 

Mosk climbed up the rope ladder without needing a compulsion to prompt him, though he was pale, and his eyes never really focused on anything. Eran didn’t know much about shock, even though he’d seen it before, but he thought Mosk might be suffering from it.

The cut on Eran’s cheek had scabbed over. It was, thanks to his Court status, already healing. The burns on Mosk’s hands and shins hadn’t fared so well. The bark on his shins had blackened, Eran could see it through the cloth that had burned away when he’d fallen to his knees. Eran wanted to ask about it, but knew he wouldn’t get an answer. It looked sore, and inflamed where it became skin. The bark itself was flat, lightly textured. It grew closely enough to the skin that it didn’t hinder clothing in any way.

Mosk’s hands were blistered, but he seemed not to notice. Eran knew that couldn’t be true, but maybe the lack of heartsong made him distant from his body.

‘Okay,’ the Traitor King said, ‘time to leave.’

Eran grabbed onto the side of the saddle automatically, as they dissolved into light. Eran wondered if they’d teleport back to the stables again, and as he held his breath, waiting for it to be over, the light dissipated.

They hadn’t moved.

Grip stood in the exact same place in the dead forest, and heat haze rising lazily from the ground.

There was a pause, a stillness in the Traitor King’s body. Then, he shifted once, and stilled again. The Each Uisge turned to look at him, frowning.

‘Gwyn?’

‘That’s…’ the Traitor King said. Then, he summoned his light again, and Eran wondered if it was fatigue. It was hard for people to teleport themselves, even once they were adults and had a knack for it. Most couldn’t manage it more than a few times a day. The Traitor King had teleported not just the four of them, but a giant dog too. Perhaps it was a sign of exhaustion. Eran took a deep breath, looking around at the light that cloaked them, never hurting them.

They reappeared in the forest. In the same place.

The Traitor King moved quickly. Instead trying the same thing again, he dropped the reins and vaulted off Grip in a single bound, landing smoothly on the ice. Eran leaned over and watched in amazement as the Traitor King walked off about twenty paces and then called his light to him.

For a few seconds, the Traitor King just looked very bright, seemed to disappear into the intense light, and then when the light faded, he was exactly where he’d been standing.

Eran realised that it wasn’t fatigue at all, and he frowned, feeling a chill of uneasiness move over him.
‘Has that ever happened before?’ he said.

‘I am reasonably confident Gwyn could teleport over two hundred times in a day if he wanted to, except he is not a performing circus pony,’ the Each Uisge said, voice muted.

Eran couldn’t even comprehend numbers like that, wondering if the Each Uisge was exaggerating, so he chose not to say anything. But it made the sense of unease grow, and he turned to look at Mosk. Except Mosk was just staring down at the piece of skull and turning it mechanically in his fingers.

The Traitor King returned, made a hand gesture that had Grip bending his front legs and lowering his head to the ground. The Traitor King climbed him, by way of his nose and forehead, unbothered by the shifting, rocking movement of Grip as he straightened into a standing position once more. Grip panted happily after that, his tail wagging again.

‘I mislike this,’ the Traitor King said.

‘Whyever would you mislike this?’ the Each Uisge said lightly. Then: ‘It wasn’t like this last time, obviously.’

‘This has never happened to me. Ask them if they had anything to do with it. Best rule it out.’

‘Oh, well then,’ the Each Uisge looked over his shoulder at them and simply said: ‘Did you?’

The compulsion was sharp, immediate, and Eran spilled an indignant ‘No!’ even as Mosk spilled a flat one. The Traitor King sat on the front of the saddle facing them all, his arms folded in his lap. Increasing alarm filled Eran in sharp pings. He felt his breath come faster, as he looked around, wondering what else the magic here was doing. Maybe it wasn’t just the fire.

‘Neither of you can teleport, can you?’ the Traitor King said to Eran and Mosk.

‘No, I’m not yet…I was meant to start trying to learn it in a few years,’ Eran said.

‘I can’t,’ Mosk said. He volunteered the information surprisingly fast, but Eran imagined he wanted to avoid the compulsions. No matter how gently the Each Uisge spoke, each compulsion was an act of violence inside his mind. Even one made up of only two words echoed long, as though he was absentely trying to think of ways to serve it more completely after he’d answered them and the worst of the compulsion had faded away.

The Traitor King turned to the Each Uisge: ‘Can you summon enough water to teleport back?’

‘No,’ the Each Uisge said. ‘While I can’t sense the magic like you can, I can certainly tell this is not a place where a fae like myself could simply summon water to relieve the fire. You wonder if it’s affecting all of us?’

‘This hasn’t happened when I’ve come here before,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Perhaps new magic has been laid upon the land. We might want to expect an ambush.’

‘Lovely,’ the Each Uisge said.

‘Except I’ve not sensed any other fae,’ the Traitor King continued, ignoring the Each Uisge’s tone of voice. ‘There are no other living beings here, except for the five of us. Nothing has crept closer. I would know.’

Eran knew that fae senses refined as one got older, but that was a level of fae sensing he’d only
ever been able to associate with the best hunters in the afrit clans. He studied the Traitor King quietly, wondering just how many skills it took to destroy the trust and faith of the Seelie Court. Of course Eran always knew that he had to be good at some things, but it was different seeing it in person. Eran’s father had always appreciated competence, perhaps that was why he still found it possible to remain in the Traitor King’s presence.

‘We’ll camp for the night,’ the Traitor King said.

The Each Uisge shifted uncomfortably. ‘Would it not be best to travel south? You court danger.’

‘I’m always courting danger.’ A flash of a grin, and the Traitor King stood, walking along the sides of the saddle to one of the packs, so that he was balanced half on the saddle flap and half on Grip’s body. The pack, once opened, revealed a wealth of items – more than could reasonably fit inside something that size. Eran craned past Mosk to look.

‘Magecraft,’ the Traitor King explained, without looking up.

‘Gwyn,’ the Each Uisge said, ‘while you get ready to camp out in the world’s longest lasting forest fire, you might want to consider that you are in the company of a waterhorse who cannot access water and would very much like to go back to the palace. If danger is courted, send some of your soldiers out here, let them die for you. They’re so very good at it.’

The Traitor King paused. Eran could see the moment the Traitor King was seriously considering the Each Uisge’s words.

‘This is the middle of the Aur forest,’ the Traitor King said, looking up. ‘We could travel south for hours, we’re still going to be in the forest.’

‘You truly think the enchantment stopping you from leaving is on the entire forest? It wasn’t even here last time, as you said. This could be something specific to you. But if this place is indeed being prepared for an ambush, are you certain you wish to leave Misfit One and Misfit Two to deal with it?’

‘I’d be here,’ the Traitor King said indignantly. His sheer confidence in his ability to protect them from whatever might be coming – which could have been a horde as much as a single person – was staggering. ‘But I take your point. We’ll travel south.’

The Traitor King closed the pack and resumed his seat in the saddle, taking up the reins and swinging Grip to the right without a word.

* *

Grip plodded on for several hours. The forest, at times, changed in appearance. Sometimes there weren’t even stumps, just a field of sand, making Eran think they’d come somewhere different until the Traitor King remarked that the trees here must have been so fragile to have disappeared completely. Then, they went through a place where the trees still stood two or three men tall, and Eran had thought these might be the fire trees, until the Traitor King made a passing comment about the world’s hardest hardwood.

Beneath Grip’s feet, snow and ice bloomed with every step. It didn’t melt immediately, which meant when Eran looked behind them, he could see how far they’d come. Still, in the distance, when it was clear enough amongst the haze of old smoke and the heat warping the air, he could see that it was melting.

‘Couldn’t Grip make enough water to teleport in?’ Eran said abruptly. ‘If that is what you need?’
They came to a halt, and the Traitor King turned to look at Eran in surprise.

‘Couldn’t he though?’ Eran said. ‘Unless it tires him, but it doesn’t seem to. Why can he draw ice forth but the Each Uisge not draw water?’

*Perhaps the Each Uisge is weak and doesn’t wish to say so.*

‘He’s a beast fae,’ the Traitor King said, and then he turned to Each Uisge. ‘Of course, most Mages don’t include them in their spells. If we leave the ice long enough, you can create a small lake, possibly? I also might try teleporting to a different location. Like the School of the Staff, to shake them all until some of their myopic scheming falls out.’

The Each Uisge sighed. ‘I don’t want to teleport in water made by that creature. You’ll owe me for this.’

‘I owe you for everything,’ the Traitor King observed as he began to unroll the rope ladder.

‘That is true,’ the Each Uisge said winsomely, smiling a little.

Eran began to understand why the Raven Prince had enticed the Each Uisge into his Court. A glimmer of that beauty that the stories talked about was present then, and Eran found it captivating, before he remembered that poison came out of the Each Uisge’s mouth.

* 

The Traitor King couldn’t teleport, not to any one of the locations he chose arbitrarily, after he’d tried to go to the School of the Staff. Eran watched in awe as he lit himself up repeatedly, burning through the kind of reserves that most fae wouldn’t use in such a way.

‘Is it because he’s King? I’ve heard it makes fae invulnerable,’ Eran said.

‘He could do it when he was Court,’ the Each Uisge said. Eran didn’t know how he felt, making conversation with the King’s consort. Not only because of what the Each Uisge had done when he’d been King, but also because of those compulsions. He expected them any moment, as though the Each Uisge would just get tired of regular sentences and compel him to go away.

Nearby, Mosk stood on a tarp that protected his body from the fire, and stared off into the distance, at nothing. The full length of the chain was extended, as Eran and the Each Uisge sat on a separate tarp.

Around them, huge outcrops of rock. It was one of the reasons they’d stopped to have Grip make the ice here, so it could fall into a bowl of naturally occurring rock that had smoothed into a deep depression over time. The rest of it though towered above them, gave the illusion of shelter, and all of it had those tiny blue flames creeping upon it.

‘It’s best not to wonder why Gwyn is good at so many things,’ the Each Uisge said finally. ‘Some of the answers are unpleasant at best, and besides, it stirs lesser men to envy.’

At this, the Each Uisge looked to Eran with a pleased expression, his eyes narrowed.

‘Is it strange,’ Eran said, unable to keep the heat from his voice, ‘being lesser to a King after being one? Or telling people you’re helping them after destroying them? What’s that like?’

The Each Uisge laughed, the sound quiet – like his voice in general. ‘Truth be told I quite enjoy it. But look at you, finding your spark again. Is it being here? Are your spirits lifted?’
'Here? No,' Eran said. 'This is...this place is corrupted.'

'Yes,' the Each Uisge said. 'It is that. Someone doesn’t want anything to grow here for a long time. It wasn’t enough to burn down a forest, this is excessive. As someone who knows a bit about the theme, I think we can safely assume that whoever did this isn’t someone we’d like to meet in a dark alley. Then again, I don’t think I’d like to meet Davix and Olphix anywhere.'

'You really don’t think it was Mosk?'

'He’s been to the Court but a handful of times,' the Each Uisge said, turning to look at the dryad, as he simply stood there, hands lax, hair limp with sweat. The Each Uisge turned back. 'He was always polite and sweet, accommodating and star-struck to be around us. Just as the Seelie fae exist on a spectrum, so too do the Unseelie fae. From the pacifist Unseelie dryads and swan-maidens – let’s ignore the outlier Gulvi of course – to those like the Nain Rouge or the Black Annis. Mosk was about as far on the sweet side as you could ever imagine. One of those fae that make you question the divide between Seelie and Unseelie.'

A pause, as they watched the Unseelie King walk over to the huge mound of melting ice that Grip had happily made only an hour earlier. That had been something to see, the Traitor King romping around with a dog larger than any animal had any right to be, encouraging him to spill the ice to excess. It had made Eran smile to see it, thinking of his own hunting hounds, before he remembered who he was looking at.

'So, no, I don’t think Mosk created this fire,' the Each Uisge said. 'Consider his entire family were here when it happened. Unseelie can be a lot of things, but generally speaking, family comes first – before duty, before honour, before righteousness. And he was not ill-at-ease around his family. He was ever in the company of his mother, or siblings, when he came to the Court. He’d never dream of coming alone. He always had an escort.'

'Don’t you think you’re sharing a lot with the enemy?'

'Oh dear, what are you going to do? Run along and tell Albion that Mosk used to be sweet? However shall we manage?'

The Each Uisge laughed, stood, smoothed off his thighs even though nothing dirtied them, and walked towards the Traitor King without looking back.

Eran stood and walked over to Mosk, gathering the loosening chain as he went. At least it didn’t hurt his hands anymore, some small mercy that was. It was easy to distract himself from the insult of the silvery manacle around his wrist while on this bizarre excursion, but it rankled all the same.

'You should sit down,' Eran said.

'Shouldn’t I lie down? That way you can fuck me.'

'Oh, can I?' Eran said, false eagerness finding its way into his voice. Maybe the Each Uisge was right, maybe the heat did enliven him. ‘Wow! I can’t wait to lie down with you and fuck you in front of the Unseelie King and his consort! It’d be fantastic.’

Mosk turned to look at him, and even through the deadness of his expression, the beads of sweat above his chapped lips, the pallor of his skin – he still managed to convey disdain.

'You’re sick,' Eran said.

'I don’t care.'
‘Just staring out into the horizon like some…cursed addlepated thing isn’t going to make you feel better.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘The Each Uisge said you used to be sweet.’

‘His name is Augus,’ Mosk said. ‘If you are not going to call him by his titles you should at least call him by his name.’

‘The Traitor King said—’

‘The Majesty of the Unseelie Court can say whatever he likes,’ Mosk said, looking down at his feet. ‘But you are wrong to call him the Traitor King.’

‘When that was what he did? To the Seelie?’

‘Did he?’ Mosk said.

‘Of course, have you just not been paying attention to what’s been happening in the world your entire life? Are you so sheltered?’

‘Sheltered,’ Mosk said quietly. ‘We both are. That’s how age works. You’re young too, aren’t you? But he is not the King of traitors. He is the Unseelie King. The fact that he has done wrong in the eyes of the Seelie is a wrong that all the Court Seelie share in, it was not only his lie, was it? It is simply convenient to have a scapegoat.’

At that, Mosk’s knees buckled, and he collapsed to the ground. It seemed that even speaking so much had drained his energy in this place. Eran looked down at the thermos of sap that the Each Uisge had given Mosk. In the packs they’d had food, spare clothing, the tarps, tents, and a great deal more that Eran hadn’t been able to see or was tucked away in additional bags. But the sap wasn’t enough to stop Mosk from ailing here. Mosk still held that piece of skull, refusing to surrender it, even into a pack for safekeeping.

‘This place isn’t good for you,’ Eran said, kneeling beside him. ‘Do you need water?’

‘If you don’t start hating me again, I will make you hate me,’ Mosk said, his voice shaking and whispery soft. ‘I will make you.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m not your friend. I’m just not someone who…’ would kick someone while they’re down.

That wasn’t true, was it? Eran tried not to think about it.

‘I hate you,’ Mosk said. ‘The Seelie think they’re so good. You’re not. You’re all corrupted on a good day. But I hate you the most. I thought when someone finally caught me, they’d do the right thing, instead of- instead of taking me on the world’s stupidest adventure. Instead of- It was like following a lost child. Maybe it’s good your parents are dead, so they don’t have to be disappointed in you, knowing that you turned out like this. Or maybe they are disappointed, and maybe that’s why they didn’t fight harder to get away from the ice. Maybe they all just wanted to get away from you.’

Eran’s breathing came rougher, his hands curled into fists. He knew what Mosk was doing, but it didn’t make it any easier to bear. Hearing his family talked about with that blatant disrespect…he wanted to slide his kh’anzar free and avenge them all over again.
He lashed out, snatched up the piece of skull, and glared when Mosk cried out in shock.

‘There,’ Eran said, holding it out of Mosk’s reach. He stood and pushed Mosk down when he tried to – on shaky legs – lunge for it. It was too easy to have Mosk flailing, send him wheeling onto the floor. He really was sick. ‘I hate you again. Now, do you want to watch me snap this into little pieces?'

It was odd to see Mosk’s face breaking into any expression that wasn’t numbness. Watching his forehead crumple, his mouth turn into his frown, his eyes squeeze shut – but just as quickly it was gone, and it looked like he’d never felt a single thing.

‘I don’t care,’ Mosk said.

‘But you got what you wanted,’ Eran jeered, staring down at him. ‘I hate you again. Aren’t you at least a little grateful? You could tell me ‘thank you’ while I grind this into dust. I could fling it away and you wouldn’t find it. Wait, not ‘it’ – *them*, right? Which one do you think? The storyweaver? Was his name Leaf? Or Chaley? The one who grew flowers in her hair?*

Mosk hunched in on himself, and then finally curled up into a ball, placing his arms over his head. Seeing him react that way to Eran, after he’d reacted that way to Mage Davix, and the burned wreckage of his family home, was a lance through Eran’s body. He ground his teeth together as he dropped the piece of bone onto Mosk’s body.

‘Stop asking me to hate you,’ Eran said.

Mosk didn’t respond, and didn’t uncurl. After a minute, one of his shaking hands shifted so that he could take the piece of bone, and then just as slowly, he drew it back underneath himself, so that it was hidden.

Eran wanted to yank on the chains until Mosk screamed. He wanted to drag Mosk against the burning soil until he got the spiteful anger out of his system. He’d always been quick to stir to anger, but Mosk’s changeable moods made that fury inside of him hunger for vengeance. It was stifled as it was. No one to properly blame yet, no clear enemy to bring to justice, and the Seelie Court having no interest in that justice in the first place.

He wasn’t just mad at Mosk, he realised. He was mad at the whole damned world.

*

‘I can’t even track the Mages,’ the Traitor King said later, as the Each Uisge stared at the pool of water that had finally melted enough for him to consider teleporting in it. Eran stood nearby, he didn’t fancy being teleported through water at all. Maybe they could go fetch someone else to bring them back, like Fenwrel.

‘Boohoo,’ the Each Uisge said. ‘I can’t believe I’m doing this.’

‘It’s not drool, it’s just…ice and water.’

‘So you say,’ the Each Uisge said in some disgust.

Then, he bent at the waist and touched his fingers to the water, sniffing it. His nose wrinkled, but he stepped into the water without even a shiver. After a few seconds, he dropped beneath, and then there was a whirl of bubbles and the form of the Each Uisge vanished.

The Traitor King sighed in relief, turned to Eran, and then froze.
The Each Uisge had reappeared in exactly the same place. After a moment he stood, looking poleaxed.

‘That’s never happened to me before,’ the Each Uisge said.

‘It’s like hitting a wall,’ the Traitor King said. ‘An enchantment on the both of us? Or this place?’

‘Or everyone,’ the Each Uisge said, staring at the Traitor King with wide eyes. ‘Didn’t Fenwrel say that taking someone’s heartsong – a seventh son of a seventh son – could do more than just create the plague?’

Eran half-expected the Traitor King to say something like ‘don’t be absurd,’ because it sounded stupid. No one could put a spell on the world like that. His fingers tightened around the loose chain he held.

The Each Uisge walked slowly out of the water, squeezing the excess out of his hair.

‘No point trying that again,’ he said. ‘It’s not the location, I simply can’t…move. The strangest sensation, like running in place.’

‘Yes,’ the Traitor King said. ‘You really think this enchantment could be on everything? Everyone?’

‘I hope not,’ the Each Uisge said, frowning. His eyes widened. ‘That would be catastrophic.’

‘We can continue south,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Eventually we’ll leave the forest, find some other fae, see if they can teleport.’

The Each Uisge was still staring ahead, and Eran could tell that they were both worried. It reminded him a great deal of the times his father and mother were worried at the same time. It never meant anything good.

What would it mean, if someone had come back to the forest and made it so no one could leave? What would be the point? Maybe it was just to slow down anyone who wanted to investigate it. Except it seemed like whoever had made the fire – if it wasn’t only Mosk – had cloaked themselves and the situation well. No one knew conclusively who had done it, and the one person who could talk about it was cursed to speak other people’s darkest fears.

‘Does it really imbalance things?’ Eran said. ‘Burning the whole forest like this? There are sacred places everywhere, it wouldn’t imbalance the world if you ruined them.’

‘It might,’ the Each Uisge said. ‘But the Aur forest is different. There are places in the fae realm that centralise and stabilise power. The Seelie and Unseelie Court. The Aur forest. The halls of the Nara-Thoth library. But the Aur forest was one of the most crucial. It existed before the Seelie and Unseelie Courts.’

‘Protected by the Aur dryads,’ Mosk said quietly. ‘Custodians of the Aur, keepers of the health of all forests, in all corners of the world.’

‘Yes,’ the Each Uisge said.

‘The birthplace of all the unicorns,’ the Traitor King said. ‘Where the King of the Forest goes when he needs to seek wisdom he knows not. A bastion of energy, life and death together, and a reminder that there is always growth. A symbol, too. The forest itself is a place of harmony and peace, but the custodians of it are Unseelie. A reminder that the Unseelie are not only death and
destruction.’

Mosk made a faint, bitter sound and turned away. He folded his arms. Eran felt the shifts in the chain.

‘Every forest in the fae realm will feel this loss,’ the Traitor King continued, looking around them. ‘Every creature dependent on a tree or woodland or forest to live has lost something. It isn’t to say that there won’t still be places of rest and peace and harmony, but a foundational force behind it has been ruined. Thoroughly. Until the Aur forest recovers – if it can be recovered, I don’t see how, given that it required the Aur to oversee and protect it and now there is only one left, who possesses no extra life-force to grow a seedling, let alone a forest – the fae realm is askew.’

‘Mage Davix told me about it. Said they were looking for what had caused it.’

‘But still didn’t let you see Albion,’ the Traitor King said, ‘even though you professed to have the cause?’

‘Albion must be seeing many people who-’

‘Don’t defend what you don’t understand,’ the Traitor King said in reproval, ‘and blindly at that. Didn’t your father raise you better? Albion hasn’t been seeing almost anyone, for years. He was likely not even at the Court when you came, but in the seas. Do you think you were special, in his dismissal of you? No. You likely could have turned up with the solution to the plague itself, do you really think they would have heard you?’

‘You might have spent your life getting away with insulting the Seelie Court from the inside, but don’t think for a minute that I’m-’

The Traitor King held up his hand, and Eran fell silent, wishing he had his fire, wishing he could show sparks in the back of his throat or make his hands glow and prove he was a threat.

‘Is it insult when it’s true?’ the Traitor King said coldly. ‘When the King of the Atlantic fails to follow through as King of the Seelie? When his factions engage in lesser skirmishes and his Court is ruled by sea fae who decry the existence of land fae? Do you think he would even like you, if he met you? You have been bred on the fat of the land – as he would put it – and you have a power that is useless in the saltwater of his home. What did you expect, Eran? Your valour to be cherished? A pat on the head and to be told that you’re a good boy? I honestly thought that the son of Ifir and Adali would have shown some ability to grow up. I recommend you do it, or I’ll have Augus compel you to keep your mouth shut.’

Eran was shocked into muteness. His rage seethed in the heart of him, fear too, and some other thing that felt slimy and wrong. He hadn’t been chastened in such a way for a long time, and he’d not expected to ever hear it again. To get it now, from the Traitor King, made resentment and shame stir up until he felt like he was choking on it.

Without another word – and expecting to be told that he shouldn’t walk away from his betters – he turned and determined to put some distance between himself and the Traitor King, heading back towards the tarps. He was amazed when Mosk followed without complaint or snide rejoinder.

Once he reached the tarps, he kept walking, his breathing shaky. He couldn’t fathom why he was so upset. Certainly, he chafed to hear the Seelie Court and its King being so insulted, but then, no one at the Seelie Court had properly listened to him. He rubbed at his chest with the hand not holding the chains.
‘Now would be a great time to call him the Traitor King,’ Mosk said, finally breaking the sound of
their steps sinking into the ground.

‘Shut up.’

They walked until they stood in the relative shade of one of the rocky outcrops. Eran knew it
probably looked like he was sulking. Perhaps he was.

He wanted to sit down on the warm ground, but knew it would hurt Mosk. Instead he stared off
away from the King. The sun was setting in the distance, they were going to have to overnight
here. They wouldn’t need to make a fire. There were enough of them still lingering about the place.

‘I don’t like it here,’ Eran said.

‘You’re a fire fae.’

‘For one second, you could pretend that maybe you don’t know everything about the whole world
either. What was it? That’s how age works, remember?’

‘But there’s fire.’

‘That’s not-’ Eran pressed his lips together. Then he forced himself to calm down, wishing he
could blow smoke out of his mouth, for the sense that he was actively releasing his fire. Instead he
had to settle for pretending that the heat in him was settling, not that he could properly feel his heat
anyway. If anything, he felt colder than before.

Night was falling, he had no idea what the temperatures would be like at night.

In the distance, the Traitor King was unpacking one of the saddle packs more fully. The Each
Uisge had his hands on his hips, his head stretched back, and was talking. Eran couldn’t hear him.

He shivered, looking up at the sky, as the colours shifted to a blue-lilac. It was getting darker. Even
with the fires around them, it wasn’t the same as having a hearth-fire or saying the words. He’d
mostly abandoned his familial prayers, but felt the loss of them. It was like forgetting to put on
clothes in the morning, ignoring his growing beard, or not wearing the kohl around his eyes; it just
didn’t feel natural.

A sharp cracking sound in the distance, but no sharper than some of the other sounds Eran had
heard. Stones finally breaking in half, other ancient places falling to the fire’s relentless grip.

Eran heard a strange slithering sound and turned first to Mosk, expecting something alien and
awful. But Mosk was staring at the piece of skull. Then he forced himself to calm down, wishing he
could blow smoke out of his mouth, for the sense that he was actively releasing his fire. Instead he
had to settle for pretending that the heat in him was settling, not that he could properly feel his heat
anyway. If anything, he felt colder than before.

His breath locked in his throat. The slithering sound grew louder, and Eran broke out into a sweat
for the first time, feeling his brother clawing at his wrist, feeling the ice touch him, seeing their
dark ghostly shapes as though preserved in frosted glass.

‘Ice,’ he wheezed, his voice emptying of power. He took a step backwards away from it. It was
only a few feet away, searching across the ground. Then another loud cracking sound, closer still,
and Eran turned to see a sheet of ice inch over the rock that sheltered them, extinguishing the blue
flames.
Ice. It’s the ice. It’s- By all the fires, how did-? How is it here?

Mosk stiffened, looked around.

‘GWYN!’ Eran shouted, as the ice grew at once, rising between Mosk and Eran, Gwyn and the Each Uisge, turning into a wall.

‘It’s separating us,’ Mosk said in disbelief.

It was, and Eran was backing away from it as Gwyn turned and stared in horror, then ran towards them even as the Each Uisge shouted something and Grip stood and growled, ears pricked forwards, the mane on his neck bristling.

‘Help!’ He couldn’t jump the ice. He couldn’t even touch it. He tried to see if he could run around it, but it had already flowed too quickly, too insidiously, and expanded out of nothing, folding itself into the land.

Gwyn halted as the ice crackled out towards him, and then moved away from it, sword drawn, staring past it at Eran, eyes wide.

‘Run!’ Gwyn shouted. ‘We’ll catch up with you. Don’t let it touch you!’

‘But-’

The ground rumbled, the air turned frigid, and Eran looked to see a huge wave of ice – moving like a liquid – over the rocky outcrops, as though seeking them out.

‘RUN!’

The roar stirred the frozen panic in his chest to something sharper, and with Mosk at his side, he fled the ice for the second time in his life.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Empty Whispers’:

‘We’re both in this,’ Eran said, a growl in his voice. Mosk cringed to hear it, thought of sparks in the back of Eran’s mouth and the glowing heat he could call to his fingers, before remembering that the mouse-maiden Mage had taken his fire away. ‘My life, my health is tied to yours. It would be better if we cooperated, wouldn’t it?’

‘Would it?’

‘How will you feed without me?’ Eran said. ‘You don’t have a knife, but I do. I can tap the trees, if you show me how. But I don’t know how to do it without you. I don’t know what happened to Gwyn or the Each Uisge, but if they’re alive, they can’t teleport, and they can’t reach us – they haven’t found us yet, have they? I… Look, I know you want to die. I know you want me to hate you. It’s not like it’s subtle, the way you dig at me, trying to get the reactions you want. But I can’t kill you without destroying myself.’

‘I thought you had nothing to live for,’ Mosk said, smiling a little. ‘If you killed me,
you’d get what you wanted. Aren’t you tired?”
And we're back in the new year! *jumps happily* Things absolutely couldn't go from bad to worse for these guys, could they? *squints*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mosk

Maybe he’d once been very powerful, if he could still run for so long when he felt this exhausted. His breath wheezed like needles in his lungs, dizziness swooped around him, and the umbilical chain that connected him to Eran shook and swung and reflected the light into his eyes, somehow hurting his wrist even though it wasn’t made of iron. It chafed at his skin, made him wish he had bark there too, not just on his forearms.

He was coated in sweat, dripping the stuff, could practically feel every precious drop of water as he exhaled it in puffs. He couldn’t keep going. But just as he began to stumble down to his knees on char and burning sand, Eran would yank him up again and keep running. It reminded him of the dark, Unseelie forest Eran had drawn them into before they’d reached the Unseelie Court, except this was no Unseelie forest, it was his home.

It was burnt. All of it. He’d not known it was this bad, or had he? Hadn’t he felt the Aur forest dying? As though every cell in him was connected to a tree out there, and each one shrivelling in that evil flame and twisting inside of him. He’d screamed and begged and cried for mercy, first losing his family, then losing something so profound he’d lost the ability to talk. At that point, he’d still had his heartsong, hadn’t he? Had it shattered then? They still hadn’t taken it. Even if it had broken, he’d still had it. At that point, simply existing in the world didn’t make him dizzy from the hugeness of it.

Now, his legs hurt, his chest throbbed, his arms were numb, his eyes burned. They’d forced him back here, the King and Augus. Eran had been not awful, and that had been awful. Eran was losing his spite, his animosity, and Mosk had a growing, yawning horror at what lurked beneath it. Eran could be kind. Eran might not kill him. Eran might not even remind Mosk that he had to hate himself, that he had to loathe himself, that he had to remember that this forest was gone and at the centre of it all, he’d been there, innocent but not innocent.

Wasn’t that the worst kind of monster? The one who thought they were doing everything for the right reasons, and still ruined the world?

He could hear their voices, clamouring in his head. They confused him. It all confused him. He was sure his memories of what had happened were wrong, after all, Davix had been in the Seelie Court and he wasn’t supposed to be anywhere.

Miraculously, the ground started to change to something more hard-packed. There were sections that didn’t feel sweltering, and Mosk’s legs gave out, the chain pulling taut. He was dragged several paces, hissing at the pain of it.
‘We have to keep going,’ Eran said, his voice frantic.

Mosk turned behind him, looked for the ice. He’d never seen it before outside of Eran’s memories. The plague. He’d not known what to expect, but when he’d seen it creep over the rocks, extinguishing the flames that had burned for months, he’d felt a strange, sickening horror. And, oddly, a familiarity. Something there that seemed like it knew him, a recognition, like the ice was seeking him out. It had come for him first, hadn’t it? Or was it attracted to Eran? Why had it split them off from the King and Augus?

Did it matter?

But he couldn’t see the ice behind them. He hadn’t been able to see it for some time. Eran just refused to stop running.

He looked up at Eran, at the pallor of his brown skin and the unhealthy flush at his cheeks, the wildness in his eyes. He reeked of fear. Mosk knew fear as a bitter sap scent, but in Eran it was acrid smoke. Mosk blinked at him, even as his shins still burned on the ground. The skin wasn’t blistering. The ground wasn’t as hot. They had actually reached the borders of the Aur forest.

They’d run throughout the night, fires of varying strengths – glowing embers in the soil or flickering upon fallen logs – guiding them. They’d fled until Mosk had thrown up sap and bile, and Eran – hours later – had vomited too. Until Mosk could hear tiny sounds in Eran’s breaths, each one filled with fear.

‘We have to keep going,’ Eran said again, voice hard, panicked, eyes glowing a bright honey-yellow.

‘I can’t,’ Mosk said, his voice dry and breaking and hardly recognisable.

‘We have to,’ Eran said. ‘We have to.’

Mosk was hauled to his feet, somehow found it in him to place one foot in front of the other so that he wasn’t dragged across the ground. Eran didn’t sound well. Mosk had never heard him sound like this, never seen this expression except that one time, when Mosk had discovered what it was like to see the ice in his memories, as though Eran’s past was his past.

The landscape began to alter as the hours passed. Here and there, trees that bore burn marks but had survived came with increasing frequency. But this was no longer the Aur forest, just…a forest. A relief to leave that endless heat behind. The memories of what had happened came with him though. Mosk told himself he didn’t care, couldn’t care, but there were places he never wanted to visit again. Experiences he wished he could scrape out of his mind. He had a piece of bone tucked in the pocket of his pants.

Was it Chaley? She’d loved him so much. Those creamy-white flowers in her curling blonde-green hair, and her vibrant golden eyes, because she’d found her Aur tree and grew lanceolate Eucalyptus leaves behind her ears. Blossoms that smelled richly of pollen and nectar, giving her a soft fragrance, at odds with her bright smile, her vibrant laughter.

She’d screamed as she’d burned. They all had. But Chaley’s had pierced Mosk’s marrow. Turned him into nothing. He’d been certain he’d been turned inside out, every nerve and organ on the outside of his body, flayed alive by it all. Instead, he’d only watched. And begged.

Mosk collapsed again, a dry sob in his throat. He was spent.

‘I can’t,’ Mosk whispered.
It was a miracle, but Eran fell to his knees beside him, breathing so hoarsely that it sounded like he was dying. Eran clutched at his chest, then turned to look behind them, the whites of his eyes showing.

‘It’s not… It’s not followed us,’ Mosk said.

‘Do you know?’ Eran said desperately. ‘Can you tell?’

‘No,’ Mosk admitted. ‘I just think it won’t have come this far. You’ve outrun it before, haven’t you?’

Eran rubbed at his chest, fought for breath, then pressed his forehead to the grassy ground. They were in a cool, damp place. This was how a lot of the Aur forest should have felt. Cool and alive.

Mosk looked at the trees around him with a numb sort of bitterness. He couldn’t hear any of them. All the secrets of the trees were gone from him now. Their voices locked out of his mind. His family. His forest. His heartsong. Then, the voices of the trees had vanished, and Mosk hadn’t realised how much he depended on them to simply live. An ever-present whispering, a constant reminder that he was so much more than the single upright creature that walked within the realm. He was every root system, every cell, every trunk and branch and limb. At any time, thousands of voices in his head. He had never been alone before.

He’d thought he understood what loneliness was, escaping from his family as a child, going his own way.

But now… Now he knew.

Mosk wondered what would happen if he cut the trees down. If he lanced their bark with knives. Would he hear them then? Would they speak loudly enough to break through the endless silence? Mosk hated his ears. Useless. They heard nothing of value.

‘I ran for days,’ Eran said finally. ‘The first time. I didn’t sleep.’

Eran’s hands were shaking violently in the dawn light. The chain clinked and rippled. Mosk watched him, mildly fascinated. He’d never seen Eran like this at all. He wondered if Eran would fuck him now. Probably not.

‘I can’t run for days,’ Mosk said. ‘And you can’t drag me for days.’

Eran placed a hand over his face.

Mosk thought of the King and Augus, and wondered if they were safe and alive. Not that it really mattered either way. Mosk’s days were numbered, it didn’t matter who was looking out for him. It wasn’t as though Augus and the King were really looking out for him either. They just wanted to understand the mystery. Then what? They couldn’t do anything.

Eran’s whole body was shaking. It wasn’t just his hands or arms. It was all of him. Even his curly black hair trembled. The only other person Mosk had ever seen so afraid was himself.

Mosk turned his gaze towards the distant, burning forest. From here, it only looked like glimmering waves of heat above a treeline. It was almost beautiful. Mosk laughed to himself, and Eran made a wounded sound next to him. He hoped Eran thought Mosk was laughing at him. The idea that Eran would be kind to him now, made Mosk want to find an entire box of needles and place them all in Eran’s skin until he came to his senses.
‘We can’t stop,’ Eran said. ‘A couple of hours. We’ll have to- We can’t stay here.’

‘Where will we go?’

‘I don’t even know where we are,’ Eran said, pushing himself up on his hands and looking around. ‘Where are we?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk said, shrugging.

‘How don’t you know? Isn’t this…familiar to you?’

‘I don’t know anything,’ Mosk said. Then he added: ‘I can’t hear the trees anymore, so I don’t know where anything is.’

It had never occurred to him to learn a sense of direction that wasn’t dependent on the trees telling him that there was water, or roads, or people, or places. He’d just assumed he would always know where things were. Now, these trees were as nondescript as others. They had no personalities. They didn’t feel familiar. Mosk didn’t recognise a single thing. He was sure he’d been here before – he and his family frequently travelled south into the cool forests and towns beyond – but none of it meant anything to him. There wasn’t a single landmark that mattered.

‘What?’ Eran said.

Mosk moved, crouched, then gagged up several mouthfuls of bile. He spat strings of the stuff out, then closed his eyes. He could say goodbye to being fed regularly again. He knuckled a fist into his stomach.

‘What do you mean, you can’t hear the trees?’

‘I’m a dryad,’ Mosk said impatiently.

‘So?’

Mosk stared at him, incredulous, and Eran shook his head, his eyes constantly darting back to where they’d been. Like he expected the ice to be flooding after them. Maybe it was. But it seemed to move slowly enough.

‘Why can’t you hear them, then?’ Eran said. ‘You’re still a dryad, aren’t you?’

That was harder to answer, and Mosk picked up some of the grass beneath them and pulled it up, gritting his teeth together. He pulled up more, and more, and finally clenched his fist in it, smelling the lifeblood of the small, persistent plants piquant in the back of his nose. He hated them.

‘I can’t hear them,’ Mosk said stubbornly. ‘I just can’t.’

‘Because of your heartsong being taken?’

‘I just can’t.’

‘Is it one of those things you can’t talk about?’

‘Maybe I called the ice here, because I hate you,’ Mosk said.

Eran stared at him, he seemed to be seriously considering it. Then, Eran wrapped his arms around himself like he was cold, and looked back the way they’d come, rubbing his upper arms. How could he be cold after all the running they’d done? Maybe it was something to do with his powers.
‘You didn’t,’ Eran said. ‘You’re lying.’

‘Am I?’ Mosk said. He tried to sound evil, but out of breath, exhausted, he only sounded lifeless.

‘I didn’t see you trying to pull me back into it,’ Eran said, his voice shaking. ‘You didn’t try and slow us down. You can run when you want to. You had plenty of opportunities to hurt me, even kill me. And you’ve tried in the past. So if you really just…wanted to get rid of me, you could’ve pushed me into the ice instead of running with me when Gwyn told us to.’

‘So it’s Gwyn now? Not the Traitor King?’

‘He’s still a traitor,’ Eran said. Then he pushed himself up to his knees, his shoulders bowing. He got one leg under himself, and paused. ‘We have to keep going.’

Mosk watched as Eran just knelt there. Eran didn’t stand. After a moment, he lowered himself back to the ground and pressed his hands flat to the earth. His jaw was tight, his expression grim.

‘Gwyn will find us,’ Eran said. ‘He has to, he’s under oath. With a god.’

‘Then we can rest,’ Mosk said. ‘Unless he’s dead.’

Eran looked at Mosk, and Mosk knew that Eran shared the same fears he did. Or something like fear, anyway. Mosk still couldn’t tell if he felt anything properly these days. It seemed that he used to feel everything so intensely, from Leaf telling him a story about the Aur dryads of old, to his mother reprimanding him for spending so much time in the forest – as though that was something an Aur dryad should be reprimanded for! – to everything that had happened when that awful Mage had come to his forest and ruined everything.

Now, his emotions were ghosts of what they used to be. Anything intense was fleeting. It was tiring being around people who felt things strongly. It wasn’t like Eran was subtle about every little reaction he had to every little thing.

Eran lay down on his side, facing the way they’d come, rubbing his face and his stubble.

‘We don’t have any packs,’ Eran said. ‘We have nothing to protect us, no currency. I don’t have my jewellery. You don’t use any weapons…apparently. We’re no better than underfae.’

‘Aside from that whole exceptional healing factor thing and the fact that we’re hard to kill in general,’ Mosk said.

‘What are we going to do?’

Mosk knew the question wasn’t really for him, so he didn’t answer. Eran likely didn’t care what Mosk thought, and Mosk didn’t want to do anything anyway. He didn’t like the ice, but he didn’t like being dragged back to the Aur forest, and he also didn’t like being tugged from place to place by the wrist like a child. Honestly, it didn’t matter what he didn’t like. It hadn’t mattered for a long time.

They fell silent. For now, at least, Mosk was able to catch his breath even as his chest burned and his fingers ached from the blistering. He picked at one of them, watched the clear liquid run free and felt the raw sting increase. As with everything else, it was one bright moment of sensation, and then it was nothing at all.
They walked after having rested for two hours. Mosk felt dizzy, and he didn’t like to look at the horizon line for too long, since things in his field of vision would sway and slowly twist, and it made him feel like he was perpetually in a kaleidoscope. Eran was quiet. It reminded Mosk of when they’d been going to the Seelie Court, but everything was different now. Eran’s behaviour was changing, and Mosk had fed on enough sap that his mind seemed to be working again, even though he wished it wasn’t.

Around them, cool, damp forest had turned into another summer’s day, with wildflowers blooming around them. The twittering and chirping of birds, and beneath that, the quieter tweets from their offspring. Squirrels raced up and down trees, and deer lurked in the shadows, watching them with soft, bright eyes. The ground beneath their feet was pleasant to walk on.

Mosk would have enjoyed this, once.

‘There’d be a tavern around here,’ Mosk said, breaking the silence. ‘You could whore me out for some clipaks if you need them so badly.’

Eran’s shoulders rose slowly, fell slowly.

‘You don’t like it,’ Eran said.

‘I thought you wanted me to be punished for everything I’d done?’

‘I don’t know what you’ve done.’

Eran didn’t sound uncertain or shaky about it. He didn’t turn around and meet Mosk’s gaze. He sounded calm, like he was happy with the conclusion he’d come to. Mosk’s chapped, flaking lips pressed together and he looked down at the silvery manacle around his wrist.

‘I do like it,’ Mosk said.

‘No, you don’t,’ Eran said. ‘I don’t know what kind of weird relationship you have with sex, but I don’t think it’s healthy.’

‘How would you even know?’

‘How would I-?’ Eran turned then, staring at him. His thick eyebrows lifted, his eyes seemed to spark. Mosk didn’t know how it was possible, but Eran’s lips hadn’t chapped. ‘You’re serious? You’re not that good of an actor. You don’t enjoy what gets done to you, and you don’t become more lively afterwards. I don’t know why you’re so obsessed with it. Have you always been like that?’

Mosk held his gaze for a long moment, knew his face was blank, but then looked down. No, he hadn’t always been like that. Before… Before, he hadn’t had sex at all. He’d known nothing about it. Now it felt like he knew everything and yet still nothing about it. But he didn’t expect to enjoy it and he didn’t want to enjoy it. Sex was nothing more than something that had enough sensation in it that he could forget about everything for a while. It amused him too, to throw himself on the mercy of a barkeeper or innkeeper and tell them that they could keep all the profits.

He honestly thought that someone would’ve killed him by now, taken it too far. Maybe it just wasn’t possible with the curses laid upon him.

‘Do you think it came because I was there?’ Eran said. Mosk knew what he was talking about,
despite the change in subject.

‘Maybe,’ Mosk said. ‘The King said that there might be an ambush though. How would the ice know you would even be coming?’

‘How can the ice *ambush* people like that?’ Eran said, rubbing at his forearms. His fingers strayed to the same spot on his arm over and over again. ‘Is it alive? How can it even be alive? You know about it, don’t you? Even if you can’t talk about it?’

Eran turned to see Mosk’s reaction, and Mosk only shrugged. It didn’t matter what he knew and didn’t know, people would assume he knew more about something, or nothing at all. They never really cared about what he actually knew.

‘If the ice is attracted to fire fae,’ Eran said quietly, ‘maybe it was simply attracted to that endless fire. It extinguished it, did you see? So there’s a fire strong enough to burn the fire trees, and there’s an ice strong enough to quench it. That’s not…normal.’

‘You must have been indispensable to your family, stating the obvious like that.’

Eran went silent, and Mosk stared up at the canopy of the trees, leaves swaying in the wind, whispering nonsense. He hated them.

* 

In a forest of spruce, silvery-white birch and pine, under the heat of the afternoon sun, they found a path made of perfectly laid brown bricks. Not roots nor time had upset their geometric flow, and Eran paused by it, staring suspiciously. Eventually, they began walking alongside it, following its winding trail into open woodland. They passed a few cottages set deeply into the woods, tiny little pathways of stone leading to well-painted homes covered in brambles or ivy.

Mosk thought Eran would go and ask about teleportation, or some other thing, but Eran only watched them for a time and kept walking.

An hour later, the afternoon cooling into twilight, two fae came up on the brick pathway, riding tiny, fierce-looking ponies. Mosk didn’t recognise what kind of fae they were at all, but he didn’t know if that was because he’d never known, or if it was because of what had been done to him. The ponies had steely eyes, and they gnawed on their bits like it was their only desire to foam at the mouth.

Eran lifted a hand, flagging them, and the fae came to a halt. They both had long fox ears and bright, fox-like eyes. But instead of a bushy fox tail that would have indicated they were shifters, they instead had a long, scaly, reptilian thing, pointed at the end and shining red and gold.

‘I greet you in peace,’ Eran said, and Mosk thought it was always strange, listening to anyone do things formally and correctly.

‘We greet you with the same,’ one of the creatures said.

‘Do you know this land well?’

‘Well enough,’ said one who had ears that were more red, a tail that blushed to crimson. The tail lashed slowly, and the pony beneath it kept pawing at the ground with one of its hooves. First lightly, then hard enough to send up a shower of tiny sparks.

‘What would we find if we kept travelling south?’
‘What will you give us for the information?’

Eran went silent, and Mosk wondered if he was offended. It wasn’t exactly polite for fae greeting each other in peace to go straight to exchange, especially over something as simple as information.

‘Can you both teleport?’ Mosk said, looking up at them. He hadn’t greeted them in peace, he could say whatever he liked.

One of the fae looked to the other, and then they both tilted their heads down at Mosk, ears twitching in unison.

‘Do you think we would be riding these ponies if we could? Only a short time ago, everyone in this region lost the ability to teleport. Can you teleport?’

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘Me either,’ Eran said, his voice hushed and amazed.

‘Season of Turning,’ one of the creatures said.

‘Turning into what, though?’ the other responded with the kind of sly, friendly grin that indicated they verbally sparred quite often. They reminded him of his brother, Mallem. It made him feel cold.

‘Has this ever happened before?’ Eran said.

‘No one knows,’ the one with the crimson ears said. ‘Nor do we know how far it stretches. Strange magic. Strange times.’

Mosk could feel Eran’s eyes on him. He saw the way the fae looked down at the chain that connected them both. They shared a look, but one only adjusted his reins, and the other scratched his delicate ears with slender paws.

‘The Mages can still move around,’ one of them said, waving a paw and rolling his eyes. ‘But who could afford portals in the first place? No one can afford them now. First the Aur forest, now this.’

_The Mages can still move around._

Mosk knew it was Davix and Olphix. He couldn’t fathom why, but he didn’t understand why they did anything at all.

One of the dapple grey ponies shifted uneasily, its head swinging around, ears shifting. Mosk heard Eran’s breathing come faster, the unevenness, and he knew that any moment-

‘We should be on our way. May your road be clear and the stars bright.’

‘And to you,’ the one with the darker red fox ears said.

They took up their reins and continued down the road, and then one of them called over his shoulder:

‘A word of advice, don’t step onto the road. It’s ours, and anything that walks upon it becomes trapped so that we may hunt it.’

Eran waited until they were gone. ‘I knew the road was too perfect to be good.’
'Yes, you know everything about everything ever.’

Mosk grunted when Eran yanked hard on the chain in response. A simultaneous feeling of relief that Eran was perhaps starting to hate him again, alongside an unsettling sinking in his gut.

Then, Eran was dragging him forward again. Mosk wanted to protest, but he knew there was no point.

*

The road bisected the woodland for hours, and they saw no one else upon it. On the other side of the bricked road, Mosk saw a small family of thistle-wreaks, the long, pointed leaves forming grand ruffs about their necks, their narrowed eyes taking in their environment with slow apprehension. They were peaceable creatures, and they wove thread into patterns with their fingers, sometimes joining their leafy hands together to create complex, ephemeral pictures. Around them, thistles had sprung from the ground, their blossoms the same dull purple as the hair upon their heads.

Eran didn’t stop to talk to them, which was for the best, since thistle-wreaks loathed speaking any language except their own.

There were birds about the trees, blossoming bushes of sharp-petalled flowers in the colours of flame or violet sunrises. The air smelled of pollen and nectar and in the distance, and cake, as though someone was baking.

Mosk couldn’t hear any of these trees either, and he scowled at them all, strangers now.

He didn’t want to think that he might never hear them again, and for a long time he hadn’t been capable of thinking anything so complex. Now, he couldn’t stop turning it over like leaf litter, wanting to see if any truths lurked beneath. He found nothing except what he knew. He knew he couldn’t hear them, no longer knew what kind of fae he was. Dryads heard the trees, bonded to the trees, and Aur dryads fed on sap.

Mosk laughed quietly to himself, and ignored the alarmed look that Eran gave him. After all, he wanted Eran to hate him. He wanted him to. He might have wanted sympathy once, or even pity, but what a foolish wish that had been.

*

The road abruptly stopped, and it seemed only a few steps later, the woodland became closed, narrow forest. Mosk took deep breaths, savouring the cool air, but then he turned and looked around, frowning. He looked up at the sky, surprised to see stars. He’d not noticed the sun setting, didn’t always feel things properly, his skin not registering the change in temperature. It made no difference, not with Eran doggedly tugging him forward.

‘I don’t like you,’ Eran said.

*Good.*

‘But I owe you an apology.’

*Damn it.* Mosk clawed absently at the manacle.

‘You owe me? Is that your Seelie…whatever it is?’
‘I don’t know. I don’t even want to apologise to you.’

‘Then don’t,’ Mosk said. ‘I don’t want to hear it. Your father was a great War General for the Unseelie, and you’re nothing more than a pathetic offshoot from that line. What happened to- Oh, I don’t know, the courage of your convictions? Hm? What, you think we have so much in common because you lost your loser family, and I lost mine?’ The words hurt him to say, he felt like he was scratching his heart open, just uttering them, but he’d long stopped minding stripping his own bark to harm someone else. ‘You think that because you saw that place we went to in the Aur forest, that you know me? You’re sorry now?’

Eran took a deep breath. He stopped walking, and Mosk kept on until the chain pulled taut. He wrapped it around his wrist twice and jerked the chain hard. The sound and feel of something impossible, and he turned to see Eran stumbling before finding his feet. They stared at each other, shock on both of their faces.

‘We’re both in this,’ Eran said, a growl in his voice. Mosk cringed to hear it, thought of sparks in the back of Eran’s mouth and the glowing heat he could call to his fingers, before remembering that the mouse-maiden Mage had taken his fire away. ‘My life, my health is tied to yours. It would be better if we cooperated, wouldn’t it?’

‘Would it?’

‘How will you feed without me?’ Eran said. ‘You don’t have a knife, but I do. I can tap the trees, if you show me how. But I don’t know how to do it without you. I don’t know what happened to Gwyn or the Each Uisge, but if they’re alive, they can’t teleport, and they can’t reach us – they haven’t found us yet, have they? I… Look, I know you want to die. I know you want me to hate you. It’s not like it’s subtle, the way you dig at me, trying to get the reactions you want. But I can’t kill you without destroying myself.’

‘I thought you had nothing to live for,’ Mosk said, smiling a little. ‘If you killed me, you’d get what you wanted. Aren’t you tired?’

He hadn’t expected it to work, but the way Eran’s entire body tensed and then went lax – even his mouth - Mosk could see that Eran was thinking it over. Did Eran really want to die so badly?

‘You really think you’re ever going to see the ice plague stopped?’ Mosk continued. ‘The right people brought to justice?’

A long stillness, the only sound that of leaves shuddering in the trees, sounding like nothing more than gibberish.

In the distance, the howl of wolves, no telling if they were shifters or simply beast fae.

‘The right people,’ Eran said. ‘So…not you?’

Mosk scowled. Maybe, if Eran slept, he’d try gutting him again. Maybe he’d even kill him. Mosk was certain he could kill someone.

‘Besides,’ Eran said, reaching up to rub at his eyes before he made himself stop. Mosk supposed he didn’t want to smear the kohl he sometimes wore. ‘I can’t leave this half done. You want me to promise to kill you once this is all said and done? I’ll think about it. You want me to give my life up before I’ve seen justice done for my family? You think I’d ever do that? Don’t you want justice for your family? All of them?’

There was no point wanting something that was impossible. Mosk only shrugged. He turned and
walked south once more, and after a few seconds of the chain pulling tight, it slackened as Eran followed without another word.

*I*

‘I can’t feed myself,’ Eran said, and Mosk stopped fiddling with his manacle and looked at him. Eran returned his gaze. Mosk thought his eyes were somehow appealing, given that fire fae were terrifying, and Mosk wanted nothing to do with them. But Mosk had seen flowers that colour. He’d seen sap that had dried into glittering resin on the side of a tree, gleaming orange-yellow in the sunlight.

Mosk looked down at Eran’s hands. Of course, with his fire power being muted, they would need to start a fire every time Eran wanted to eat.

‘Do you have to cook everything?’

‘It needs to be touched by fire,’ Eran said. ‘I’ve tried- I think all of us tried food that hadn’t been cooked when we were younger. It’s unpleasant. I didn’t think- The Unseelie Court have been feeding us.’

Mosk listened to their soft footfalls, looked around. It was a strange forest. There were no real paths, but every now and then they would come across a black metal lamppost glowing brightly, its lantern a shining, warm beacon. They were placed with no rhyme or reason, and Mosk wondered if someone hunted by them, or if they were there to provide shelter.

Then, he bitterly twisted those thoughts into nothingness. He didn’t want to think, or wonder, or feel. Better when he was a husk. Even so, the times when he asked questions, it was like watching someone from a distance. A person who pretended to care. A performance of what Mosk had once been.

‘Do you want your heartsong to grow back?’ Eran asked an hour later, as they passed into the gloom beyond another glowing lamppost.

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘Not at all?’

‘What good are they?’

‘I- What *good* are they?’

Mosk rubbed at his arms. Gooseflesh was crawling across his skin, making him feel something, and he didn’t like it. He looked around, but none of his senses worked properly. A few steps later, he stumbled, and grunted when one of his knees hit the ground. A wave of dizziness floored him. He pressed his palms to the ground, panted as his vision righted itself.

Eran knelt beside him, and Mosk gritted his teeth and lunged forwards, pushing Eran hard, not even caring that it made the dizziness worse.

‘Hey!’

‘Idiot,’ Mosk muttered. Then crawled the small distance over, raised his manacled wrist, swung it down. His forearm was caught in Eran’s grip and he tried to tug his arm back. ‘Let me go.’

‘So you’re not considering cooperating with me? At all?’ Eran said.
‘I thought you were angry.’

Fingers dug into the soft flesh on the underside of Mosk’s forearm then, hard enough that he winced and then whimpered, expecting flames on the back of it. He kept trying to yank his arm free, but Eran was so strong. He made a face as Eran levered him backwards. Mosk’s back hit the ground. In an instant, he wondered what it’d be like if they were both naked, if Eran fucked him. It would hurt, then be nothing at all, just a rhythm to focus on. Something outside of him. Something he could blame the dizziness, the vertigo, the emptiness on.

What he deserved.

‘Fuck me,’ Mosk said.

‘I am angry,’ Eran breathed, his voice low and threatening. ‘I am. That you keep carrying on like a child. I lost my family too! That they took my fire, which I need to live. That nothing makes sense. That we are alone, and I have been to the Unseelie Court, and the Seelie Court, and I have no answers. None. And I still don’t know what happened to my family, or why, or why you’re at the centre of it.’

Mosk gasped when those fingers dug so hard into his forearm that he could feel bruises become broken skin.

‘My god is sick,’ Eran said, his voice that same forbidding tone. ‘He came to me and he’s sick. He burned himself out trying to stop that ice, did you know? A god. I can hardly think about it. Those fae we saw before, they explain it away, a Season of Turning, which means nothing to me. I could have ripped their faces off, trying to exchange information for a price, like we shouldn’t be working together.’

Puffs of air over Mosk’s face, one after the other, Eran’s warm and ragged breathing. But it didn’t carry the heat and fire he’d had in the beginning. Eran could have once broken the chain just by melting it, the idea was horrifying.

The grip on Mosk’s wrist lightened, then Eran swore and let go immediately. Mosk’s arm dropped to the ground, and he stared detached as Eran lifted it with both hands this time and looked at the damage he’d done. Then those amber eyes moved up and met Mosk’s again. A soft touch over Mosk’s skin, like an alien signal, and Mosk felt something.

He reared up, screaming into Eran’s face, shrieking until those pretty eyes widened and his whole face went tight with shock. Mosk swung his free hand as hard as he could, cuffing Eran on the side of the head. He yanked his other hand free, then pushed himself backwards, wanting to scrub that gentle touch away until the skin was raw.

‘If you won’t fuck me, don’t touch me.’

‘That wasn’t…You weren’t upset that I touched you,’ Eran said slowly. ‘You were upset that I touched you like that.’

Mosk didn’t dignify that with a response.

Eran looked behind them, as though the ice would be following them still, and then he looked ahead. ‘I am trying,’ he said, as though convincing himself.

‘Stop trying,’ Mosk said, then laughed. ‘Trust me, you don’t want to understand any of this.’

The dizziness hadn’t left, Mosk didn’t think he could stand even if Eran dragged him. He placed
his cheek on his bent knee and looked at the distant glow of a lamppost. Around him, the huge spruce sentinels that would have had wisdom to share once, and now only sighed with the wind. These spruce were old, ancient, reaching down into the ground with their roots to feel out the world.

His firstborn brother Im had bonded to spruce. He’d been quiet and wise, with a deep, gentle laugh. Once, Mosk would listen to the spruce talk and whisper, and he’d feel the warmth of Im’s hand in his own, guiding him gently through making a family meal, or walking him from tree to tree. Im was the one who knew the spoken triads, he remembered family wisdom, he knew how to solve nearly any problem and those he hadn’t known, he’d always understood to ask someone wiser.

These spruce didn’t tell him about his brother. They didn’t offer anything at all. Along with the birch and the pine. Mosk didn’t know if this forest was Seelie or Unseelie. He didn’t know who lived here. He didn’t even know if there was water.

He covered his mouth with shaking fingers and wondered if he’d vomit.

‘You need rest,’ Eran said. ‘We’ll have to get moving again, but you- You’re ill. Better than before, but still ill.’

With any hope, I’m dying.

‘Can you show me how to- Can I tap any of these trees? Do you know how?’

‘I’m not hungry,’ Mosk said behind his hand. The idea of food turned his stomach. He wanted to die here. He wanted to curl onto his side and become rot and bones, nothing more than mulch for the roots around him.

Eran left him alone, and Mosk closed his eyes, distantly aware that he might be cold, and nauseous, but wanting nothing more than to empty out and disappear.

*

He jolted awake, thinking one of his brothers was hissing his name. Instead, he woke to Eran on the ground beside him, and a ring of blazing lights around them. He stared up in amazement, wondering if he was hallucinating, then saw the silhouettes of the lampposts. At some point in the night, the posts had moved towards them, circling them with their black, dull metal bodies. The forest floor lit up, and beetles and worms moved in the grass beneath them.

‘Have you found something, my precious darlings?’ A figure emerged from the opaque black gloom, standing half in light, half in darkness. The creature’s horns were limned in light, an eldritch face marked with an overly long, crooked mouth that – when it smiled – revealed teeth like little tombstones. ‘I get so lonely in this forest, and here I have found myself some new friends.’

The creature lifted its hands and the chain and manacles around Mosk and Eran’s wrists transmuted and split into two, much finer chains – the creature held the leading ends, and tugged on them playfully.

‘Come to my home. The hearth is warm, and I will treat you so well.’

Its voice was sibilant, and the lampposts crowded closer, resembling the thick bars of a prison cell. Mosk couldn’t tell if the creature was Seelie or Unseelie, but he didn’t really think it mattered.

He was pretty sure he was going to die soon.
He just had a feeling.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Captured':

Eran watched, and thought of the miskatin licking Eran’s blood off his claws. His arm ached. He stared at the cauldron. More than one fae could fit inside it. The fireplace itself was large enough to make a stew that size. There were bone fragments everywhere on the floor around them.

He cast his gaze about, chilled, sickened. He’d suspected, but this was the kind of confirmation he didn’t want.

The miskatin noticed him, and seemed to be waiting for Eran to meet his eyes again.

‘This way,’ the miskatin said, ‘my friends will never leave me.’
Captured

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Extra shout out today to the folks who leave kudos / comment / bookmark / subscribe etc. You're all wonderful. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eran

The creature’s home was more like a sty, smelling of rot and refuse, with bone splinters in the corners of the cavern. Eran leaned closer to the roaring, giant fireplace they’d been placed near. He wondered if the bones all represented fae that the creature had wanted to be friends with.

Mosk, beside him, was whimpering and making thin whining noises in the back of his throat, balled up, his head covered with his hands. Upon seeing the huge fireplace, he’d broken down into heaving, retching gasps. It wasn’t the same as the shut-down numbness Eran had seen in what remained of the Aur forest. This was some fresh fear that made Mosk hyperventilate as he’d been dragged before the fire and chained to a heavy metal ring by it – just as Eran had been chained to a separate ring.

His kh’anzar and his new dagger had been removed. They rested on a small, rickety table that Eran couldn’t reach from where he was, even if he could throw something to lasso it – which he couldn’t. There was no rope on the hard, stone floor.

The creature moved off, vanished into darkness, perhaps into another cave. Eran watched after it, listened for the scratch of its steps or the wheeze of his breath but heard nothing.

‘Mosk,’ Eran said, a knot of nausea in his chest. They were covered in soot and sweat, their clothing stained and dirty from the running they’d done from the ice. He knew that if he felt exhausted, Mosk must be utterly spent. ‘Mosk, here, move behind me. You’ll be less affected by the fire.’

Maybe it was a mistake, to be like this now after his utter certainty that Mosk was the monster at the heart of his problems. But he’d seen too much to be sure of anything except Mosk’s illness, his fear of fire, his bitter hatred. Eran wasn’t going to go to his death without at least attempting to help.

Mosk didn’t react, and Eran eventually moved, looking around the cavern with a dry mouth for the creature. He positioned himself between the fire and Mosk’s body, using himself as a shield. It wouldn’t do much, but Eran knew he couldn’t be hurt by the fire, even if he couldn’t make it himself.

He watched over Mosk and then looked around for the creature again. He thought he could see its outline in deep shadows at the back of the cavern, but he couldn’t be sure.

Then the shape twitched, and Eran only just controlled his flinch. He hadn’t even heard the
The creature shambled forwards with its strange, stilted steps. It’s overly long arms and clacking fingernails reached forwards even from across the room. Eran had a vision of those arms stretching out and seizing him. He shuddered. But the arms dropped, and instead, Eran was drawn to those animal-bright eyes and their oval pupils. There were Unseelie fae, and there were Unseelie fae. Everyone knew that. Eran had been raised with that.

It was impossible to ignore the difference between someone like Mosk, and whatever this creature was. Eran had to try to get them both free.

‘I would like to be your friend,’ Eran said. His voice tremored, and he wished he sounded stronger, braver. Fearless.

‘Yes,’ the creature hissed. ‘We are going to be such good friends. I have made so many friends in this cavern, but no one stays.’

*Because you probably eat them.*

‘Well, if we are to become good friends,’ Eran said, ‘perhaps you might tell me your name?’

The creature hesitated, it bared its thin lips, opened its large maw and revealed all its teeth. A forked tongue slid into the air, tasting it. The creature laughed. Behind them, the fire crackled and Eran tried to take solace in its presence. But this fire didn’t serve him. It served the creature.

‘Good friends do not ask miskatins their nameses, good friends do not betray.’

Eran hadn’t heard of a miskatin. He didn’t know if this was the only one, or if there were many. He hoped there was only one. Though it didn’t much help him, given they were here now.

‘I’ve never met a miskatin before,’ Eran said.

The creature, the *miskatin* who refused to give its name, walked closer on strong legs. Its thighs and calves and feet covered with a shaggy fur that had bits of bone deliberately knotted into it. The sounds of it clinking together were almost musical.

Eran forced himself to stay very still as the creature regarded him, as it bent over and pushed his face close to Eran’s. Its breath smelled of fetid decay, as though it ate not only carrion, but excrement. Its eyes lacked any real emotion, each tooth unevenly placed in its gums.

The creature reached out with its clicking claws, then grinned as it slid two through Eran’s shirt and deep into the muscle of his upper arm. Eran choked as pain flooded him. Jerking backwards only made the awful cuts wider. Fear hooked into him, he broke out in a cold sweat as the miskatin leaned forwards until the tips of the claws poking out of the other side of Eran’s arm could touch the disgusting stone floor.

‘Friends,’ the miskatin said. ‘Now we’ve met.’

‘Let us go,’ Eran said. Blood was spilling down his arm. The claws hadn’t touched bone, Eran knew that much, but it didn’t seem to make the pain any better. He was pinned, Mosk crouched and terrified next to him.

‘Friends don’t leave,’ the miskatin said, blinking slowly. ‘That is a cruel friendship.’

A sawing, rusty sensation in his arm as the miskatin drew its claws free, and Eran pressed his lips
together and refused to make a sound. He could see in the gleam of the creature’s eyes, that the miskatin saw his fear and his pain, and enjoyed both. Here then, a monster. Not the Unseelie Court, that had fed him and clothed him and given him weapons.

Eran’s gut soured as he watched the creature bring its bloodied claws to its lips and drag its forked tongue over them. The tongue was agile, wrapping around the claws like a serpent. The miskatin made soft, crooning noises, appreciating the taste. Eran reached over to his arm, bleeding freely now that no claws were staunching the wounds, and clasped his palm over them.

‘Do friends do this?’ Eran said, his voice weak.

‘Friends do this,’ the miskatin agreed, nodding to itself.

Its steps scraped the ground as it shambled off, and Eran continued to clutch at his arm, turning back to look at Mosk, and then check on the fireplace. It wasn’t uncomfortable to be so close to the fire, at least. Small mercies. He could probably hide in there if he needed to. But Mosk couldn’t.

Eran knew there was a spell on him – he’d hurt if Mosk was hurt, come close to death if Mosk died. It was erratic, and didn’t seem to activate if Mosk hurt himself, and it hadn’t activated now. Eran wondered if that meant that even the spell could tell there was nothing to be done.

That wasn’t good enough, but Eran couldn’t think of what to do. He didn’t even know if Mosk would run, though he knew Mosk would probably give it a good try. The chains were thin, but they were strong. They had some kind of magic in them that stopped Eran from being able to feel his true form. No hints of fur or huge teeth in his mouth, no sense of a beast that might be able to snap the shackle. It didn’t matter, Fenwrel quelling his fire had stopped him from being able to shift anyway.

Quelling his trembling wasn’t easy, but he managed it. He wasn’t going to go down without a fight, that wasn’t his way.

He didn’t want to think about what it meant that he could die here. Would probably die here. Months of journeying after his family and the rest of his clan were killed, and he’d always been able to skirt danger. Was it just that this land was more populated? Was it Mosk? Did his lack of heartsong or the curses he carried somehow enchant them with bad luck?

Eran looked at Mosk, hunched and reeking of fear. He reached out with his non-bloodied hand, the chain lightly clinking, his arm screeching a rough pain at him, but he stopped before touching him. What was he going to do? Offer reassurance? And what would it amount to? Mosk probably asking him to fuck or something, which Eran just…couldn’t hear right now.

Eran’s fingers curled into a fist, and he lowered his hand back into his lap, his mind racing, a thousand questions and no solutions.

*

The miskatin ambled out of the cavern an hour later, murmuring about finding some trinkets to celebrate its new friendships. Eran watched as he left, looked around the cavern warily, and then started jerking on the chain, testing how strong it truly was. Nothing happened except he jarred his wrist, his shoulder. He tried grasping Mosk’s chain beneath both of his hands, hoping that his own chain was spelled to not break for himself, but another chain might respond to his strength.

It didn’t work.

‘I haven’t even heard of this kind of fae,’ Eran whispered.
‘I h-have,’ Mosk said into the stone floor. ‘But the stories never end well.’

Eran was shocked that Mosk was actually talking to him. Not just asking to have sex. Not just saying hateful things.

‘Any miraculous forms of escape I should know about? Trick ankle? It can’t stand a certain run of words?’

‘No,’ Mosk said. ‘I just said that the stories never end well.’

‘We have to get out of here.’

‘We can’t,’ Mosk said.

‘We have to try.’

‘You keep using the word ‘we’ like that means something to me. It doesn’t. What can I do anyway? I don’t feel well.’

Eran paused in his attempt to try and find some kind of latch or opening to the manacle around his wrist. He had come to assume that Mosk never felt well, but aside from plainly stating when he couldn’t keep going because he was exhausted, he rarely volunteered the information otherwise.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Your stupidity led us into this trap,’ Mosk said, lifting his head off the floor and glaring at Eran.

A flash of annoyance that he’d tried to reach out only to get that as a response, and then the feeling that he really shouldn’t have bothered in the first place. He stood up, moved as far as the chain would let him move, and tried to see if there was anything around that would help him.

‘I’m dizzy,’ Mosk said, and Eran turned back, eyes wide. ‘My head hurts. It always hurts. It’s going to hurt when I die. When the miskatin kills me, it’ll be a relief.’

‘It’s not going to kill you.’

‘What, are you going to save the world with willpower alone?’ Mosk rolled into his side and pressed his forearms into his chest. ‘Good luck with that. Can’t wait.’

‘I know you’re afraid,’ Eran said. ‘I can smell the reek of it on you.’

‘What do you think is causing it, though? The relief of being killed? Or the fireplace?’

Mosk curled into a ball again, and Eran stroked fingers over the hairs on his chin and pursed his lips. It was a proper conversation. A bitter, angry one, certainly, but still a conversation. Of course they’d end up having it now, when Eran was beginning to taste the hugeness of the dread in his chest, when he was beginning to feel the bitterness of the smoke in his belly. He wasn’t on some sacred journey like he’d first thought, when he’d assumed he was meant to deliver Mosk to the Seelie Court and get his answers and get vengeance, and instead…

He lowered himself to his knees. He didn’t know whether to face Mosk or the fire. The fire was comforting to a point, but after that it only made him think of everything and everyone he’d lost. It was hard to find solace in something that would still serve the miskatin, even after Eran and Mosk had been killed.
‘We had these fires we made every evening,’ Eran said, because the miskatin hadn’t returned and his innards were beginning to curdle with anxiety and in the last ten minutes he kept seeing flashes of the ice reaching for him, eating his family, the screams as some of them were taken. He pressed the heel of his hand into his chest, stared ahead, felt numb. Hadn’t Mosk said that people with nothing to live for were good at dying? Eran thought he’d be terrible at dying, but it might turn out to be easy after all.

He wasn’t going to go without a fight, but that hadn’t really mattered to the miskatin yet.

His arm still hurt.

‘The first for cooking, which my mother and father shared, because my mother loved my father’s meals, and he loved hers. The ambaros and afrit have different cuisines, use different spices, and eventually they made shared dishes too. It was one of the things that came out of it, Seelie and Unseelie living together. I never really noticed much else, but I remember getting excited as a child that they were inventing new dishes together, for each other.’

See, Eran? No cloves now, because we’re going to get that aromatic brightness from your mother’s side today. His father had become softer and talked more when he cooked. His clever, brutal hands becoming delicate and filled with the need for perfection. When he was cooking, he was the most generous with his praise. That day, he’d ended up saying: Sometimes, Eran, not always – but sometimes – you can combine two things and make something stronger, maybe even better. That’s how you were made.

His father regretted that Eran was born Seelie, but he’d always had nothing but acceptance for Eran being a hybrid.

‘Then a fire for the fire gods,’ Eran made himself say, like he was stamping this place with his memories. Even if he was killed, the fire would remember his words. ‘Mainly Kabiri, in all his forms. Sometimes others. My mother’s hands would make that one. She could make blue flames drop from her fingertips like rain, shaking them free where they’d wriggle to life and give themselves to the gods instead.’

Mosk’s breathing had slowed down. Eran wondered if he was listening. If he was waiting for a moment to condemn Eran or his family, or both with the same cutting sentence.

‘A fire for home and hearth. A fire of nourishment and light and warmth. It was the gentlest fire, and yet my father made it. He was not a gentle person. But he understood what the home was meant to be for. I suppose you didn’t really have a hearth-fire. But a lot of fae do.’

‘Most do,’ Mosk said quietly.

‘What did you have instead?’

‘Magelight,’ Mosk said. ‘We didn’t cook anything anyway. Our house was made of wood. It was…made to burn.’

Eran frowned. No house was made to burn. It was made to be lived in. Made to hold memories and contain people who loved each other.

‘Your home must have been large, because there were a lot of you. Or did you not all live together?’

‘We lived together,’ Mosk said. ‘It wasn’t large. We shared beds. Later, some of my older brothertrees and sistertrees lived separated when they’d found their Aur tree. But they returned
home sometimes… The house could have been larger, but I think it’s tradition for- I think we kind of like living on top of each other, in each other’s space all the time. A lot of… groves of trees are like that, you know. They grow closely and crowd together. Sometimes they crowd each other out, or a sapling can’t get enough light, but we are not only trees, and we can make room if someone isn’t flourishing.’

‘Brothertrees and sistertrees,’ Eran said, tilting his head.

‘What?’ Mosk said sharply, as though he actually cared what Eran was saying, and didn’t like it.

‘No, I don’t mean anything by it, I just… like the words.’

‘Oh,’ Mosk said. ‘They’re just words. They don’t mean anything anymore.’

‘They sound like they do.’

‘Well, they don’t,’ Mosk said, turning his head to the side to glare at Eran.

‘You lie to yourself a lot, don’t you?’

‘I’m not the one telling myself stories to hide from the fact that we’re going to be murdered.’

‘It’s not hiding,’ Eran said, unable to even feel annoyed at this stage. ‘It calms me down.’

Mosk said nothing to that, and Eran wanted to keep on talking, but his eyes searched the shadows again. Surely there was something he could do. Nothing came to mind and Eran’s breathing turned sharper, shallower. He closed his eyes and thought of his father cooking, adding pinches of spices to the clay pot, only stopping when his mother would slide her arms around his waist from behind, and lean her head on his shoulder. Only stopping to accept her love.

* 

The miskatin returned hours later, at a point where Eran’s eyes were wet and burning because he’d spent too long thinking about everything he missed about his family. Everything he’d never get back. It crushed his heart, tore at him, wouldn’t abate even when he’d tried to stop. He’d made a mistake. He shouldn’t have thought about it.

A sack of dirty potatoes and other root vegetables was upturned on a large trestle table. Then the miskatin walked from the cavern into an adjoining cave, and came back with a cauldron that was impossibly huge. The miskatin carried it without effort, placing it next to the table. Then, with a cleaver that gleamed like the hunger in its eyes, it began to roughly chop the vegetables, each sharp sound echoing around them.

Eran watched, and thought of the miskatin licking Eran’s blood off his claws. His arm ached. He stared at the cauldron. More than one fae could fit inside it. The fireplace itself was large enough to make a stew that size. There were bone fragments everywhere on the floor around them.

He cast his gaze about, chilled, sickened. He’d suspected, but this was the kind of confirmation he didn’t want.

The miskatin noticed him, and seemed to be waiting for Eran to meet his eyes again.

‘This way,’ the miskatin said, ‘my friends will never leave me.’

Eran had nothing left to throw up. He was still a little worried that the ice would creep into this
cavern and trap them. But mostly, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from those chopped vegetables being tossed into the cauldron, or the belly of the cauldron itself. He wasn’t sure he could be cooked in a cauldron if he was alive, but he was certain the miskatin would have no problems cutting him to pieces first with that wicked looking cleaver.

He looked down to Mosk. He was surprised to see that grey-green gaze, to see the paleness of Mosk’s skin, and realise that Mosk didn’t want this either. Didn’t want to live maybe, didn’t want to think about anything, but didn’t want *this*.

* 

In the grand scheme of things, Eran really didn’t matter. He *wanted* to matter, but even when he was younger he’d known he’d have to prove himself and he hadn’t done that yet. So really, he was just another fae, and Gwyn had been right to reprimand him, even if he was an unethical, horrid person in general.

But in the grand scheme of things, Mosk mattered. Maybe he was behind the ice plague, maybe he wasn’t. Maybe his guilt was because his family had been burned alive and he’d possibly been there to see it, or maybe it was because he’d somehow made the ice plague too. All of those things didn’t matter as much as the fact that Mosk might be one of the fae integral to stopping it somehow. Even if he didn’t understand it or couldn’t communicate with it. He was connected to the Mages who had made it – who had probably made it – and beneath all those curses, he was the only one who could reveal that to others who mattered, others who could do something about it.

And if it came down to a choice between Mosk living or Eran living, Eran knew that Mosk was the one who stood a higher chance of seeing Eran’s parents avenged, even if Eran knew Mosk wouldn’t care about it.

Eran was considering the huge fire in the fireplace. He listened to the miskatin throw down the cleaver, the last of the root vegetables chopped.

‘I am going to get water for the stew,’ the miskatin said. ‘And then we are going to be the very closest friends.’

Eran shuddered, but he didn’t look away from the fire. He listened to the miskatin walking away, and then stared down at his hands, chewing on his bottom lip. Could he do this? He had to. It didn’t even matter about the spell that meant Eran was meant to look after Mosk.

For him to get the justice he wanted, he had to make a choice.

The fire wouldn’t be enough to melt both chains. Eran knew fire. He understood it. He knew exactly how much he needed to melt metal if he was channelling the heat into his own hands.

He thought he’d be more upset, but as he wrapped his hands around Mosk’s chain, feeling the metal and the quality of it, he was almost devastated by the hugeness of the relief that coursed through him. He didn’t want to be killed like this, but he was so tired. He’d only proven to himself, on this journey, that he understood little, and that not many people cared about the plight of his family. But the Unseelie fae seemed to care, enough that they might at least stand a chance of stopping the ice one day.

‘If your manacle gets warm, you’ll have to endure it,’ Eran whispered. ‘It’s the only way I know how to do this. If it works, you must *run*, understand?’

Mosk looked up, and then cried out when Eran yanked him closer to the fire. Mosk tried to struggle
away, but Eran only plunged his hands into the coals, wincing at the strength of the heat. With his ambient body temperature having plunged since Fenwrel’s magic had muted his fire, he needed a minute just to bear it. But he could bear it, and then he let the heat circulate into his body, flooding his mouth with sparks, making his eyes hot, his breath warm.

He directed that heat from one arm to his other arm, down to his hand, until his skin started to warm.

But he needed so much more fire to make his hand red-hot, to melt the chain, and so he dug deeper into the fire and beckoned it, asking it to use his body as a vessel. No fire wanted to die, so it fought him. It didn’t matter. Eran was the child of his mother and father, and he knew how to master a fire.

It took longer than he’d hoped for the metal to start to shift in his hand. The fire was guttering now, most of the coals were dead, and Eran was going to kill the fire entirely to do this. But it was the right thing to do, wasn’t it?

Even if Mosk was hyperventilating because of the heat, the closeness to the fire. Eran couldn’t do anything about that part.

Eran almost felt like he had his fire back again, working with the huge fire for such a long time. He wished it were true.

The fire was almost completely dead when the chain finally snapped. A handful of glowing coals, almost out. Eran could see Mosk’s sweating face by the dinge.

‘You have to run,’ Eran said. ‘Okay? Stay out of the light of those lampposts. Gwyn and the Each Uisge will find you.’

Mosk stared at him, as though Eran had only dragged Mosk in front of the fire to hurt him. Eran grabbed Mosk’s shoulder and shook him hard.

‘You have to go,’ Eran said. ‘Now, while it’s not here. Okay?’

‘I…’

Eran opened his mouth to yell, even as his heart pounded with fear. Instead, Mosk’s whole body scraped against the floor and he staggered upwards, his knees shaky, one of his ankles rolling before he got it underneath himself. He stared down at the broken chain. Stared at the chain still binding Eran to the metal ring, and then looked beyond it to the fire that had just about died.

Maybe he realised what Eran had done for him, or maybe he was just following those deeper instincts to flee danger – he clearly had them, he’d used them before. Eran hoped they’d be enough to get Mosk away.

Mosk turned and ran. He didn’t look back.

Eran told himself it was fine. It wasn’t about gratitude. It wasn’t about someone acknowledging it. It was about making sure his family, his loved ones, had a chance of having their deaths avenged, no matter how small.

That was all.

But he still curled up on his side afterwards, shaking and feeling feverishly warm. The heat from the fire was slow to leave his body, and Eran tried to tell himself that as long as he was near a fire,
he wasn’t truly alone.

He didn’t believe it.

He passed a shaking hand – covered in bits of flaked, dried metal – over his eyes and hid from how much everything hurt. He didn’t want to see. He didn’t want to know. He hadn’t saved his family but maybe, maybe he’d saved someone who could help in the future.

It wasn’t going to be him.

*

The miskatin returned, hissing and clacking its claws when it saw that only Eran remained, that the fire was nearly dead. Still making its sibilant noises, it tossed log after log unto the coals, stuffing twigs and bits of dead grass in until the fire took once more. Eran watched numbly, thinking that this had to be better than being swallowed up by the ice, surely. It had to be better.

Minutes passed, and as the miskatin tossed another heavy log onto the fire like it weighed nothing, Eran found a flash of heat inside of him and lunged for the miskatin, grabbing his leg and dragging him backwards, snarling and trying to hurt him. But the creature was taller, stronger, hungrier, and while Eran was sure he’d landed a few bruises, he was the one who was left on his back, claws raking wounds into his front, then resting almost tenderly at his neck. The miskatin glared at him.

‘You do not understand how to be good,’ the miskatin said in contemptuous accusation. ‘But I will make you be good.’

‘By eating me,’ Eran said angrily, but he didn’t struggle. Not with those claws at his neck. He was still buying time, even though there was no point anymore.

‘Yessss,’ the creature said, smiling its rotten, discoloured teeth.

‘I will never be your friend,’ Eran said. ‘You don’t even understand the meaning of the word, you savage, destructive thing. You are nothing more than a cannibal who makes excuses for your appetite. You will never have friends.’

The creature’s forked tongue licked out, it made a horrible, rattling sound and then swung its arm up and brought it quickly down. A brief moment to fear he’d never be conscious again. This was it.

The world went black.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Breaking Apart:'

Time passed, and Mosk stared up at the stars through the canopy, feeling like they were moving far more than they were supposed to – the dizziness, again. He considered there might be one thing he could do. He’d never done it before, and he didn’t know if it would even work. He didn’t even know how.

Maybe he could pretend to do one last thing that mattered. He could go through the
motions of it, and not feel like he was a complete waste of space and time, a shell that once held things that were important. He could…at least try.
Mosk was getting the hang of running while exhausted.

He stumbled out of the cavern, his breath sore in his lungs, his body throbbing from being so close to the flame, his wrist still hot from the warm metal which was now nothing more than a useless manacle and half a chain. He leaned against the rock, looking around. He could see the glow of the lampposts in the distance, stationed randomly in the forest, beckoning. He couldn’t see the miskatin anywhere, but he wasn’t sure that meant anything.

He also didn’t know if the lampposts could sense him now. They might be aware, they might be alive, he didn’t know. There wasn’t much in the tales about the lampposts, except that they were the miskatin’s servants, and they did its bidding.

He followed along the rocks that surrounded the cavern in the darkness, until he realised that he was following along a path. His heart hammered. Probably the miskatin’s path.

If only he could stop running. Stop moving. But he’d had a distant, strange sense of what Eran had done for him. He felt like he could stop once he’d just gotten himself away.

He staggered off the path into the murky black, avoiding the instincts to move towards the light. His feet crunched into leaf litter and twigs, his ankles knocked into branches, his toes found holes in the ground – rabbits, moles, whatever made their homes here. His breathing was shaky and sounded deafening, but he couldn’t be quiet. He was too tired to exert that much control over his own lungs.

He pushed on into the night until he had to stop, leaning against a tree. He couldn’t hear it. The tree wouldn’t talk to him. It might as well have been dead. He dug his nails hatefully into its bark and caught his breath, his vision swimming, dots moving in front of his eyes. His head pounded, there were spikes at the base of his skull, driving into his forehead. He’d almost gotten used to it, but whenever he stopped, the pain caught up with him. Nothing had been right since they’d taken his heartsong. Nothing at all.

Looking around, he had no idea which way to go. He only knew the way he’d come. Behind him, Eran was still chained in the miskatin’s den. Eran, who for some bizarre reason, used all that fire to get Mosk free. Mosk knew Eran was under a spell, but it was still just an unusual thing to do, wasn’t it? Who did that? Why didn’t Eran try and save himself first at least, and then look for another way to save Mosk?

Mosk’s expression twisted, his mouth slanting into a crooked frown. All that talk about cooperation, like they could be friends. Like Mosk needed that.

Except if he didn’t have that, he wouldn’t be here now, free.

His upper arms ached as he dug his fingers into them. He couldn’t hear any unusual forest sounds. He was sure he’d put the miskatin’s den pretty far behind him, but not far enough, and he couldn’t
make himself go on. Where would he go? He had no food. He could find a bar, get laid, but he supposed eventually Gwyn and the Each Uisge would find him.

But he could still find a bar.

Except he knew that he owed some kind of life debt. Wasn’t that stupid? He could just stay here until Eran died, and then he wouldn’t owe it anymore. It wasn’t like he could ever pay it back. He had no magic. He had no power. He had no _heartsong_. He had no weapons, no canniness, no ability to be wily. He was just weak and pathetic. A _wretch._

Davix’s voice wreathed through his mind until he heard the other things Davix had said to him, and he shivered, sagging down the trunk and biting the inside of his lip until the pain felt like one of the thorns in his head. He stared blankly ahead. There was nothing he could do. He was the most powerless fae in the whole realm. At least that was how it felt. Perhaps there was some slug fae who had less power or something.

Mosk couldn’t even hear the _trees._

His head swung back towards the cavern. He could just leave Eran there, couldn’t he? Life debts weren’t squared away all the time. People died. It happened.

And Mosk wanted him to die, didn’t he? He’d tried to kill him once. He’d meant to kill him. It was harder than he imagined. Getting the knife into Eran’s body was easy enough, but there was resistance. Organs that didn’t slice as easily as others. The knife had caught and Mosk couldn’t get it in deeply enough and then he’d realised he had no idea what he was doing, and he’d betrayed one of the most fundamental tenets of what it was to be an Aur dryad.

Non-violence. Pacifism.

He’d lost everything else, he didn’t think it would matter to lose that too. But it mattered. And now he was _violent_, he could never undo it. He _liked_ dragging the piece of skull across Eran’s cheek, he liked the desecration of it, he even liked the stupid look of shock on Eran’s face. The way he’d touched his cheek later.

So it didn’t matter if he left Eran in the cavern, to be hacked to pieces, cooked and eaten. Mosk could run.

Besides, there was nothing he could do.

Mosk took two shaky steps forward, away from the cavern, away from the support of the tree, and then he stilled and felt paralysed. Eventually, he moved back to the tree and looked back towards the cavern, swallowing the sticky lump in his throat and trying not to hear the distant voices of his family talking to him, telling him the right thing to do, because they were dead, and it didn’t matter what they would say. It would never matter again.

There was nothing he could do. He was the boy of a thousand curses. They’d ripped everything they could from him, and then he’d looked into the cold eyes of a Mage who had then put all that poison inside of him and dumped him in the middle of nowhere. He was a husk of a tree. Not even a good one. A dead tree could house animals, lichen, fungi. He wasn’t even that. He was a splinter. Useless.

He clawed at his elbow and looked towards the cavern.

There was nothing he could do.
Time passed, and Mosk stared up at the stars through the canopy, feeling like they were moving far more than they were supposed to – the dizziness, again. He considered there might be one thing he could do. He’d never done it before, and he didn’t know if it would even work. He didn’t even know how.

Maybe he could pretend to do one last thing that mattered. He could go through the motions of it, and not feel like he was a complete waste of space and time, a shell that once held things that were important. He could...at least try.

Eran was probably already dead. Mosk was pretty sure he’d have no way of knowing.

Taking a deep, shaking breath, Mosk swung away from the tree and began to stumble back to the cavern, avoiding the lampposts as he went.

It turned out he hadn’t made as much ground as he thought he had. The cavern was easy to find. He edged along the miskatin’s path and tried to stay as quiet as possible, which wasn’t easy, given the world rocked a little with every step. Sometimes the dizziness wasn’t as bad, but tonight? Tonight it was bad.

Edging deeper into the cave, he saw that the fire had been built up again, and froze. He hated it. He hated that fire. His heart hammered in him like a woodpecker, too fast, driving holes into his marrow-wood.

Eerily, a voice echoed up through the narrow entrance, and Mosk’s eyes widened:

‘No, no, you can’t do this! I’ll kill you!’

A sibilant laugh, and then a short wail of pain. Mosk quailed, looking behind him, wanting to run back into the forest.

He didn’t even know if it would work. And if he came back and it didn’t work, Eran’s...whatever he’d done, it would’ve failed. Mosk didn’t think he had enough water left in him to break out into a sweat, but fear turned his body clammy.

Eran screamed, and Mosk lurched forwards, digging furrows into his forearm above the now-cold manacle. He hated all of this. Hated what he was about to try and do. Hated what it would do to him, to seek the magic like that. It was poison. You didn’t seek out poison.

He started delving in his own mind for the miskatin, even as he walked forwards, stumbling over a rock. He imagined Augus’ compulsions – it wasn’t hard, he’d heard enough of them – forcing him to talk about what he couldn’t talk about, and he imagined that the miskatin was using them. That he was being forced to say something he couldn’t, and being tripped into something awful instead. Seeing the ice swallowing Eran’s family. Seeing the impossible darkness from the eyes of a watery creature.

A flash of an image, and he saw other miskatins, as though he was very small. They towered over him. Fear flooded him, somehow greater than what he felt now, as though the miskatin’s fear was much bigger than his own.

But at least he could do it, access those memories. He hadn’t known it was possible if someone wasn’t forcing him to talk about his past.
He was unable to concentrate when he entered the huge cavern. He saw flashes of information – that the cauldron was now over the fire, that the miskatin was using a filleting knife on Eran’s arm, and Eran was bleeding, but not badly wounded, and Eran was staring at Mosk in horror. The miskatin stared too, in a way that made Mosk feel stupid for coming back, because he shouldn’t have-

He shouldn’t-

‘No,’ Eran breathed. ‘Why?’

Now, he had to do it now. He had to see if it would work. It probably wouldn’t work. The miskatin was evil, how could this work?

Instead, he dug deep into the curse that stopped him from talking, and – sick with dread – he burrowed deeper into the magic, telling himself that he was going to talk about what happened to him no matter what. Which meant he saw; he saw what they’d done to him, he saw what happened to his family, he saw everything, and:

‘I’m so small, and they are going to look after me. All of them. The tall miskatins are my friends, and they only make a new one every three hundred years and I am the most special and they are hissing at me, they won’t stop hissing, and then the first miskatin with the beard says: ‘You were made wrong.’”

The miskatin stared at him, its too-wide mouth pursing strangely. Mosk had to close his eyes. A perfect time for the miskatin to rush him with its knife, but it didn’t. So Mosk dug deeper, and tried to hold back the whimper in his throat as he lived what the miskatin had lived, in the worst moment of its life.

‘They poke me all over with their claws, like they’re testing my flesh, like they want to see how much meat is on my bones,’ Mosk continued, forcing his eyes open and glassily staring at the floor. ‘They poke me on the insides of my elbows and the arches of my feet and even my throat and it hurts and I thought it was a game at first because miskatins like gameses and they like friends and so this must be what friends do. I want to live with them. I have to. Miskatins can’t live alone. We have all the caves and all our helpers and we live together and share in our kills or if we live apart we always go back, every few months, we always go back.’

A rattling sound, and Mosk felt the miskatin’s words and thoughts in his mind and throat and the horror of what had happened in his body, overlaying what the Mages had done to him and he whined, resisted a scream. He was never supposed to do this without being forced. Why would anyone do this to themselves? Why? Maybe he’d kill himself with it before he ever disarmed the miskatin.

‘Then one of them lifts me and throws me away, like a bone with no more meat, and it tells me that I am a useless thing and not a friend and they will try again in three hundred years. They each stand there and they each tell me that I am no longer their friend. I’m- How could I understand? I am just like them! I will hunt like them, and eat like them, and I am made in their image! I am their friend!’

A long hissing, and then the sound of a knife clattering towards the ground, but Mosk couldn’t see that anymore. He felt like something was beginning to break inside of him. He dug himself into the curse, had to force himself to keep talking. He thought it might be the worst thing he’d ever done to himself, to his own mind, and it was an agony above and beyond what he was seeing and feeling, what he was living as though it was his own terrible memory.

‘I yell and yell as they walk away, leaving me, and then- and then one of them turns and comes
back, and my heart leaps! It leaps! The miskatin will be my friend! I only need one. Just one. I want all of them, but one is enough compared to none. And the miskatin comes back and it takes my hand, and it drags his claw down my chest, and it—Oh.'

Mosk realised what was coming, shied away from it, but already knew. The curse seemed to taunt him with it. Did he want to put himself through that? Did he want to live like that was his own memory for the rest of his life? See it in his dreams?

Does it matter?

He was so empty, and he could only fill himself up with these moments, the worst memories, the ones no one wanted. That no one wanted to hear.

‘How are you doing that?’ the miskatin said, its voice weak. ‘How are you doing that? What is that magic? Stop doing it.’

‘And it drags me to a smooth rock and pushes me over it and I am very small, and I think maybe it is going to kill me, because it seems like he would kill me, but then it keeps touching me and I don’t understand because miskatins don’t—’

‘Don’t,’ the miskatin whispered. A hard rattle followed. Mosk knew now – it had bones in its throat that it could rub together. A sound of threat. Of anger. Of terror. Even Unseelie miskatin cared about family. Except they hadn’t cared about this one. It’d been defective somehow.

Mosk forced himself to mine deeper, eyes streaming, dizziness swelling in strength, because he already knew, he just hadn’t found the words yet. The miskatin’s phrasing disintegrating to horror in his head. Just as it had with Eran. Just as it did with Augus. Just as it did with that Mage, when he’d tested the curse to make sure it worked.

It would kill him, to keep digging into other people’s memories like this.

‘The miskatin tells me that I am not its friend, and that I will never be, and that it will show me,’ Mosk forced himself to say.

‘Stop it! You’re a liar! You lie! That is not what happened!’

Mosk looked at the miskatin, felt like they were both swaying at the same time. The miskatin had gone pale with shock, its claws in fists. By its side, Eran had grabbed the filleting knife with his good hand, stared at Mosk in disbelief.

‘We don’t ever do that,’ Mosk continued, as the miskatin trembled. ‘Miskatins never— We have no need— But the miskatin that was supposed to be my friend, it held me down on the smooth stone, and it—’

‘Stop it,’ the miskatin said, and Mosk thought that this plan was so stupid. He was going to get himself murdered. How could it work?

Something was breaking inside of him. It couldn’t be his heartsong, because he didn’t have one anymore. It couldn’t be his spirit, because that had broken before the heartsong had gone. He supposed it must be his mind, but it felt deeper than that. He could almost see a weaving of colours – fire bright – coming apart. Threads pinged apart. A tapestry fragmenting inside of him.

‘—It pushed his claws into me and then it laughed at me and kept telling me we weren’t friends and then he pushed into me and told me that this would make sure I would never have another friend again. Not a single one, and then—’
'You are bad magic!' the miskatin screamed at him. 'You are bad magic!' Mosk stumbled backwards as the miskatin rushed towards him, terror that he was going to be killed, terror that anyone might touch him the way the miskatin had touched him in that memory. Instead, the miskatin rushed past him, fleeing the cavern. Its steps pounded away, and then in a matter of seconds, it was gone.

His knees hit the rocky ground hard, and Mosk pushed his hands into his chest, moaning weakly into the dusty, disgusting floor. He still couldn’t shake it, the worst of the memory. And he’d broken something in the process of doing it. Maybe he’d ruined himself, forcing himself to activate the curse voluntarily. It felt like he’d snapped something that should have held together forever. How many pieces could he break into anyway?

Awful memories drifted around his mind, first the miskatin’s, and then his own. They were clearer than they’d ever been, closer somehow, and he wrapped his arms around his head and wanted it all to go away. The miskatin would come back and kill him, and he hadn’t even saved Eran’s life. He’d just…found some more time for them to feel the truth of their own mortality.

‘I wish they’d killed me,’ he whispered to himself.

It took him a minute to realise what words he’d set free, what it meant to say them aloud. Then his eyes opened and he stared down at the ground, the light dimming around him.

Carefully, not wanting to feel himself choke on it, he mouthed the words:

‘Olfhix killed my family.’

The curse didn’t activate.

Was that what he’d broken? In deliberately and consciously seeking out the miskatin’s worst memory? Every curse had a breakage clause. They had to. Nothing in the world was permanent, so even curses had to disintegrate. But some curses could be close to permanent. They could last generations. They could only break with death. And that one…

Olfhix must have assumed Mosk would never do it. Would never want to do it. Because no one would. No one in their right mind would ever do that to themselves.

But Mosk wasn’t in his right mind.

He rolled to his side and watched as Eran – one hand in the fire, one hand on his own chain – stared back at him. Eran was pale and had smudges of dirt all over him. Mosk probably looked the same. Mosk tried not to look at the fire, and instead stared at Eran’s hand becoming red hot.

The fire was no longer shrinking, and yet Eran’s hand was glowing.

Eran stared down at his hand, and then let go of the chain – already broken – and slowly took his other hand out of the fire. He swallowed, pushed himself upright, and continued to stare at his glowing hand. Then, he took a deep breath and exhaled a wave of sparks. Mosk whimpered. He couldn’t help it. It could’ve been beautiful, once upon a time. He didn’t like fire, but he’d not been wholly, irrationally terrified of it. After all, some trees needed fire to live. What if that had been his Aur tree? Dryads weren’t terrified of it. Just…naturally wary.

Now, it was horrid.

‘The spell broke,’ Eran said. ‘It must’ve broken when…when I- When I saved your life.’
Eran turned and looked at Mosk, eyes wide.

No, Mosk thought, because it was bigger than that. There was an element of sacrifice in it. Eran had put Mosk’s life before his own. He could have broken his own chain first. He should have.

So that was the clause Fenwrel had placed upon the blocking of Eran’s powers. Unfair, brutal, and yet proof that Eran wouldn’t kill Mosk. At least, not without good cause. He’d sacrificed himself to save Mosk. It didn’t make any sense. Mosk didn’t want to know why. But that’s what he’d done. All Eran’s talk about cooperation was real, and Mosk didn’t think he stood much of a chance of getting him to change his mind.

Not if he hadn’t been able to do it yet.

‘You came back,’ Eran said, running towards him. Mosk cringed away, still in the fresh hell of the miskatin’s worst memory, and Eran held back, not touching him or collapsing by his side. Instead, he paused, then turned and grabbed his belt with his weapons off the table, cinching them around his waist. ‘You…you didn’t just come back to die, you came back to- I have my fire again. I can protect us. I mean, I think… At least better than before.’

Eran turned his hand and called a single blue flame to his palm. In looking up to the ceiling to avoid the flame, Mosk saw the way Eran’s eyes closed in relief and some other strong emotion.

Then, Eran ran off, deeper into the cave, down some corridor. When he came back, minutes later, he held a pouch of coins, and two finely made necklaces. Probably from some of its other victims.

‘It’s not stealing if the miskatin already took the items, right? We have to go,’ Eran said. ‘When it comes back, it will kill us.’

‘If it comes back.’

‘We have to go,’ Eran said again, reaching his hand down to Mosk to help him up. Mosk looked at the extended hand and couldn’t bring himself to take it. He pushed himself up unsteadily, and then swayed, staggering hard. He bared his teeth when Eran caught him by the shoulders in a grip that was firm, but not mean. He lashed out and clawed at whatever he could reach. He wanted to get Eran’s wounded arm, but missed. ‘You need rest, and we can’t stay here. We’ll find somewhere.’

‘What about the ice?’ Mosk said.

‘It hasn’t found us yet,’ Eran said quietly. ‘Maybe it didn’t come down this far. But it doesn’t seem to move that fast. And…I can’t stay awake forever. I’ve tried it before. Can you stand?’

‘I hate you.’

‘I know,’ Eran said, like he didn’t even care.

‘I’ll kill you in your sleep.’

‘Maybe,’ Eran said.

‘I wish I’d never come back and helped you. You don’t deserve it. You’re a disgusting, awful excuse for a fae.’

‘But you did,’ Eran said. ‘Come on, we have to go. You can insult me on the way.’

‘Condescending piece of shit,’ Mosk muttered, even as he followed Eran through the cavern,
hardly able to see where he was placing his feet.

‘See? You’re already doing it,’ Eran said, a mixture of cheerful and wearied.

Mosk didn’t have the energy for it, so he stopped talking.

For the first time since everything that had happened to him, he could talk about it. He knew he could. It was – for a while – all he’d wanted. To be able to share the story of it, let people know the horror of it, for himself, for his family, even for the world.

But now that the words were unshackled by breaking the Mage’s curse, he found himself pushing them down, shoving them away. It turned out he didn’t need Olphix to lay magical words upon him to stop him from speaking the truth. He didn’t want to speak it anyway. So he wouldn’t, and he’d go on pretending the curse was still there.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter: 'Isn't This Better?':

‘I don’t know where we should go,’ Eran admitted, as they continued to walk. ‘I don’t know many of my father or mother’s allies, and I don’t really know where any of them live if they’re not in the desert. I don’t think the Seelie Court will try and help us. But I’m not sure what more the Unseelie Court can do.’

‘They’ll feed us,’ Mosk said.

Eran nodded like he was giving it serious thought.

‘You were angrier,’ Mosk said.

‘I was angrier at you,’ Eran said, looking at him, lips pulling into a smirk. ‘Now I’m angry at everything.’
Isn't This Better?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mosk

*

Eran was very good at haggling. Mosk hated it. All his life, he’d never liked markets, how busy they were, or that strange insulting playfulness where a buyer derided their merchant’s wares just enough to get a price reduction but not enough to truly insult them, and everyone went home happy. That made no sense to him. Why didn’t the merchant just set the stock at a different price?

From a distance, he watched Eran casually play a kind of word game with the vendor. Mosk didn’t really understand it, and he hadn’t paid close enough attention to understand why they were now both smiling, friendly glints in their eyes. It didn’t seem to matter that Eran was a fire fae, though Mosk had seen for himself how some fae would react to him for it. In this pocket of the fae realm, wherever they were, no one really seemed to care.

Eran spent the morning procuring goods with coins he’d stolen from the miskatin. Interesting to think how Eran had justified that. Mosk had always assumed that Seelie couldn’t steal like that.

Mosk still flinched to have anyone come too near him, the memory of the miskatin’s memories clinging to him like a bog. It was tarry and awful, drowning his roots with too much information, turning his leaves to rot. He had enough of his own memories to contend with, but now he felt that abject rejection, the intense pain of it.

Mosk closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The dizziness got a little worse, and then seemed to level out. He just wanted to sleep.

‘I got you some sap! It turns out there’s a lot of fae in the forest that eat it. Did you know that?’

It was too early for that kind of enthusiasm married to such stupidity.

Mosk only opened his eyes and met Eran’s bright gaze. He said nothing. Eventually, Eran’s expression fell.

‘Are you even hungry?’ Eran said.

‘No,’ Mosk said.

That was mostly true. Mosk liked having sap for the short period of time that he’d had it. But all too quickly, he’d once more gotten used to nothing at all. It felt like a dullness, a coldness, but it wasn’t the dizziness, and it wasn’t vertigo, it wasn’t sometimes using all his remaining concentration to just put one foot in front of the other.

‘I could probably organise for you to see someone,’ Eran said. ‘There’s a few healers who work out of this market, and—’

‘No.’

Eran looked like he wanted to argue, but – miracle of miracles – he didn’t. Maybe Mosk was
rubbing off on him. Mosk wanted to laugh. That’s what pollutants did, wasn’t it? They spread their sickness onto everyone and everything else.

‘Okay…’ Eran said, and then hefted his newly purchased pack over his shoulders and grasped the chain trailing from Mosk’s wrist. It wasn’t even that he needed to anymore, it was only that Mosk sometimes forgot to follow. He didn’t think he’d ever be grateful for the chain, or the cuff, but someone pulling on it gave him a direction to go. He hoped there might be rest at the end of it.

‘If you need more money, there’s a couple of taverns, and I could probably-’

‘Don’t start,’ Eran snapped.

Mosk frowned, but stayed silent. Unless he was willing to escape and just find a tavern, he had to put up with it.

‘Is that…’ Eran continued, as they made their way into open woodland, a meadow beneath their feet, birds chirping, and the trees staying so stubbornly silent that Mosk wanted hooks to sink into their heart-marrow in bitter revenge. ‘Is that one of the curses placed on you? I suppose you can’t talk about it.’

‘Is what?’ Mosk said, frowning.

‘Your need to have sex.’

The scoffing sound came before he could stop it. Was he cursed to want sex? No. It happened… accidentally really. The Mages had done what they’d done. Mosk had gotten free. He’d found some rest in a tavern, but being too empty to care what happened to him, he didn’t bother struggling when a drunkard muscled into his room. He stared up at the ceiling, annoyed to be distracted by what was happening to him, only to realise that it was *distracting*. A strange gift, he desperately wanted to be anywhere else but in his own mind.

After that, it was just easier to seek it out and ask for it.

‘It’s really not a curse?’

‘I just like doing it.’

‘You *told* me you didn’t like it.’

‘Well I’ve *told* you a lot of things that aren’t true,’ Mosk said. ‘Guess you just don’t know what to believe.’

Eran made a sound of discontent. Then, as they followed a streamlet along into the darker shadows of thicker trees, Eran only said: ‘I’m starting to get a feel for it.’

‘What?’

‘When you’re lying, when you’re telling the truth.’

‘Great.’

They said nothing else for a time, and Mosk half-closed his eyes and trusted Eran to know the way, even though neither of them did. They were just wending their way south.

*
Mosk assumed the Unseelie King and the Each Uisge would have caught up with them by now. He didn’t know how he felt about them being dead. He posed it to himself as a question, and felt nothing at all. Just hollowness. So they were probably dead. Eran didn’t say a thing about it. Mosk thought perhaps they should stop, wait for someone to find them, even wait for someone to fuck him, but he knew Eran would never stop running from the ice, even if they were going much more slowly now.

No one could teleport. The geas that Mosk thought was only affecting a small amount of the Aur forest seemed to be spread out far wider than he could imagine. Was that what the Mages had done with his magic? His power? His heartsong? Was that enough? A plague of ice? Removing teleportation?

Mosk hated thinking. He hated asking himself questions.

He turned his back from the camp that Eran had set up – now that it was early evening – and picked up a whippy branch that still had leaves attached to it. Filled with a scratching vexation at the trees around him, he began to hit them. The branch thudded against trunks until the leaves fell off, until bark stripped from the branch itself. Until the branch fell apart.

Mosk looked for another branch and started again.

The trees didn’t even cry out in pain. Mosk could smell it in their sap, in the small grazes he managed to create, but they weren’t speaking, they could have been dead. So Mosk gritted his teeth and laid into them, and wished he could just hear them.

The crackling of a fire behind him, and Mosk tensed, squeezed his eyes shut, his hand losing grip on the branch. He hated it. He hated it. Not as much as before maybe. Going back to the Aur forest had changed something inside of him. Instead of being all the way back in the past, he was now in multiple places at once. He was with the Mages. He was standing next to Olphix as the Mage burned everything. Everything. He was here, now, wanting to dig his fingers into Eran’s throat.

It should never have been that easy for Eran to get his powers back.

Though he knew it hadn’t exactly been easy. Still, Eran should never have put himself on the line like that! Absurdity. Mosk had hoped he was evil and cruel. Instead, he was just…earnest and stupid. But even stupid people could burn him with their fire. Eran had proven that.

‘It’s only small,’ Eran said. ‘It’s very small. It can’t hurt you.’

‘Shut up,’ Mosk said, refusing to look, refusing to open his eyes. That was something he couldn’t do before, speak while a fire was burning. Not like this. Was it progress though? Somehow, it just hurt more. Like the underside of his skin was coming alive and all he had in it was hooks and rust. It was worse.

‘I promise,’ Eran said.

‘Fuck you.’

A loud sigh.

‘I know you don’t want me to be nice to you,’ Eran said. ‘But I’m going to be. I’ve changed my mind. I didn’t have all the information.’

‘You’re just…an idiot.’
‘Everyone has to start somewhere,’ Eran said.

The fire made a noise, and Mosk jumped, his skin crawling. After a while, a shifting sound, like Eran was maybe turning back to the fire. Eran said nothing else and Mosk slumped by the tree he’d been beating, leaning his head against it, succumbing to sleep without even thinking that he might want warmth, or to eat.

*

He woke with a start, nightmares clawing at him so that he was sorer upon waking than when he’d fallen asleep. All his body tense, and a shadow standing over him. Mosk’s breath caught in his throat, until he saw that it was Eran holding a flask in front of him.

‘It’s sap,’ Eran said. ‘Some kind of walnut. You can have that, can’t you?’

Mosk reached up and touched the flask, and Eran gave it to him, and then sat next to him. Mosk unscrewed the cap, still waking up. The walnut sap was sweeter than most, and he thought it might be butternut, but he couldn’t be sure. He didn’t have the same connection to its life-force anymore, even though the drippy blood of trees kept him alive.

He sipped at it, remembering Fenwrel’s advice to not go too fast. He was still getting used to eating again. It hadn’t been that long.

‘I’m going to try and remove your cuff today,’ Eran said, looking down at it. ‘I have to use heat to do it, but I bought some bits of fireproof leather – you know, the kind that can hold Everfire? So you shouldn’t feel it. Or it might just make your arm sore. But if it burns you at all, I’ll stop or… find another way.’

‘I don’t need that.’

‘You’re livelier than you were when I first met you. I thought you’d escape, now that you aren’t attached to me. I think you’d follow me anyway.’ A pause, and Eran muttered: ‘Unless there was a tavern nearby. And then at least you’d be easy to find.’

‘Ha. Funny. You could fuck me too. It could be your finder’s fee.’

‘Why were you hitting the trees last night?’ Eran said. ‘Is it because… You said you couldn’t hear them?’

‘They aren’t talking to me,’ Mosk hissed bitterly, reaching back and elbowing the tree behind him. ‘They won’t talk to me. They’re everything, and they won’t talk at all.’

‘I can’t imagine what that must be like. You could hear all the trees? Or just…some? How do they talk?’

Every question was like a knife in his chest, reminding him of what he’d had, and what he likely wouldn’t have again. He’d been stripped of everything that made him himself.

‘We don’t have to talk about it,’ Eran added.

‘It’ll be shitty either way,’ Mosk said eventually. ‘I could hear all of them, all the time. And I don’t know, they just talk. They just… It’s- I don’t know. It’s not like you and me. They’re always saying something. They never shut up.’

‘Until now. Until…what happened? And your feeding teeth too?’
‘They pulled them out,’ Mosk said, staring at the grass beneath him. He took another sip of the sap, letting his vision blur until the grass blended together and was nothing but meaningless green.

‘They pulled them out and then dug inside with metal until they killed the bone canal back to— all the way back to…’ Mosk didn’t know. He’d felt it up in his cheek, and then curving down behind his throat. They’d used a wire they’d fashioned specifically for it. He’d thought himself beyond screaming at that point, but that had been so bad they’d used magic to immobilise him.

‘No light on that,’ Eran muttered, snapping his fingers towards the ground.

‘What?’

‘It’s a saying?’ Eran said, waiting to see if Mosk knew it. Mosk had never heard of it. ‘It’s… Something afrit say when something irredeemable happens. No light can be shed on it. It’s— Just another way of acknowledging how awful something is.’

No light on that.

True enough.

‘You broke your curse, didn’t you? Or at least one of them?’

Eran asked the question so innocently, so innocuously, that Mosk nodded once before he went very still. No. No. He hadn’t broken his curses! He was still cursed. He hardly dared breathe. Would Eran burn him now? Force him to talk about what happened? Mosk was certain he could still dig into what was left of the curse and force Eran’s worst memories in front of him, but he didn’t think that would hold up before the Each Uisge’s compulsions, and he couldn’t speak about it.

‘When you saved me,’ Eran said. ‘Not because you saved me, but because you kept activating it. Am I right?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk said finally. ‘They never told me.’

‘I just— I just need to know,’ Eran said, his voice breaking. He sounded so tortured, given the morning light was gentle upon them. In the distance, butterflies hovered over some striking blue flowers, occasionally touching down to lick at nectar. ‘I just need to know if you did it. Did you do it? The ice plague?’

Yes.

Mosk closed his eyes. He shook his head. ‘If I said yes?’

Eran made a choked sound, and Mosk clutched the flask of sap closer to his chest. He was surprised when Eran spoke again, instead of burning him.

‘Tell me this. If you had never met those Mages – ever – would you have set out to make that ice? Would you have done…any of it?’

‘No,’ Mosk said weakly. ‘Why would I?’

‘Okay,’ Eran said. ‘Okay.’

‘Don’t tell them.’

‘Who? Gwyn and the Each Uisge?’

‘I can’t talk about it,’ Mosk said, not even knowing why he was bothering. He looked up, winced
at the wave of dizziness, and squinted until everything came into focus properly. ‘I can’t. His compulsions- I don’t.’

‘But it could help us.’

‘It won’t,’ Mosk said, starting to laugh. ‘It won’t. There’s nothing that can be done. Nothing that can stop them.’

_Not even death._ Something Mosk had learned now, and understood properly. They weren’t even fae anymore. They were something beyond it and beneath it at the same time.

‘You don’t know, though. If we could—’

‘NO!’

The shout was loud enough that in the distance, a bird squawked as it was flushed from its rest. Eran looked up in its direction, and then back to Mosk, frowning. Eventually he pushed up and walked back to the remnants of the fire, but Mosk got the sense that the conversation wasn’t yet over. He supposed that was obvious enough. If there was one thing Eran wouldn’t stop doing, it was trying to avenge his family.

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They began to walk again. The land opened out considerably, and they were in gently sloped meadows occasionally broken up by small but well-tended farms. Fences carved the land into sections, painted white or left rough. The streamlet had become a gently flowing river, and every now and then a pale red pony would pop its head above and look around, before sinking once more. Its eyes were wholly black, and Mosk could have sworn he saw a pale red human hand come above the water once as well, just resting on the ripples produced by the water’s flow.

Mosk recognised none of it. The land was both somehow familiar, somehow not. Maybe he’d been to places like this. Maybe he’d been to this very place and not paid much attention. It had always been strange to leave the comfort of the huge, undulating Aur forest behind, and he’d always wanted to hurry back again.

‘I don’t know where we should go,’ Eran admitted, as they continued to walk. ‘I don’t know many of my father or mother’s allies, and I don’t really know where any of them live if they’re not in the desert. I don’t think the Seelie Court will try and help us. But I’m not sure what more the Unseelie Court can do.’

‘They’ll feed us,’ Mosk said.

Eran nodded like he was giving it serious thought.

‘You were angrier,’ Mosk said.

‘I was angrier at you,’ Eran said, looking at him, lips pulling into a smirk. ‘Now I’m angry at everything.’

‘You seem…less angry.’

‘If I find something I can fight, that might change.’ Eran rubbed the section of his arm that the miskatin had slid a knife into. It had mostly healed, but every time Eran touched it, Mosk heard the wail he’d made, alone in that cave and not expecting anyone to come for him. Was that the kind of thing Eran’s father would have done? One of the War Generals of the Unseelie King? That wasn’t
how the rumours went. Mosk had seen him in the Court before. He was brusque and terrifying.

The path forked, and Eran stood considering it for some time, consulting the crudely drawn map he’d bartered for. It had a few landmarks on it, but no real destinations. Mosk wondered if this was what the rest of his life would be like.

Then he wondered if Olphix would be angry that it didn’t hurt more. Mosk felt miserable, but he knew he didn’t feel as miserable as Olphix wanted him to feel. He hunched his shoulders, picked at his finely made shirt. He was covered in bits of dust and dirt, not having properly cleaned since the miskatin’s cave. He’d grown so used to being dirty, not caring about it. Now he wanted to wash it off, and feared that Olphix would find him like that, clean and not as miserable as he should be.

‘Are you okay?’ Eran asked.

‘You’re so Seelie,’ Mosk said in complaint.

‘It’s not Seelie to ask if you’re okay. You hardly walk in a straight line. You said you had a headache before. Is that-?’

‘It’s never gone away,’ Mosk said.

‘Your whole life?’

Mosk just looked up as if to say, What do you think?

Of course not his whole life! Most of his life had been spent lounging in the highest branches, his legs hanging splayed as he lay on his belly or his back, staring up at the whispering canopies. Sometimes he even held a bow in his hands and hung a quiver of arrows from a nearby branch. He was very good at shooting falling leaves. He’d never shoot the animals.

He shuddered and rubbed his face clumsily.

He couldn’t think about it. Couldn’t. Everything in his mind was a trap.

‘Do you think it’s the heartsong being gone?’ Eran said. ‘How could it all be gone anyway? You’re still…alive. It’s- Maybe they just took part of it?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Surely people would die without a heartsong.’

‘How would you know?’

‘What was your heartsong? Did you know it? I know not all fae-’

‘Determination,’ Mosk said, and then laughed weakly, once. Oh, how determined he’d been. That had gotten him precisely nowhere.

‘That’s…’ Eran rubbed his wrist where his cuff had been. ‘That’s my heartsong. Determination. My father saw it in me early. He said it was a good heartsong for the chieftain’s heir to have. Except the chieftain is dead too. Everyone who was there is gone. Everyone beyond it. The ice spread so far, and I don’t know what afrit have survived.’

‘Did they all live together?’

‘The afrit?’ Eran said, shocked. ‘No. They- The majority of desert fae are afrit. From the small
villages to the huge metropolises. There are so many. Different tribes, ethnicities, languages. I am marid-djinn afrit, we lived in close concert with the afshin afrit, and made up the largest army of the desert together in an alliance. The marid-djinn are named after the black Marid lion. Have you ever seen one?’

‘No,’ Mosk said, faintly spellbound.

Eran had a way of talking about his family, his life, that made it so much like the stories they would tell around the tiny plant they were always nursing in the centre of their home. There was always a baby hearth-tree, to be planted out when it was old enough. A tree raised on stories and love, that would become a repository of knowledge in the Aur forest. Sometimes Mosk would stumble across trees from other Aur dryads, ones that had lived centuries or millennia ago. He would hear older stories, different stories, and feel himself connected to forests that had lived forever, Aur dryads that had lived with their trees and would live on forever.

Except forever wasn’t real. The Aur forest was gone. All that memory and wisdom, gone.

But there was something about it, when Eran spoke. When he got that faraway look.

‘I’ve only ever seen them twice,’ Eran admitted. ‘They are large and protective of their families, and the deepest black, with a trace of midnight in their manes and tails. Their eyes are like the stars when the moon is dark, and their claws are sharp enough to strike sparks from even the dullest rocks.’

The pale red pony lifted above the river again, as Eran decided to continue along the farmland route, avoiding what looked like more deep forest. The river continued into the forest. As they left the river behind, Mosk looked behind him and saw a pale red hand waving from the water. Mosk almost waved back.

‘They may be all dead now,’ Eran said. ‘The lions. I don’t know who- I haven’t met another afrit since. I know not all afrits are dead. They didn’t all live in the desert, for a start. But I’ve not met a single one. It’s coincidence, isn’t it? They can’t all be dead.’

Eran shifted his pack and touched a hand to his kh’anzar.

‘I’m the last ambaros though. It’s sacrilegious to hope my god is wrong. But I hope.’

*

They made camp on some farmland. Eran went and asked permission to make a small fire away from the tiny sheep that were no larger than rabbits, and they were given access to a grassy, fallow field in exchange for some bread. Apparently they weren’t the only travellers accessing the old rights to land, now that teleportation wasn’t possible. But they were the only ones there that evening.

Eran took Mosk’s wrist as confidently as if he owned Mosk’s whole body. He simply grabbed it while they were sitting, and began carefully threading thick leather through the tiny gap between the cuff and Mosk’s wrist. It grazed and hurt, and Mosk watched, feeling uneasy. His mouth had tightened, his shoulders tensed.

‘I don’t want this,’ Mosk said abruptly.

‘I know,’ Eran said. Was he trying to be soothing? It wasn’t working. Mosk stared at Eran’s eyes, turned downwards. He had reapplied his kohl in the morning. It made the amber of his eyes stand out. Even like this, Mosk could see a sliver of colour, strong against those thick lashes. Mosk
wondered what he looked like in his true form. Afrit usually had horns, didn’t they? The War General Ifir did. But Eran didn’t have any. In fact, unlike Mosk, who had bark on his shins and forearms even in human form, Eran looked like he could completely pass for a human. Was that the ambaros side of things?

Too soon, Eran was holding Mosk’s wrist strongly in one hand, and clamping down on the metal with his other. His fingers began to glow at the tips, the metal began to smell, the leather charring. Fear was nausea in his gut and throat. He bit his lip so hard that he cried out from that too. Yanked his wrist back over and over, and Eran didn’t let him go, an implacable, immoveable force, reminding Mosk of how powerless he really was.

‘Stop it!’ Mosk shrieked. ‘I hate you!’

‘I know,’ Eran said, his grip tightening, his other hand glowing brighter. Mosk twisted his whole body in the other direction but he could feel the heat of it building quickly in his wrist. His breathing was frantic, and he stared around him, looking for anyone who might help, but of course there was no one. There was never anyone to help him. They’d all burned away in the fire.

The smell of leather burning, which reminded him of skin and hair crisping, caught up in crazed flames, and he could imagine it, was there smoke? Was it his arm? He couldn’t feel the burning pain of it, but he was certain it was there.

‘Stop it!’

Eran said something, a completely different language. It sounded like he was swearing. Mosk kept twisting his body until his shoulder protested in his socket and that pain eclipsed everything else. He hadn’t pushed it to dislocation, but he was close.

A release of pressure around his wrist and he sprawled into grass. He could feel the leather falling away, the sound of metal hitting the ground behind him, and cool air on his wrist. His other hand hurt. He stopped moving his fingers, only to realise he’d been digging into the ground to try and get away. An abject, helpless behaviour. It achieved nothing.

He could hear Eran panting behind him, like he’d done something difficult. A wave of fury crashed through Mosk, from the top of his head all the way down to his toes. He turned, moaning at the dizziness, keeping focus enough to viciously push Eran away from him. He felt like a tree might, getting struck by lightning. He couldn’t do anything except react.

A glimpse of wide, startled eyes. Eyebrows rising. A mouth opening. Mosk raked down with his nails and felt the heavy blow through his whole arm. Blood welled from scratches in Eran’s cheek. Finally, finally Mosk could do something.

He wasn’t fully aware of his actions after that. It was bright smears of colour across his tilting vision. He couldn’t tell the difference between the world shaking and moving around him, and Eran fighting back. If he was even fighting back. Mosk bit at whatever he could reach, fabric or skin. He pinched and clawed and kicked out with his legs. His breath was cold and rasping in his lungs, nothing like fire.

Hands wrestling him back down to the ground, a knee in his gut that knocked the air out of him and made him quiver. He found a shred of breath and screamed, expected to be burned, but Eran’s hands just felt like normal hands. Bruising, too tight, but normal.

The yelling was gibberish at first, and then it cleared into words, and he realised Eran had been
shouting at him the whole time.

‘Fucking stop! Just stop! It’s done!’

Mosk stared up at him, the fight leaving him at once. Eran glared down at him, something like fear on his face, his hands not turning hot once. Mosk kept waiting for it. Eran was the one who burned him because he could.

‘Are you fucking done?’ Eran snapped.

Mosk nodded.

Eran pushed backwards immediately, standing and walking away. Seconds later, Mosk watched in horror as Eran held his hands slightly away from his body and flames burst into life, covering them. Eran shouted in frustration, or maybe he said something, but he did that for almost half a minute before the fire vanished. His hands didn’t even smoke.

Mosk watched as those hands came up, tugged on black curls a couple of times, and then his arms dropped. Slowly, Eran turned to face him. His cheek and chin were bleeding. He had a split on his lip. Mosk thought there might have been scratches and bite marks on his arms. For a brief, strange second, he wanted to apologise. It had been so long since he’d felt like doing anything of the sort. He almost didn’t recognise the impulse for what it was. Then it vanished.

‘What did you expect?’ he said mulishly.

Eran stared at him, his eyes widening more. Mosk thought he’d retort then, but instead Eran shook his head slowly, and turned away once more, staring at the trees around them.

Mosk let his head thump back to the grass. He felt so unwell. The dizziness was still there. First the image of Eran would twist slightly one way, and then the other, and Mosk thought he might be getting used to it, but he still hated it. He’d once had the best balance out of any of them. He could run fleet of foot across tree branches, leaping from trunk to trunk if he wanted to, hanging upside down and catching falling leaves in his hands, or finding the hardest to reach flowers and fruits for his family.

Now he could hardly walk upright on the ground. He’d thought it was a curse, but the Unseelie Court’s Mage, Fenwrel, had thought it was the heartsong being removed. It sounded ridiculous, his balance being connected to his heartsong. He laughed weakly, and then placed both of his hands over his face, hiding it. Both his wrists were naked now. He couldn’t feel the trailing edge of the chain or even the heavy metal cuff. It felt strange, and he wasn’t sure he even liked it.

What would Eran do now, if Mosk forgot where he was? Just shout at him? It was easier when someone just pulled him, and he followed without thinking about it. Because he didn’t want to think.

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A couple of hours later, Eran returned, which was the first time Mosk noticed that Eran had even left. Eran’s fingers were blackened and covered with soot, which meant he’d probably burned something and eaten it, away from Mosk.

They stared at each other warily. Eran’s wounds had closed already. They weren’t totally healed, but they’d be gone by morning. Eran sat next to the fire and placed his hands inside of it, and it momentarily brightened. He stared at Mosk as he did it, as though daring him to protest.
Mosk looked away, and then pushed himself up into a sitting position. He had to keep one hand on the ground, bracing himself, so he wouldn’t slump back down again.

A low whispering, and Mosk looked up, thinking that Eran was talking to him, or muttering under his breath. Instead, Eran was staring deeply into the fire, his eyes glowing yellow-orange, and smoke coming out of his mouth, sparks too, winking into nothing, like stars going out. Eran spoke softly, insistently, but it wasn’t in any language that Mosk knew. He’d heard bits and pieces of dialect spoken by the afrit, but it didn’t sound like that. Did the ambaros have their own language? Probably.

Even though Mosk was tense to see the fire, the brightness of it, and even though he felt sick, he couldn’t look away.

Eran touched glowing fingers to his own forehead, closing his eyes, before lowering his fingers back to the fire delicately. Then he repeated the reverent gesture three times. He fell silent, his fingers resting in the fire, his mouth closed, a small amount of smoke flowing from his nostrils with every exhale.

When Eran started singing, Mosk was surprised at how bright and clear his voice was. No whispering thing, but a rising and falling, a melodious singing to the fire at his fingers. The flames seemed to weave together, listening to his notes, cooperating with the music. Mosk had never seen anything like that. He’d never known something that enchanting could be associated with fire.

The song didn’t last long. Two minutes and it was done, one long note becoming nothing but a curl of smoke from Eran’s lips. Eran slowly withdrew his hands from the fire, and closed his eyes again, and Mosk looked down, feeling like he’d intruded.

Feeling things again. Not just tiny flashes of things, but actual emotions. Mosk tugged at his own shirt, vaguely annoyed, somehow chastened by Eran’s willingness to do that in front of him. Because it was obvious now that Eran had avoided it since he’d captured Mosk. It also didn’t seem like Eran was doing it to put him in his place. It was, absurdly, strangely trusting.

After a while, Mosk curled up on his side. He didn’t want to move closer to the fire. He turned his wrist and stared at it, wondering what there was to miss about the metal that had kept him so helpless. He could really run away now if he wanted to.

Soft footsteps coming towards him, and then Eran sat in front of him.

‘Here,’ Eran said. ‘You need to keep eating.’

Mosk pushed himself up and saw the flask in Eran’s hand, and looked at Eran in confusion. Eran only held out the flask, and Mosk took it, running his thumbs along it. Then he opened it and took a careful drink. This was the sap of another tree entirely. Bitter almonds, a sharp astringence, and he held the flask tighter. Cherry. Like Mallem – that was his tree. The sap tasted like he did. Bitter and hostile.

Somehow, Mosk still wanted it, and he’d drunk half the flask before he thought to stop. Eran just watched him, bearing none of the anger he’d had earlier, when Mosk had attacked him.

‘Why are you being like this?’ Mosk said.

‘Like what?’

‘I- I attacked you, earlier.’
‘I remember,’ Eran said, and then grinned quickly, in a sardonic kind of way.

‘So why?’

‘Isn’t it better like this?’ Eran said. ‘Isn’t this better? Did you prefer it, the way it was before? Between us?’

Mosk looked down at the flask, and then back up to Eran. It was better like this. He didn’t trust it, and he didn’t know what to expect of Eran in exchange for it, but it wasn’t like before. Even the sap cleared his head a little. Mallem had always been good at that, bringing Mosk down to harsh reality. Now, it just made the world stay still.

‘The cherry is…good,’ Mosk said.

‘Is it?’

‘It tastes horrid, but it’s good.’

Eran laughed. The sound surprised Mosk. It rose and fell, almost melodic, like his singing.

‘It was cheap,’ Eran said.

‘It’s poisonous,’ Mosk said. ‘To most fae. Aur can eat it. They were probably trying to get rid of it.’

‘Then I’ll haggle for lower prices next time,’ Eran said, leaning back on his hands and looking up at the night sky.

Mosk thought he should say something, but couldn’t think of anything to say. He finished off the flask of sap and capped it, laying it down by his side. Then he lay down and looked up at the stars, watching shadows sometimes cross them – shifters and animals winging their way across the world. Eventually, Eran got up and went back to the fire, picked something up and brought it back to Mosk. A thin blanket, warmer than it looked.

‘Goodnight,’ Eran said, casually draping it over him, like he was used to doing it. ‘I’ll keep watch for a while, but I think we’re safe here. The farm has a guardian.’

Mosk watched him walk to the fire and lay down beside it, bunching up his own thin blanket into a pillow, his body turned towards the flames. It created deep midnight blue shadows wherever the fire’s glow didn’t touch him, and they were oddly comforting, like the spaces between the stars in the sky. Mosk fell asleep, lulled by a proper meal, the exhaustion of the day, and those shadows making him think of the deepest, coolest places in the Aur forest.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter ‘Leave Be’:

‘Do you still want to die?’ Mosk said.

The question surprised him, but Mosk didn’t ask it in a barbed way, and Eran knew it was no secret between them. That Mosk wanted to die. That Eran…wanted something like it too. He slowed, and then focused instead on rinsing soap from the collar of his
shirt.

‘I don’t…’ He almost said that he didn’t want to anymore, but he could feel it as a lie, and lying so baldly felt like bitterness in the back of his throat. ‘I haven’t been thinking about it, there are more important things right now. But I…don’t know what to do without them. My family. And I don’t want to live without them.’

‘Me either,’ Mosk said.
After two days of walking out of farmland into rocky hills filled with small goats and their fae shepherds, they came upon another, larger marketplace. Eran enjoyed seeing them, they reminded him of the desert markets; those held early in the morning, those held at night with charmed glowing baubles floating above, lighting the air. Eran often went out to acquire items for his mother, had learned how to haggle from both of his parents. It was bittersweetly familiar, but gave him warmth all the same to see the stalls, the milling people, hear traders hawking their wares.

He turned to Mosk, who was plodding along behind him. Occasionally he fell to a halt or began to walk off track. Once Eran would have thought that was an escape attempt, but now he knew better.

‘We’re going to rest a bit,’ Eran said. ‘I want to think of what to do. We can’t keep walking forever. And a crowded place will let us know if it- If it’s coming.’

A faint, brief shiver, but Eran’s body still glowed with warmth, and he could call fire to his fingertips so he didn’t feel cold, exactly, when he imagined it coming. The only thing that lately invoked that weird, aberrant feeling was thinking about the things he’d done to Mosk.

He had no confirmation that Mosk wasn’t truly guilty, and sometimes he reached down to stroke the quiescent tattoo that had led him to the dryad. When he thought back on the words he’d used with the pangolicz, he realised he might have trapped himself. He never asked to find who was truly at fault, he asked to find someone he could blame. He was beginning to think a Mage might treat that as two separate things. Mosk certainly let Eran blame him.

The pangolicz had never given Eran the direct answers he’d actually needed, Eran had heard what he wanted to hear. Eran had asked if anyone had located who was responsible and the pangolicz had said that no one had been punished for the crime of the plague. It wasn’t a yes or no answer. Everything from the beginning of that meeting had been designed to make Eran feel like he was getting what he wanted. Really, the tattoo could have just led him to someone connected, someone who would absorb Eran’s blame and rage.

Sometimes he wanted to ask Mosk why he allowed it. Wanted to ask what he was blaming himself for. The plague? His family dying?

Mosk was looking healthier though. His skin wasn’t always deathly pale, his eyes were clearer. There were times when he looked away and Eran found his profile striking. It was like staring at a painting of an aloof young prince, with the proud line of his nose, his lips that were always set into a faint, troubled frown. He wondered what Mosk was truly like. What would he have been like to talk to, years before? Augus had said he was shy and gentle. What did that mean? Mosk was still shy. In the past, was he only like that with Eran, because Eran had tortured and tormented him?

‘Are you going to keep staring at me?’ Mosk said eventually.
Eran grimaced and turned to look around. They’d been walking for hours, and if Eran was tired, Mosk definitely was.

‘We’ll find somewhere you can rest,’ Eran said.

On the other side of the market a broad road stretched on into the distance. Eran could see a ridge of tall, crooked towers on the horizon beyond dense forest. A fence contained the marketplace, a finely carved wooden plaque on the gate calling it the Many Meadows Market. Beyond that fence, Eran sought the shade of a tree for Mosk and sat beyond the shade in the sun, thinking about what to do with the remainder of his coin. He’d stolen more than he’d thought. He’d try to exchange the necklaces today for more clipaks. He might see about finding an item that could tap trees. Maybe there was someone he could speak to about it.

‘Are you okay here?’ Eran said. Mosk sat on the unrolled square of leather and occasionally pulled up individual strands of grass.

Mosk didn’t reply, Eran took that to mean he was okay. At any rate, Mosk couldn’t teleport away, and Eran didn’t think he’d make much ground if he bolted. He hesitated, then made his way into the market.

At first he just looked at the different wares. A lot of foodstuffs here, reasonably priced and competitive. His chest began to ache as he thought of the different things he knew his mother would like. A basket of smoked fish – rare in the desert and a delicacy besides. Dyed yarns and fibres, sheep’s wool smelling of lanolin, nothing like the wool from their goat stock. There were hagstones from rivers, little sculpted acorns, fantastically detailed into owls and cats and little trees. The meat was of a quality that would inspire his father to talk lovingly of the best fire to cook it in.

He stopped by a fruit stand and needed a moment to catch his breath. It came over him at the strangest times, this acute loss, the ache of missing them becoming a knife in his chest. He’d see their bodies in the ice, hear his father screaming at him to run. He looked around like the ice might be nearby, but there was nothing. A few fae stared at his amber eyes for a bit longer than normal, but went back to work soon afterwards.

After a while he felt calm enough to start purchasing. Some soap, because they’d need to find a river and bathe. Eran needed to be able to remove the old kohl and reapply it. More sap for Mosk, which was heavy, but Mosk didn’t seem to need a great deal. He talked to a Seelie dryad who had thin willow branches and leaves growing all out of her head who told him that a sharp knife and a strong wooden cup would be enough to tap certain kinds of trees for raw sap, and that dryads preferred it when it hadn’t been altered.

‘Don’t boil it down. It’s too strong, then,’ the dryad said. Then she smiled at him, winked, and added: ‘And don’t buy the knives and wooden cups from Notch. He always overprices. Miss Yuvi Milkbone over there has them under the counter, and practically gives the cups away.’

Eran flashed a smile back at her and they ended up talking longer. He enjoyed the opportunity to small talk, even to flirt, something that felt familiar. The dryad was sweet tempered. She shared all sorts of titbits. They were primarily on Seelie land, ‘But even the Unseelie around here are genial.’ There were tolls on the paths through the ridge of towers in the distance, one could avoid them by using an underground cave system, but there were knockers down there who didn’t like to be disturbed and often it was just better to pay the tolls. Everyone didn’t understand what was happening with not being able to teleport, but taking some comfort in telling themselves it was the Season of Turning.

‘But the poor Unseelie fae,’ she added, shifting a small keg of sap and then stroking her fingers
‘What do you mean?’

‘The ones that need to cross over into the human realm to hunt, they can’t now. They can’t feed.’

‘Shit,’ Eran said, staring. ‘I hadn’t thought…’

‘It’s not a problem for the higher status fae, yet. But of course most of us here are underfae or Icturiel. I’m Capital,’ she said, smiling. ‘My whole family are. But underfae can starve to death, and I think there are pilgrimages happening to both the Seelie and Unseelie Courts now. Underfae going to ask for a status raise, you know, so they won’t just die from it. No gossip has come back yet. Someone said no one can teleport, not even the Seelie King. But that’s just silly.’

Eran wanted to agree with her, but he’d seen the Unseelie King and his consort unable to push back against the power that blanketed what seemed like the whole land.

‘Why…would anyone do this? Stop fae from teleporting?’

‘Old Blacktooth thinks it’s to make it harder for fae to run. But from what? I think it could be an attack on the Unseelie. Or at least the Unseelie that feed on humans. We’d never need crossover to the human realm again if the Unseelie who fed on them all died.’

Eran placed the sap he’d purchased into his bag, thinking that over. An attack on the Unseelie? And Davix in the Seelie Court, potentially behind the ice plague in the first place and likely behind the reason no fae – as far as Eran knew – could teleport?

Their conversation moved onto lighter things before other customers came over and Eran departed with a wave.

Yuvi Milkbone did sell very cheap knives and wooden cups, along with bands of stretchy fabric to hold the cup in place against a tree. She gave him a small card of lovely calligraphy naming trees that were easiest to tap, and then showed him the resin sculptures she made and shaped with her fingers. They were all beautiful, but Eran needed to save his coin, and he had no family to give the little glowing animals to.

On his way to a dwarf that looked like they specialised in jewels, Eran’s feet slid to a stop when he saw a pair of twisting horns in the distance. He frowned, eyebrows knitting together. So far everyone he’d seen with horns had been other species of fae, not desert fae at all. But that striking curl, the blackness of them, it was…distinct.

Eran walked hesitantly through the crowds, hardly daring to hope, and then stared at the embroidered robes the fae wore, the black shield at his side with an alert golden scorpion engraved into it. For a moment, he struggled to breathe.

The fae – as though sensing him – turned slowly and met his eyes. Eran’s mouth dropped open. Bright red eyes, brown-red skin, and a full beard that was pointed with wax. The horns were brushed with gold at the tips.

Eran pressed a hand to his chest.

‘Afshin?’ he said.

The fae approached him. He was well over six feet, not including the length of his horns, and his face was grim, but Eran was used to grim-faced warriors and he could see the spark of hope in
those red eyes.

‘Afshin,’ the fae agreed, his voice a deep rumble. ‘You?’

‘Marid-djinn and ambaros,’ Eran said. ‘I’m Ifir’s son.’

‘Eran?’ the fae said, coming forward all at once and grasping Eran’s shoulders with tight fingers. He didn’t smile, exactly, but the lines around his eyes crinkled. Maybe he was someone who used to smile more often, to have that many friendly lines around his eyes. ‘Eran Iliakambar? I thought everyone from your way died- I was scouting, and there was nothing to return to. The ice was still there a month ago. It doesn’t melt. Here, come. Let us talk. They brew tea here. It’s very weak, but it’s still tea.’

Eran trailed after the fae feeling about five years old. He kept expecting the horned afshin in front of him to be a mirage, an oasis that would wink out of sight as soon as he got close enough. Instead, they sat facing each other on two logs, ceramic mugs of tea in their hands, and Eran drank in the details of seeing someone from the desert. An ally.

‘I’m Amhar,’ the afshin said. ‘I’ve fought for your father before, but I work better as a scout. I’d been out for several months, a year ago, heard a terrible rumour about ice that killed those of fire, came home and everything was gone. The town, the cities around the town. I couldn’t access my village. I spent months after looking for others. There’s a few, but the ice has all but conquered the most populated desert regions. It’s attracted to fire, heat, hot places. I saw it twice. Once, I woke up and it had already taken my pack, my blanket, my fire. The second time I saw it in the distance, making towers of itself for no reason except that it could.’

Eran nodded, sipping the tea, conducting a tiny amount of heat into the mug to keep it hot on his tongue and in his mouth. The afshin had some of the largest towns. It was hard to imagine they were gone.

‘I scouted as much of the desert as I could access,’ Amhar said, ‘but… And nothing melts it. Nothing makes it go. In the end I came down into the cooler places to see if anyone else had survived. I’ve seen no other marid-djinn, no ambaros. Hardly anyone. Sounhaqh is destroyed.’

‘What?’ Eran said, forgetting his tea.

‘I know,’ Amhar said, staring at the ground. ‘I know. Very bad. I saw it myself. Only from a distance, but it wasn’t safe to go any closer. I’ve learned a bit about the ice, how it moves, how it thinks. It hunts, but it also goes dormant once it’s fed. If it finds a town and devours it, it stops for a time. But if you get too close, even when it’s sleeping, it will send out shoots and find you. That’s how I lost my pack.’

‘Sounhaqh,’ Eran said, shaking his head. The solar city, a Kingdom in its own right, and so large and sprawling that the first time Eran had gone, he’d been overwhelmed by the mazes of streets and alleys. There was a whole marketplace that only sold silks. Another that only sold spices. Each one huge and populated and filled with people who were used to competing for their place in the busy life of a city. Sounhaqh inhaled and exhaled industry, and united communities that often lived very far apart. ‘So it doesn’t come down here as much?’

‘It’s made forays,’ Amhar said. ‘Nothing too serious, I think. But it will cross into cooler places for towns. That’s how the rumours go. Some say it’s looking for every last one of us – fire fae – but I think… I don’t know. I don’t want to draw conclusions. It’s good to see you. It’s good. I heard rumours that no one had survived. Is your father here? Or at the Unseelie Court? Or is-?’
‘The ice,’ Eran said haltingly. ‘Everyone in the clan… Iliak and father, and every- all of the ambaros. Kabiri said I’m the last.’

‘Kabiri?’

‘He is ailing,’ Eran said, looking at the scorpion on Amhar’s shield. The emblem of the afshin military. Tough and sturdy, with a sharp, quick strike. Amhar must have been old and strong to have horns that large, and the golden tips at the end…he’d been respected by his family, his people. ‘With the ambaros gone – it’s made him sick, losing so many, using his fire to try and make the ice go. He cannot make the ice melt. So he said.’

Amhar’s red eyes flared bright, then dulled again and he closed them.

‘And all Kabiri has left is a hybrid?’ Amhar said, shaking his head slowly.

Eran’s hands twitched, but he said nothing. Hadn’t he said that to Kabiri himself? Only half ambaros, so did it even count? But Kabiri said it counted. Kabiri had claimed him, indignant that Eran had even raised it. Amhar’s words still stung. He was used to that attitude from some of the afrit. As though being a hybrid made him not quite ambaros, not quite marid-djinn.

‘Are there many desert fae left?’ Eran said, changing the subject.

‘In pockets, yes. Some have evacuated. Desert fae that don’t have a strong connection to fire are less likely to be attacked, though again, many have left and are waiting for the ice to go away. I’ve found people here and there. No marid-djinn, only two other afshin. The afrit have been hit hard.’

‘I haven’t seen any others except you,’ Eran admitted. ‘I thought everyone was gone.’

Amhar nodded, scratching at his thigh, and then finished his tea, grimacing at the flavour. It was very weak, but Eran liked the ritual of it. Tea with the afrit, and Eran felt sore in his heart and settled at the same time.

‘You can come back with me,’ Amhar said. ‘There’s a small group of us, about three days away. That’s what I do, look for fire fae, rumours of them, in amongst the trading.’

Eran wanted to – for a moment was sure he would – and then thought of Mosk, sickly and pale and willing to let anyone fuck him and mostly happy to tell people he’d made the plague of ice. Amhar would cleave him in two with his blade if Mosk so much as said he’d had anything to do with the ice. He wouldn’t even wait for an explanation.

‘I can’t,’ Eran said. ‘I’m looking for answers too. Though I’m not sure…what to do. But the desert is leading me along another trail, for now.’

‘I wondered,’ Amhar said, smiling. ‘It’s almost a relief to keep scouting, anyway. It gives me something to do. My own trail in the sand. And it’ll bring cheer to the others, that you’re alive. The son of Ifir and Adali, alive! Are you good for coins?’

‘I’m- For another week or two, maybe.’

‘Here.’ Amhar rummaged in a small pack at his side and brought out a smaller pouch, handing it over. Eran took it, frowning, and then looked inside. Clipaks. A lot of them. Eran almost asked if they’d been stolen, but no, someone with gold on the tips of their horns was wealthy. And scouts often had wealth well-distributed outside of the desert, because they knew what items were best to trade and invest in.
‘Amhar, this…’

‘You have to,’ Amhar said, a smile on his face that would brook no refusal. ‘That’s what we do, isn’t it? Grant wishes?’

‘To humans,’ Eran said weakly, his hand shaking. ‘If we can’t avoid it. Not like this.’

‘It should be like this,’ Amhar said, grimacing. ‘Your father was a hero to many of us, and he and Iliak ran a solid, good community. We got good battles, good wars and good deaths. And now there’s not enough bone marrow in the world left to mourn them. I wish I could give you more. But if you run out, and your trail is hidden by life’s sandstorms, come back to this market. I come here once a month…sometimes once a week, when I can.’

‘I am in your debt.’

‘No,’ Amhar said. ‘I am in yours. To see you has been a blessing upon my day. A warmth in my heart. Make your father proud, Eran. Your mother, too. She was so beautiful. But, ah, the ambaros always are, aren’t they?’ He laughed gruffly. ‘Your father was lucky to land her.’

‘He always said she was blind,’ Eran said, smiling a little. Amhar grinned, his pointed canines making him look feral. But the grin faded and he looked grim once more. His bushy eyebrows pulled together and he stared down at his hands. Eran finished out his tea and placed the ceramic mug down.

The stories were no longer cheerful ribbing, or fireside talk. It was somehow wrong without bone marrow to honour them. Without mourning fires and pieces of broken and shattered amber lain into rocks to remember them – flashes of light catching the sun and reminding the world that those who had died, they too had once been a bright part of the world.

They bid farewell to each other, grasping each other’s hands and arms, making strong eye contact. It reminded him of his father, feeling those coarse hands around his forearms.

‘May the fire guide you,’ Eran said.

‘And you,’ Amhar replied, eyes crinkling. He turned and walked back into the market, and Eran felt like it had been a dream, except that he had a small pouch of clipaks, and a promise that there might be something to look towards, after all of this was done.

*

Later, Eran ate some well-smoked mutton jerky and Mosk sipped at maple sap and closed his eyes with every mouthful. It looked like it tasted good. It really seemed like Mosk was somehow coming back to himself. Eran wondered if a heartsong could grow back so quickly. Perhaps it was there now, just waiting to form into something new.

He didn’t know how he felt that they both had – for a time – had the same heartsong. Had Mosk had his from childhood too? They were around the same age, and Mosk seemed so different from him. Yet Eran felt like they shared a strange kind of connection. Fae having the same heartsong wasn’t that rare, and certainly afrit had the kinds of natures that meant more than one of them had a heartsong of determination. But to share it with an Unseelie dryad?

‘The maple is good?’

‘It’s very sweet,’ Mosk said. ‘I’m not- I’m going to reach a point where I won’t need to feed as much soon. Aur dryads don’t eat every day.’
‘They don’t?’

Mosk shook his head. ‘About once every two days. We just don’t need more. But I must be… making up for things.’

‘Yeah,’ Eran said. ‘When was the last time you got to eat sap? I mean aside from at the Unseelie Court? Obviously not with me. But…when?’

‘Before,’ Mosk said, shrugging.

‘Before the plague?’

‘Some time before that. I don’t know how long. But before the Aur forest- Just…before.’

Eran had no idea how long that truly was. A year, at least? It made him feel sick to contemplate.

‘Maybe keep having sap more often,’ Eran said. ‘Just for a bit longer.’

‘Maybe,’ Mosk said, staring at the empty flask.

‘Mosk, I know you don’t want to hear it, and you don’t have to be okay with it, but I am sorry. Not for…capturing you, I really thought that was the right thing to do and it wasn’t like- You did agree with me. But how I treated you- and, that night…in Summervale. I just-’

‘I asked,’ Mosk said, frowning up at him.

‘I know. But I participated in it, and even if you don’t agree with me, I made some wrong choices.’

Mosk pursed his lips, stared down at the flask. Eran didn’t expect him to say anything, and he certainly didn’t expect anything like forgiveness. He didn’t know if Mosk could feel it, and Eran didn’t even know if he wanted it. His mother had always taught him that an apology had to be offered without expectation, which had been hard to understand when he’d been a child growing up in a home full of people with fiery tempers. Now, he understood why it had to be that way. He wished it dulled the sick feeling he felt in his chest whenever he thought about it – that fae arresting Eran with his gaze, while he brutalised Mosk as though he meant nothing.

‘Eran?’ Mosk said.

It was so strange to hear his name in Mosk’s mouth. To hear him get the accent right, as though he’d been saying it a long time.

‘Yes?’

‘Do you think I could bathe?’

They’d been travelling for some time, and Mosk had never once shown an interest in personal hygiene. He slept in the dirt. He got bits of plant juice and dust on his hands. His hair clumped together and he never tried to clean his face.

‘Of course!’ Eran said. ‘Yes! I got soap just today. And they said there’s a lake nearby that is protected by a benevolent wight. Apparently he lets anyone bathe there. Should we go?’

A long pause, and then Mosk nodded. Eran hesitated a moment before he started packing up. Every small step forward that Mosk made felt momentous. There was a time when it was easy to imagine that Mosk would care about nothing at all – including himself – forever. It would have been terrifying to imagine Mosk coming back to himself like this, weeks ago, yet now it was welcome.
The lake was at the side of a very neat trail of woodchips through an open birch forest. Mosk followed without much prompting, and they walked along the side of a lake until they came to a small house whose long, crooked, smoking chimney didn’t even reach Eran’s chin. He knelt down automatically, but then heard voices nearby and looked ahead to some reeds and bushes surrounding the other three quarters of the house.

‘Hello?’ he called.

‘Halò?’ a quiet, gentle voice called back.

Mosk and Eran walked around until they came to two small fae sitting on some flat stones in the sun, sharing tea. One was very thin and diminutive, with long, wispy, uneven black hair and bright green eyes. His clothing was made from wild leaves, some having browned over time and showing bits of skin behind them, and others green and fresh. For all of his dishevelled appearance, he looked friendly. The other-

‘Luridan!’ Eran said, staring.

‘Michty me!’ Luridan said, bouncing up onto the balls of his feet and beaming. He wore the same pointed brown hat with the same wide floppy brim, the same dusky brown skin and stubby teeth. ‘An it be you and the empty one of before! Not so empty now though, is he? You’ve already given me such stories and now you’re back? Glory days, glory days!’

‘Fàilte,’ said the other brownie, standing slowly and holding his hands clasped together. ‘Do you know Luridan very well?’

Eran was beyond grateful for the switch in dialect. He knew his parents were going to educate him in other languages, but he’d been so focused on afrit and desert languages that everything else had been neglected.

‘Not…exactly,’ Eran said. ‘But we’ve met.’

*He told me some kind of death phrase, it was terrifying.*

‘He was kind enough to give me a story, now,’ Luridan said. ‘I told you, didn’t I? A story about an empty bairn and his crabbit friend.’

Eran was surprised when Mosk laughed under his breath, covering his mouth in the process. Mosk looked at Eran and his eyes actually twinkled. He lowered his hand and said:

‘He called me an empty baby and you a grumpy friend.’

‘Ah,’ Eran said. ‘I see. Given you knew us for a whole fifteen seconds, I suppose it wasn’t that far off.’

Luridan seemed pleased at the assessment, and Eran thought that the first time they’d met, he’d assumed Luridan was creepy, maybe even malevolent. He seemed genial enough now, but Eran wondered if it was a coincidence that he was here.

‘Can I help the two of you?’ the other fae said. ‘Do you need to use my loch?’

‘Aye, do they now,’ Luridan said, looking them both over. ‘Do they now! Best dunk them many times to get rid of the smell.’
‘Forgive my friend,’ the brownie said, looking up at them both, still holding his hands together. ‘They call me Gille Dubh, and this is my loch. You’re welcome to make use of its waters to clean yourself and your clothing. I ask for nothing in exchange.’

‘I’m Eran Iliakambar,’ Eran said, ‘and this is Mosk Manytrees.’

Gille Dubh looked at Mosk, and his expression shifted from genial and pleasant, to sorrowful. His thin black eyebrows pulled together.

‘It’s a sair fecht. Endings with no beginnings, no beginnings yet. Once a time when I came upon mi-àdh, I wandered lost, but found a loch in a forest of magic green. Trespassing upon pure waters, I hoped to go by unseen, but found by the Manytrees was I. Amaley was her name, she clothed and fed me, bathed my feet and tended me in a grove of great white oaks. I’ll never forget the acorns bright in her hair, or the mercy she gave me there, in the Aur forest.’

‘My mother,’ Mosk said, staring. ‘You met my mother?’

‘Aye,’ Gille Dubh said. ‘Take whatever you need from my loch, please. You may stay a while, if you wish? Or are you travelling somewhere? I have some maps inside that might assist, and but a handful of wisdom that fits in my fist, but you’re welcome to it all.’

Mosk nodded, looked across to the lake. Eran offered a smile of thanks. He’d been touched by what Gille Dubh had said, so he couldn’t imagine what Mosk felt – it was likely complicated, given he didn’t seem to feel things properly.

‘We’ll make use of your lake for now, and then visit again once we’re clean? It’s sore manners to intrude on your beautiful home while we’re like this.’

‘So you say,’ Gille Dubh said, ‘but I can’t agree. Either way, go get yourselves clean.’

‘Mòran taing,’ Mosk said, bowing his head.

They turned, and Eran caught Luridan waving a cheerful goodbye, and he lifted his hand automatically. They walked around the lake until they found a green grassy space leading down to shining pebbles. It was secluded from the main path, and seemed to be well fitted out for people who used it for bathing, including some drying frames made from willow wood.

‘What did you say to him? At the end?’ Eran said.

‘I just said thank you,’ Mosk said. He was stripping off slowly, as though his body pained him, or the actions were difficult.

‘Are you in pain?’

Mosk looked down at his own fingers as he undid the fly of his brown pants.

‘I’m dizzy a lot,’ Mosk admitted. ‘I don’t like to do anything fast. Not anymore.’

Eran grimaced, but couldn’t think of anything to say. Eran dragged his clothing into the water with him, handing Mosk the soap as he stepped into the cool lake. Though the weather was warm, the waters were frigid, but refreshing and clear. Eran could look down and see waterweed growing beneath his feet, and turtles getting out of the way. An eel curved around his calf and swam deeper into the lake.

He could see stones to stand upon, as though set there for people to stand steady as they cleaned
themselves. It was pleasant. One thing Eran didn’t have a lot of access to in the desert was fresh water. Of course they had a well at their home, but while travelling Eran usually scrubbed himself with a handful of sand and water to clean away the remnants of the day. This was an abundance that had once been impossible to fathom and even though he was more used to it now, it was still a gift.

They cleaned slowly. Eran watched Mosk, at first surreptitiously, and then more openly when he realised Mosk didn’t care. He was very slender, even too thin, and when he closed his eyes as water poured down his face, Eran could only see how thick his lashes were. His hair never lay entirely flat. It lived upon his head, green and more alive than ever, holding its shape even now.

As far as travelling companions went, Mosk had turned out to be…nothing like he’d expected. Eran knew he’d feel lonely without him.

*

Later, Eran knelt in the shallow waters, washing their clothes. They held up to the scrubbing well, and the fabric was exceptional. Mosk’s leaf shirt was some strange kind of material. He thought it might actually be leaves that had somehow been preserved. They never ripped or tore, but they were thin and didn’t feel like any fabric Eran had ever touched.

Mosk sat with his heels in the water and watched Eran, rubbing his hands over the grass.

‘Do you still want to die?’ Mosk said.

The question surprised him, but Mosk didn’t ask it in a barbed way, and Eran knew it was no secret between them. That Mosk wanted to die. That Eran…wanted something like it too. He slowed, and then focused instead on rinsing soap from the collar of his shirt.

‘I don’t…’ He almost said that he didn’t want to anymore, but he could feel it as a lie, and lying so baldly felt like bitterness in the back of his throat. ‘I haven’t been thinking about it, there are more important things right now. But I…don’t know what to do without them. My family. And I don’t want to live without them.’

‘Me either,’ Mosk said.

They looked at each other. Eventually, Mosk looked down at the ground, and Eran kept cleaning their clothing.

‘My last name is Iliakambar,’ Eran said, working soap into a stain at the hems of his own pants. ‘It means that I am connected to Iliak, the chieftain, and that I am ambaros. I’m a true-hybrid, but…that’s never happened before with us, so there’s no naming conventions for me that really fit? Anyway, if my father was the leader, I’d be Ifirambar. Not all fae have surnames, but among the afrit, they designate the hierarchy. I am the son of Ifir, but I was to take the role of Iliak, if I could make myself worthy of it. I was to lead the majid-djinn afrit and the ambaros both, as chieftain. Some of them didn’t want me because I was Seelie. But my father said that I could still prove myself and that if my actions spoke loudly enough, they would accept me. Anyone who didn’t, my father said I could kill, if he didn’t kill them first.’

Eran smiled a little to remember that. While he and his father had a thorny relationship at times, his acceptance of Eran was sometimes so clear, so bright. Eran had never been able to offer the same in return. It’d been hard, to be a young, Seelie child around the war-hardened marid-djinn. The ones that gloated about how many Seelie kills they had behind them, some of them even stepping up that kind of talk just because Eran was there to hear it. They’d never do that around Adali, Eran’s
mother, but they’d do it to Eran just to see how he’d react.

‘There’s nothing to lead now,’ Eran said, rinsing the clothing, wringing it, rinsing it again. ‘All my life, they were training me for it. They taught me how to look after people – being a leader is more than just leading your people into war when it’s necessary. The more I learned, the more I realised how far away from it I was. Maybe centuries. So sometimes I didn’t take it very seriously. But now it’s off the table, completely, and I don’t know how I can miss something I’ve never had, will never have, but I don’t know that I’m anything without it.’

He thought that Mosk might disagree. Might rush to say that Eran was something without it. Instead, Mosk just nodded like he understood. It helped, strangely, to not have someone disagreeing with him.

‘You get it,’ Eran said.

‘I do.’

‘I wish you didn’t.’

‘Me too,’ Mosk said, smiling bitterly.

‘Look at us, getting along.’

Mosk’s smile strengthened, then vanished, but he didn’t seem too unhappy, so Eran just focused on their clothes. He wasn’t going to get them much cleaner, and they needed to lay out on the grass to dry.

Eventually he joined Mosk on the grassy bank, glad for the sunny day that would dry them quickly. Not as fast as desiccating desert winds, but there was a breeze. It was pleasant here.

But if he tried to think of his future, he quickly felt something different. As though his heart was made of a glowing coal that had nothing to fuel it. One day the coal would die, it would burn out, and he would have nothing left.

He rubbed his arms and looked over at Mosk, who stared ahead at nothing.

‘Do you think we should stay here?’ Eran said. ‘Give it a week or so, and see if…they survived? If anyone finds us? There’s the market. People live there. We’d know if the ice was coming.’

Mosk shrugged.

Eran was too scared to ask what they should do if the King and the Each Uisge were dead. Where would he go? How would he get his answers? Did he just stick with Mosk until Mosk decided to reveal more? And how would that ever equip him to deal with the Mages involved? He wanted justice. It wasn’t enough to know what happened, he needed to fix it. If not for himself then…then for people like Amhar, who had to get back to the desert one day and rebuild communities.

A shiver of guilt that he couldn’t imagine doing the same. That the idea of going back after losing everything was just too huge a weight. He’d rather be crushed to death beneath it, than struggle to survive it.

He watched as Mosk kept circling the wrist that had been manacled with his fingers. Over and over, he wrapped his thumb and forefinger over the joint, and squeezed.

‘Does it hurt?’ Eran said abruptly.
Mosk flinched, and then looked up, frowning. He looked away slowly. ‘No…’

‘Really?’

‘It doesn’t hurt.’

Then why was Mosk doing it? It was such a curious behaviour. If Eran didn’t know any better, he’d say Mosk wanted his wrists to be bound.

‘Look at ye!’ cried Luridan. ‘All scuddie bare! Not a single bit of cloth between you!’

Eran turned to see Luridan and Gille Dubh approaching with a small plate of simple cakes, and some loaves of bread on a wooden board, with a small round of cheese. Gille Dubh was so small that Luridan was taller than him, and his hat taller besides. The cakes looked no bigger than pebbles. But Eran smiled to see them both.

‘The clothing is drying,’ Eran said.

‘Och, because we couldn’t tell that for ourselves,’ Luridan said, rolling his eyes.

‘Forgive Luridan,’ Gille Dubh said, who apparently always seemed to need to forgive his friend. ‘He is from coarser folk.’

‘Haud your wheesht!’ Luridan said, affronted. Gille Dubh smiled simply, and then offered the platter of cakes to Eran. Though Eran would have needed to eat all of them and more besides to feel full, he took a single one and placed it upon his palm, sending some heat into it to warm it through very delicately. Luridan handed him a tiny bread roll, and some roughly sliced pieces of cheese.

‘I know they’re small,’ Gille Dubh said. ‘They’re only humble fare.’

Luridan snorted. ‘Guid things come in sma’ bulk.’

Even Mosk took a cake, though Eran wasn’t sure if he should eat it. Perhaps it would be rude to ask if Mosk could eat anything other than sap. Eran wanted to get up and add some more to the repast, but he only had sap and burned jerky. Still, should he have offered? But he knew that his mother would find it rude if a guest added to her meal with food of their own, as though she couldn’t provide a complete meal. The hospitality rules among fae changed everywhere.

Gille Dubh seemed happy to serve them. And then he and Luridan sat down and picked up cakes between them, and some bread and cheese.

‘Ith gu leòir!’ Gille Dubh said, some phrase to celebrate the eating of food, and then nibbled at a piece of his small cupcake and smiled.

Eran lifted his cake and ate half, the piece only making a tiny mouthful. But as soon as it was on his tongue, he tasted more flavours than could be packed in such a tiny piece of cake. Cinnamon and a rich, deep honey. Vanilla and orange and lemon zest. He could somehow taste the flour and butter, the milk and eggs. It felt like family love and the warmth of another’s arms, like a forehead nuzzling his own, and that sleepy-good feeling of waking up to a family filled with fire and love. It was bittersweet, filled with a nostalgia for something he craved but couldn’t have. Yet here it was, complete in his mouth, and real all the same. There was a dish his mother made that was the same, a shole-zard that did more than nourish, but filled one with a complex, loving magic. It was given to afrit and ambaros who were aggrieved or ailing due to depressions they couldn’t elevate.
To be given a food made with so much care, that offered so much, he looked at Gille Dubh with renewed appreciation. Gille Dubh only smiled back, as though he was aware of exactly what he’d offered, and was glad for Eran’s recognition of it.

A strange, choked sound, and Eran looked over to Mosk immediately. He had his hand up to his mouth, and his eyes were wider than usual. He looked…unhappy.

‘Mosk? Are you okay? Should you not have-?’

‘Aye, leave him,’ Luridan said softly. ‘Leave him now.’

‘Mosk?’

But Mosk shook his head and then looked away from all of them. His legs drew up to his body, and he didn’t say a word. Eran put down the rest of his cake, thinking that perhaps they’d done something to him. That they’d been all smiling and trustworthy, and in Eran’s stupid naivete, he’d put Mosk in danger.

‘Sometimes it hurts to feel something that doesn’t hurt,’ Gille Dubh said, reaching out and placing his hand on Eran’s knee. ‘Leave be.’

Eran looked away from Mosk only slowly, and then looked down at the tiny piece of cake that had magic inside of it.

‘Leave be,’ Gille Dubh said again, patting Eran’s knee before withdrawing his hand and eating the bread roll instead.

So Eran let it go, but he resolved to ask Mosk about it later. He looked at the second half of the little cake with trepidation, but in the end, he craved that emotional connection too much to avoid it. He missed feeling loved, and he missed feeling safe. If he could only have it in two small bites, then that’s what he’d do. But as he felt that sweetness dissolving into sweet, buttery goodness on his tongue, he felt the wrenching in his chest and knew it was true.

Sometimes it hurt to feel something that didn’t hurt.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'So It Is:'

‘How did you survive the miskatin?’

‘What?’ Eran said. ‘You know about that?’

‘I track,’ Gwyn said impatiently.

‘Then why did it take you so long to get to us?’ Eran said, the anger taking over his fear as he looked at Mosk, still kneeling on the blanket and looking uncertain. ‘How come it took you both so long? We thought you were dead. We had no reason to think otherwise. And then you come here on horses, like, what, you got distracted along the way and decided it would be nice to find some war horses? We haven’t exactly been going fast, either. I mean, it’s not like Mosk is capable of sprints or anything. We haven’t been hard to find!’
Eran woke strangling on his own breath, his heart pounding hard as he tried to clear the smell of fetid rot from his nose, felt the film of it on his tongue, heard the hungry rattling the miskatin made and pressed a warm hand to his eyes to try and distract himself. He wasn’t there, he had his fire back, he wasn’t there, he had his fire back. It was pre-dawn, he pushed himself up into a half-sitting position on the blanket, each breath shaking out of him. He stared ahead with wide eyes, shocked at the audacity of the nightmare. Of course he’d had dreams about the ice in the very beginning, but everything had calmed once he’d found something to focus on. He’d assumed it had gone away. But that dream was no normal nightmare. Fresh, slicing pains in his arm, like the miskatin had only just started carving him. Carving him.

“What is it?’

Eran let out a surprised cry before he could stop himself. He looked at Mosk, embarrassed by his weakness. Mosk was already awake?

“What are you doing up?’

‘Couldn’t sleep. I didn’t know you had nightmares.’

‘I don’t,’ Eran said, his voice still weak. I don’t.

“The ice?’

‘No,’ Eran said, pressing the heel of his hand to his chest and then dropping it. ‘Not the ice.’

Mosk looked at him in confusion. He seemed calm enough. Eran was relieved he seemed better. After eating that tiny cupcake that Gille Dubh had given them, Eran had worried the entire evening that something was awry. Mosk had withdrawn, refused to speak, and clutched his wrist like he was manacling himself. Eran had watched that behaviour for about an hour, and couldn’t stop thinking about the length of rope he’d bought at the market, hiding in their pack. He kept imagining taking it out, sliding it carefully around Mosk’s wrist, and then tying a knot in it.

He felt sick for imagining it. There were bedroom games, and then there was…whatever he’d thought up in response to Mosk clutching himself like that.

But if Mosk hadn’t slept, maybe he wasn’t doing that much better. It was just good that he was talking again.
‘The…miskatin,’ Eran forced himself to say, trying to keep up that tenuous thread of connection between them.

Mosk’s eyes widened, and then he looked away, shaking his head. Eran felt disappointed, but it gave him something else to focus on, and as he rubbed at his upper arm, the feeling that he’d only just been cut into began to fade away. They were by the Gille Dubh’s lake, and fireflies hung above it, weaving and dancing. A glowing green-gold by some reeds, that Eran already knew was some kind of magical turtle.

‘Did you know I’d come back?’ Mosk said, his voice neutral.

Eran swallowed. He could say yes, pretend it was so. Pretend that in one moment he hadn’t given his life away, pretend that he hadn’t even felt a small amount of relief in amongst the despair and grief. Pretend that he hadn’t seen his own death in the miskatin’s eyes, in the dull reflection of the miskatin’s blade.

‘You didn’t,’ Mosk said. Eran didn’t know what to say. ‘You were an idiot. You are an idiot.’

A sluggish burn of anger at being insulted so freely. That he’d done that, for Mosk, to ultimately get answers for his family, and Mosk threw it away like it was nothing. Eran closed his eyes. It wasn’t worth the anger. Mosk was still recovering from starvation and…whatever tortures he’d been through, and Eran felt like he’d made the right choice. If he’d saved himself first, he still wouldn’t have had enough fire to save Mosk, and he had no answers.

Even if Mosk said he had no answers too. Eran knew it wasn’t true. They were going to have to talk about it again, Eran would make sure of it. Mosk had broken his curse, and Eran was going to make sure he got every last shred of that story, even as he dreaded hearing it.

‘Why did you do it?’ Mosk said.

‘Because you have the answers,’ Eran said, looking up at him. ‘I don’t.’

‘What if I didn’t come back?’

‘Then I would have died, and you would be alive and still have the answers,’ Eran said simply. It wasn’t simple at all. It cut him up to think about, but he still knew it was the right decision, even if Mosk insulted him for it.

‘I have no answers,’ Mosk said.

‘You have no solution to the plague of ice,’ Eran said quietly, looking over at the fireflies dancing. ‘But you still have answers.’

Mosk was silent after that, and Eran lay down again and watched the sun rise through the trees, breathing slow and strong, reminding himself that he was alive, and Mosk had returned for him, and all was not what it seemed.

* 

The next morning, Eran went back to the market, leaving Mosk by the lake. On the opposite side, as he’d walked away, Gille Dubh was playing a drum and Luridan the fiddle, and every now and then he’d see Luridan’s form capering around and hear his coarse laughter, and Gille Dubh’s quieter enjoyment. They were excellent hosts, and the music was soothing and uplifting all at once.

He took the pouch of clipaks with him, along with his pack, and looked around. It was easy to chat
to most of the vendors, who were happy for visitors, and seemed unbothered that he was a fire fae. Eran wondered why it had been so different in some of the other villages he had visited, but he got an answer as he bartered for more sap. The girl he’d flirted with the day before was happy to see him again, and tucked a yellow flower from a vase of wildflowers into his hair. She had a white one in her own, and it looked like it had grown wild among the willow branches and leaves that were her hair.

‘You’re a fire fae, like,’ she said. ‘Aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Eran said. ‘I hope that’s no problem. It’s been a problem in the past.’

‘Aye, underfae are very superstitious,’ she said, nodding to herself. ‘I’ve heard tell that it’s bad in some parts. We try and be more open here at Many Meadows, it’s served us well. Everyone needs to trade. And you’re Seelie too, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Eran said, smiling. She beamed back at him while pouring the sap he’d asked for. A lot of cherry, but he’d added plenty of maple and walnut as well, knowing he could carry it, and knowing it tasted better for Mosk. They’d try tapping trees later, when they had time to wait for the sap to gather.

‘It helps. I hear tell that you’re staying with old Gille Dubh?’

‘Yes, he’s been a marvellous host.’

‘Aye, he is that, just lovely. I think his influence is one of the reasons it’s so nice here, why people don’t panic so easily. We get Unseelie through here too, of course, and everyone trades all friendly like. But he embraces all. That’s his way. The lake has a good feeling.’

‘It’s been lovely to just bathe and get clean again. I’ve been travelling a long time.’

‘You and your friend?’ she said, not looking up.

The question was asked innocently enough, but Eran knew then that there’d likely been gossip going around about the fire fae and his companion.

‘Yes, my friend. He’s sick, needs a lot of rest.’

‘What is he? What kind? He could be common fae, but he’s not, is he? With the bark. I told young Mickle-Mackle that he was a young dryad, with skin like that, but was shouted down. The green hair too?’

‘I see we’re something of a fixture already,’ Eran drawled.

‘A handsome man like yourself,’ she said, grinning at him, ‘and a quiet fae hidden away like? It’s a marketplace, what do we do except barter for products, pleasure and gossip?’

‘So you say,’ Eran said. ‘It feels like home, actually. Except the landscape is all wrong.’

‘Oh?’

‘First of all, there’s not enough sand,’ Eran said. ‘The sun’s not nearly hot enough. The blue of the sky not blue enough. And everything feels cool and so green here.’

‘There are dryads in the desert too, y’know,’ she said, winking at him. Then she touched her slender willow branches and shook them around her head. ‘Not me, though. Och, I’d burn! With
skin like mine? Look how smooth that is, there, I have to take care of that. The desert sun would burn me."

Eran reached out and touched the cheek she presented, ran his knuckles over it gently and watched the way her lashes dipped. As he touched her, he thought of Mosk’s clear, smooth skin. Thought of what he might look like, presenting his chin like that, his eyelashes – thicker than Eran’s, thicker than this dryad’s – fluttering at the touch.

He withdrew his hand and kept the smile on his face, but felt shaken.

‘Very smooth,’ Eran said warmly. ‘Perhaps you’d best stay here then.’

‘You too,’ she said. ‘Our landscape obviously agrees with you.’

She looked him up and down, and Eran still felt that playful chemistry between them, still enjoyed it, but was bothered by what his mind had shown him when he should have been entirely focused on the fae before him. Except he didn’t even know her name. On an impulse, he thrust his hand forward, palm up.

‘I’m Eran, by the way.’

‘I’m Field,’ she said, placing her fingertips into his palm. A gentle brush of a touch that ended at his fingertips, inviting and sweet. He wanted to take her waist in his hands and grasp at her skin, but behind everything he imagined, he wondered what it would be like to do the same to Mosk. Because they were dryads, maybe? Perhaps it was just a natural association.

‘Hello, Field,’ Eran said. ‘I greet you in warmth and light.’

‘And I you, in cool places, among green meadows.’

‘Well met,’ he said. ‘My friend is a dryad by the way. You can tell Mickle-Mackle that he’s wrong. Why else would I be ordering the sap?’

‘See? This is what I tried to say!’ She thumped the wooden table with her fingers in satisfaction, and her eyes gleamed happily.

Eran began to respond, when a hush fell over the market. At first it was subtle, the voices dropping away, but then Field looked up, her forehead creasing, and Eran did the same, his entire body going tense. He shuddered, his skin prickled, and he held his breath, expecting people to start screaming about the ice. He mentally tallied how long it would take to sprint back to the lake, to pack everything up, to grab Mosk – and maybe Gille Dubh and Luridan – and run.

Instead, amongst the sounds of feet shifting on the ground, the livestock in their pens, came the sound of three horses clip-clopping. Eran couldn’t see them yet, but he craned his neck, eyes wide, wondering who the visitors were.

Then he saw who was coming on the war horses, and his eyes went wide. Beside him, Field tensed and took several steps back.

‘No,’ she breathed, ‘not here.’

But Gwyn wasn’t looking at her. Wasn’t looking at anyone except Eran. He rode in on a pale palomino, built all over with muscle and unfazed by Gwyn on its back. Behind him, the Each Uisge on a steel grey mare. They trailed a black horse behind them, he had no rider. Augus and Gwyn
were alive, they looked well. The horses they’d acquired were healthy, coats glistening, eyes bright and ears lively with intelligence.

The tension in the air was thick, and Eran took his containers of sap automatically, putting them into his pack. Instincts long drummed into him that you always got what you paid for, no matter the circumstances.

Gwyn drew up alongside him, then looked around. Eran blinked, it looked like he was glowing, but it was a trick of the light, because it went away and didn’t come back.

‘Where is Mosk?’

‘Resting,’ Eran said automatically. ‘You’re alive?’

Gwyn stared at him, like he couldn’t quite comprehend the question. Then his eyebrows drew together.

‘I could ask you the same question. But clearly, we all are.’

‘Traitor!’ someone shouted nearby. Gwyn didn’t even turn to see who it was. Augus pulled up alongside Gwyn, and unlike the King, looked around warily, slowly, assessing the surroundings. It was then that Gwyn put his hand on the hilt of his sword. It looked casual, but it wasn’t.

‘You know these people?’ Field said. Eran looked over to her, saw the horror on her face, the way she stared at the King of the Unseelie fae. He’d been her King once. Eran suddenly realised how dangerous it was for him to be here, for him to be a ward of the Unseelie King. The awareness of it shuddered through his body, and he realised why the Each Uisge was so wary here.

‘Ah,’ the Each Uisge sighed, ‘it had to be a Seelie market, on Seelie land.’

The sound of running footsteps behind them. The black horse spooked even as Augus turned sharply in his saddle.

‘Be still,’ he called, his voice sharper, louder. ‘We mean you no harm. You will award us the same courtesy.’

Field was trembling behind her table, staring at the Each Uisge with wide eyes. Eran didn’t feel the compulsion as acutely, and he didn’t know how that was possible. How could the Each Uisge capture the entire market, it seemed, and yet exclude Eran from the compulsion? Eran understood now that it wasn’t that he was resistant to them. He could still feel them, just…he knew they weren’t for him.

Gwyn didn’t react. He still looked at Eran like he was surprised to see him. Or maybe surprised that Eran was still alive.

‘Mount,’ Gwyn said, moving his head back to indicate the black horse. Eran shifted his pack and walked over, looking at the horse, who regarded him with a twitchy awareness. Eran offered his hand, and as the horse sniffed it, Gwyn made a noise of impatience. So Eran took hold of the saddle and swung up, landing not quite as smoothly as he wanted. These weren’t the kratel gazelle he rode in the desert, and everything about horses was stranger. He’d ridden one before, but it didn’t feel natural.

Before he could settle in his seat, Gwyn set the horses onwards. Eran twisted and looked behind him, and saw Field making some sign of…rebuke? Repudiation? Something else? He looked at the rest of the market, at vendors who he already felt like he was growing a rapport with. They all
looked at Eran like he was a stranger at best, or worse, a fellow traitor.

Eran held the reins tightly in his hand and felt defenceless turning his back on them, and didn’t like the feeling.

*

It didn’t occur to Eran to question where Gwyn was taking them, until he arrived at Gille Dubh’s lake.

‘How did you know to come here?’

‘Tracking,’ Gwyn said.

‘Where’s Grip?’

‘Sent back to the Unseelie Court,’ Gwyn said. ‘It wasn’t safe for him.’

After some time of being able to say what he wanted to Mosk, being able to travel almost as they liked – provided it was away from the ice – Eran felt like a small child all over again. He’d found his fire, he’d found some measure of independence, and now he felt like Kabiri had given him a babysitter instead of an ally. He fell silent.

Mosk only looked up once the horses stopped nearby. Eran watched as Mosk stared in amazement at Gwyn and the Each Uisge, and then met Eran’s eyes and didn’t look away. He didn’t make a face, he looked like someone who was seeking some kind of comfort or reassurance. From Eran.

‘You really are both hale,’ Gwyn said, looking between them both, faint disbelief in his tone.

‘Why? Did the- the thing that Kabiri did, did it…? Did it do anything?’

‘It did something,’ the Each Uisge said, smiling a little. He looked from Mosk to Eran, and then squinted at Eran’s pack. ‘You’ve found sap?’

Gwyn interrupted before Eran could reply. ‘Why didn’t you stay in one location sooner? What on earth possessed you to keep moving away from the Court, away from anything that looked like sense?’

Eran couldn’t think of what to say, taken aback, and he felt all the reasons pile on top of each other. But everything came back to running from the ice. Hadn’t Gwyn told him to run? What was he supposed to do? Looking up into Gwyn’s hard stare, even from a few feet away, it was intimidating. Hadn’t he kept Mosk alive? He’d broken the spell placed on him!

Gwyn stared at him for a minute longer, and then his frown vanished and Eran couldn’t read his expression at all.

‘How did you survive the miskatin?’

‘What?’ Eran said. ‘You know about that?’

‘I track,’ Gwyn said impatiently.

‘Then why did it take you so long to get to us?’ Eran said, the anger taking over his fear as he looked at Mosk, still kneeling on the blanket and looking uncertain. ‘How come it took you both so long? We thought you were dead. We had no reason to think otherwise. And then you come here on horses, like, what, you got distracted along the way and decided it would be nice to find some
war horses? We haven’t exactly been going fast, either. I mean, it’s not like Mosk is capable of sprints or anything. We haven’t been hard to find!’

His anger had spiked, he exhaled smoke and sparks, and Gwyn tilted his head in response and squinted at him.

‘Have you broken Fenwrel’s geas already?’

‘Yes,’ Eran said, hoping it didn’t mean they were going to find a way to put it back on him. ‘And yes we survived the miskatin. I broke Mosk’s chain and told him to run, and he came back for me, so we both got away. It broke the spell.’

Eran didn’t know why he did it. Why he masked Mosk’s role in it. He knew Mosk didn’t want them to know that Eran wasn’t the only one who had broken a spell. But he was baffled as to his own involvement in concealing it. As a Seelie fae, he normally felt awful if he lied, but this felt… different.

‘Impressive,’ the Each Uisge said quietly, even as he walked over to Mosk and ignored the way Mosk cringed from him. Eran stared in frustration. They’d come back and were ruining everything. Already.

‘Back off,’ Eran said sharply, and the Each Uisge stilled, and turned and gave Eran a look that was as frightening as any stare Gwyn had ever given him. ‘If you’re here to just intimidate him, then you might as well pack up on your way and go trotting back to the Unseelie Court since it’s obvious you both can’t teleport.’

‘I’m checking on his health,’ the Each Uisge said, his gaze unblinking. ‘If that’s quite all right with you.’

‘It’s not up to me, is it?’ Eran said, staring back. After staring down a miskatin that began carving his flesh from his arm, staring back at the Each Uisge wasn’t easy, but it was easier.

The Each Uisge’s eyebrows lifted, and then he shrugged and turned back to Mosk. ‘I want to check on your health.’

‘Okay,’ Mosk said.

So the Each Uisge crouched beside him, looking into his eyes, checking on his teeth, and then looking at the bark on his forearms. Then he pressed his palm flat to Mosk’s back, between his shoulder blades – surprisingly gentle, Eran thought – and closed his eyes, his eyebrows pulling together like he was looking for something, instead of just… pressing his hand there.

‘Anything?’ Gwyn said.

‘Honestly, I can’t say,’ the Each Uisge said. ‘Perhaps something nascent.’

‘You’re looking for a heartsong?’ Eran said. The Each Uisge could do that?

‘Fenwrel’s theory is that if his physical and mental health begin to recover, it indicates his soul might follow. But it’s too early to say. There’s something there, but it could have been there before, just well-hidden. This is not an exact science.’

The Each Uisge withdrew his hand and stood, taking a few steps back, and then looked longingly at the lake. After about a minute he seemed to shake himself out of it and looked around. ‘Is the lake looked after by a waterhorse?’
‘This is Gille Dubh’s lake,’ Gwyn said.

It was amazing, Eran decided, how much Gwyn knew. He knew how to find them. He knew they’d been in the miskatin’s den. He knew where they were. He probably knew Gille Dubh.

‘We shouldn’t stay here,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘I doubt it’s been appreciated that we’re moving through Seelie land.’

‘How come it took you so long?’ Eran said again, his voice less angry now, more curious. ‘Was it the ice?’

Gwyn nodded as he walked towards the lake. He knelt, began scooping up mouthfuls of fresh water, and Eran looked to the packs on the horses behind them, thinking that surely they had some? Maybe Gwyn just preferred it from the lake. It tasted very pure and sweet, Eran had tried some.

‘The ice separated us, as you saw,’ Gwyn said, wiping his forearm over his mouth as he turned and stood, then stretched, looking around once more. ‘We couldn’t teleport, and it had burrowed beneath the ground, so we were forced to travel west for several days. By then, Grip was ailing to be away from water and food for so long, and Augus and I couldn’t teleport, so we sent him back to the Court. We later located some horses to make the journey faster. It took time to simply pick up the trail you’d left behind.’

‘How did you come by your funds?’ the Each Uisge said. ‘You had nothing when you ran.’

Gwyn frowned at that, and shook his head at something. Eran wondered if he was annoyed that Eran and Mosk had been poorly provisioned. Would he be annoyed at something like that?

‘I had no fire,’ Eran said, testing, ‘I couldn’t even eat.’

It looked like Gwyn was capable of feeling something like remorse or guilt after all, judging from the expression.

‘You’re obviously able to land on your feet,’ the Each Uisge said.

Eran shrugged. ‘The miskatin… It had some jewellery, some clipaks, and I decided that since it had already stolen those things from its victims, it wasn’t really a…direct theft.’

‘Seelie loopholes,’ the Each Uisge said, smiling like he was actually pleased that Eran had found one. It was weird, did the Each Uisge actually approve of it? He’d said ‘impressive’ before too, when Eran had mentioned breaking Fenwrel’s spell. Eran had thought it might be patronising, but maybe it…wasn’t? ‘And now you have a flower in your hair.’

Eran touched the yellow flower, having forgotten that Field placed it there.

‘A vendor,’ Eran said awkwardly.

‘So you escaped the miskatin,’ Gwyn said expectantly. ‘And then?’

‘We found- I found a market, Mosk needed food. I needed food. So we- I traded for some items. I was trying to conserve funding, but at Many Meadows I found an afshin afrit, Amhar, and he gave me some more.’ Eran pointed at the pouch by his side. ‘He talked to me about the ice. He’s a scout, and has been finding and rescuing fire fae. There’s not many.’

Gwyn stared at Eran, like he could reach inside Eran’s mind and pull all the information out directly. But Eran didn’t have much more to say. Eventually, he just related what Amhar had told
him, and when Gwyn pressed with further, sharper questions, Eran could only shake his head.

‘I didn’t think to ask them. I didn’t- I didn’t expect to see anyone at all. And he’s not there all the time. He wasn’t there today.’

’Sounhaqh has fallen,’ Gwyn said. He sighed. ‘We’d offered the chance to evacuate, but they wouldn’t. Sounhaqh’s had protective magic on it for- Well, since Zahakh.’

‘You did that?’ Eran said, shocked. ‘It’s not only an Unseelie city.’

‘Albion wasn’t going to do it,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head. ‘What do you think the responsibility of the Unseelie and Seelie Kings are? It isn’t only war, for all that it seems it must be.’

‘And no one can teleport,’ Eran said. He looked over at the Each Uisge, who looked healthy, even as Eran wondered how he was impacted by it. ‘One of the vendors said it might be to- to attack Unseelie fae that need to feed on humans.’

‘We’ve heard the same,’ the Each Uisge said. ‘I think it’s to stop anyone from escaping into the human realm. Some of the Unseelie being unable to feed is just a side effect.’

He sounded casual about it, but Gwyn looked at him worriedly, and then grimaced.

‘But you don’t know that?’ Eran said.

‘We know far less than we want to,’ Gwyn said. ‘I wish it were different. Davix and Olphix are playing their own game right now. To stop teleportation wholesale…’

‘They say Mages can still teleport?’

‘Not teleport,’ the Each Uisge corrected. ‘They can use portals. They’re not the same. They have to learn how to do that, over many years, with magic. It’s not the same as moving with natural and innate fae abilities.’

‘Actually…’ Gwyn looked around again, and then pointed to the right of the ridge of towers, where dense forest formed. ‘King Oengus is not so far from here. We’d best see if he’ll accept us, and pass a message onto Fenwrel and the Court. They’ll want to know you’re well, and they’ve not heard from us either. I have a feeling our tracking spells aren’t working properly, or Fenwrel would have located us by now.’

Eran had heard of King Oengus Og. He thought maybe everyone had. The sad King with birds that flew about him, who had enchanted swords and spears, who could make magic just by speaking. But Oengus was Seelie, wasn’t he? Would he have anything at all to do with Gwyn? Eran couldn’t get the reaction of all the Seelie fae in the market out of his head. After all, Field had told him – more than once – that they traded with Unseelie fae all the time and it was fine. He’d seen himself that they traded with Amhar, and no one wished him any harm.

‘But he’s Seelie,’ Eran said awkwardly.

‘We can only but try,’ Gwyn said calmly. ‘Oengus and I have battled together, fought side by side. There might be something that goes beyond pure animosity.’

The Each Uisge was watching Gwyn as he spoke, a slight frown on his face. Then he looked over Eran and Mosk again and half-smiled. ‘We have some clothes for you both. You look like you could use them.’
‘Yes, please,’ Eran said. He’d been focused on food and other practicalities first. Just getting the pack and negotiating for sap ate into his funds.

A rooster crowed loudly nearby, and Eran startled, turning in the direction of the sound. Through bushes and reeds, Gille Dubh emerged, riding a glossy red rooster with an ivory comb. The rooster itself was large, some kind that Eran wasn’t familiar with, and Gille Dubh was small enough to fit upon it neatly.

Behind him, Luridan came, practically skipping. It wasn’t the same welcome that Eran and Mosk had received. Not with Gille Dubh riding a mount and looking at Gwyn soberly.

‘Look at that, Gille Dubh!’ Luridan said. ‘And the King of the Stars has come to visit you, today!’

‘So I see,’ Gille Dubh said, not looking away from Gwyn.

To Eran’s surprise, Gwyn walked forwards and got down on one knee, though he was still much taller than Gille Dubh, even mounted upon his rooster.

‘Your loch is beautiful as always,’ Gwyn said. ‘I see you are in something of a quandary. You want to welcome me, but you cannot think of how to welcome such a traitor, can you?’

‘So it is,’ Gille Dubh said.

‘I do not wish to sour your relations to your Market, and it is not rudeness for you to forego the usual greetings in these circumstances, is it? I ask for only a couple of hours, and then we shall be on our way. It is, at least on my part, good to see you again.’ Gwyn turned to Luridan and nodded. ‘And you.’

‘Aye! My old battle companion of days gone by.’ Luridan pressed a fist to his chest and shook his head slowly. ‘And then, evil like, you turned out to be an Unseelie galoot now! It’s enough to break a brownie’s heart.’

‘The trows speak finely of you,’ Gille Dubh said. ‘On both sides.’

‘Yet I keep them in silver, and they’d speak finely of anyone who did such a thing.’

‘The stars still shine on you,’ Gille Dubh said, a strange intonation in his voice, as though it was a ritual that Eran wasn’t familiar with. ‘In all skies.’

‘Yet they shine on everyone, equally, and in that – everyone is of the stars, Gille Dubh. Even you.’

Eran was mesmerised. He’d never heard Gwyn speak softly like that. He couldn’t feel any increased dra’ocht in the air, so Gwyn wasn’t working his glamour to create a moment. But this held something in it that he wasn’t familiar with, and he couldn’t look away.

‘The beating of my heart tells me that you betrayed us, Gwyn ap Nudd, and yet I betray myself, for I still wish you were our King.’

A pause then, Gwyn looked down at the ground. When he looked up, Eran couldn’t see his expression, but he could see Gille Dubh’s, earnest and wistful at once.

‘Yet beneath that, deeper still, is the beating of a heart that tells you that you’ve never needed a King, and never will.’

‘So it is,’ Gille Dubh said, nodding once.
'So it is,' Gwyn said.

'You can stay at my loch,' Gille Dubh said, 'and avail yourselves of its waters. I regret I cannot be a better host than this, may you find me in better temper, some day.' Gille Dubh turned then to the Each Uisge. 'Waterhorse, I ask that you treat this loch with respect, and touch it not with your abilities.'

'It’s a lovely lake,' the Each Uisge said, inclining his head. 'I’ll leave it be.'

Gille Dubh then turned his rooster with a slender black rein, and the rooster trotted back into bushes and reeds. Presumably, Gille Dubh was going to vanish into his home. Gwyn stayed on the ground for a bit longer, and then eventually stood and turned to face the rest of them. If Eran didn’t know any better, he’d say that Gwyn looked melancholy. It went against the rumours he’d heard, that Gwyn had enjoyed playing the Seelie side against themselves, that he’d gotten only joy from lying to the Seelie noblesse for so long.

‘Aye,’ Luridan said quietly, joining Gwyn’s side. ‘Mayaps you’ve lost a friend there, Gwyn of the Stars. But I wouldn’t be too sure. Now then, are we going to trade some tales and break some bread? I’m starving, I am, and it feels as though you might have a story or two to share with old Luridan. Ohhh, what a good day it is!'

Gwyn smiled a little, looked down at Luridan, and then nodded towards the horses. ‘I hope you like ale.’

‘Glory days!’ Luridan hooted, skipping ahead. ‘Oh, glory days indeed!’

*Luridan told tall tales that Eran was sure couldn’t be true, even though he was Seelie and Eran didn’t know if he could lie or not. But to hear Luridan tell it, he’d been at every major war, every major event, since he’d been ‘but a wee bairn.’

Gwyn sat cross-legged on the blanket, the Each Uisge with his legs tucked under him beside him, eating waterweed that Gwyn had stripped from the lake for him. Mosk sipped at some walnut sap, and in front of them lay a repast of food that Eran picked at slowly, careful to cook the food in his hands away from Mosk’s sight where possible. Mosk still stiffened whenever he did it, and Eran didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t help what he was. He needed to cook things to eat them, and in the best circumstances, they needed at least a little char on them.

Luridan piled a huge amount of food in front of himself, and seemed as happy to share stories as he was to listen to them.

‘I was there! I was there at the battle at the Unseelie Court, when the Seelie came to lay waste to those rotten scoundrels! Begging your pardon, of course.’ Luridan nodded towards Gwyn.

‘Of course,’ Gwyn said, a half-smile on his face. ‘So you were there for the whole battle?’

‘Aye! That I was, a-biffing and boffing those Unseelie dogs every which way! Pow! Biff! Down they fell! Those…those curs, those scallywags! Begging your pardon, Your Majesty!’

‘No, no, continue,’ Gwyn said.

Luridan continued until, by the sound of things, he’d single-handedly saved the Unseelie Court, most of the Seelie fae in the process, and rescued the Seelie King from Gwyn’s ‘rotten’ light. Gwyn watched with amusement in his blue eyes, the smile never quite leaving his mouth. He
looked – strangely – like a parent might when indulging a child. But Luridan was thousands and thousands of years old, and clearly lying.

Later still, when Luridan had eaten more than the rest of them and was snoring on the blanket – lying on his back beside Mosk, who was staring ahead at nothing at all – Eran walked over to Gwyn. The Each Uisge was standing some distance away by the water’s edge, gazing out over the lake. Eran looked at him, and then looked at Gwyn, who had noticed Eran and was watching him curiously.

‘Why is Luridan like that? I know he’s not telling the truth.’

‘We all know,’ Gwyn said, looking to Luridan. ‘He’s… He’s an interesting soul. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that he’s here now. He always tends to appear before something important happens, and then vanishes before the conflict occurs.’

‘I saw him before. Just after capturing Mosk. He told me to take care of my time before I died or something, and then vanished. He said Mosk was empty. And that it was a story.’

‘Yes, that does sound like him,’ Gwyn said slowly. ‘There’s nothing sinister about it, though it can seem that way. His magic, his… nature- He has an ability to sense when something integral to fae politics, fae lives, is about to happen. So he has a habit of appearing amongst soldiers as they travel to battle, for example. He’s never there for the main event. Too wily. Too willing to save his own skin. But everything he predicts in his bones, he’ll say he was there for and had a major role in. That’s just his way. He wasn’t at the battle between the Seelie and Unseelie ten years ago. But he can no sooner help telling stories about it, than Mosk can help eating sap, or you can help being a fire fae.’

Eran wondered if that meant it was significant somehow, that he was led to Mosk. Did it mean something that Luridan had found them specifically? Was Eran part of it? Or was it only about Mosk? Eran had no idea how it worked, and he suspected if he asked Luridan about it, he’d probably not get a straight answer.

‘That was some feat,’ Gwyn said eventually, ‘to get away from a miskatin. To break Fenwrel’s geas at the same time.’

It was so unexpected to hear anything like that from Gwyn that Eran stared at him, shocked. He couldn’t think of what to say.

‘Your father would have been proud,’ Gwyn said.

Eran couldn’t help the way his breath hitched, any more than he could stop the heavy wave of anguish that crashed through him at hearing those words. He couldn’t even manage to say thank you, and Gwyn shook his head a little. Eran wondered if he wanted to take the words back.

‘Mosk is doing better,’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes,’ Eran said, his voice strained. He cleared his throat. ‘Yes, he- Food, mostly. It seems to be the food. He says he’s dizzy a lot. I think he feels unwell all the time. It’s very bad. He seems too weak for this. Would it not be- Should he not just be at the Unseelie Court or something?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gwyn said. ‘I think another might say it is in the hands of the fates, or luck, but I believe in neither. We are in the hands of Mages, and I still hold out hope that he has something we can use. He’s improving, too. The road isn’t so poisonous for him. He’s done well under your care.’
The grey mare that the Each Uisge had been riding whickered quietly, strained her head towards Gwyn, who held out his hand without even looking in her direction. The horse kept bunting her nose into Gwyn’s palm, and then finally just settled it there, ears relaxing, eyes closing. Gwyn didn’t seem to have noticed.

‘Is there a plan?’ Eran said tentatively.

‘Several,’ Gwyn said. ‘I don’t like any of them. With teleportation gone, I am giving serious thought to travelling to the Seelie Court on foot and forcing a confrontation. But I am not strong enough to fight Davix on my own, and nor – I think – is anyone else that lives.’

‘Not even Kabiri,’ Eran said.

‘Do you know what Mages do?’ Gwyn said, his voice unexpectedly bitter, ‘they steal. It doesn’t matter if they’re Seelie or Unseelie. They commit great acts of theft and thieving to build their magical abilities. They take from each other, they take from other people, they take from cultures, and Davix and Olphix have been doing it the longest – as far as we know. They have not only taken lives, languages, more- They have sundered the soul from someone’s body. They do not come with ransom demands, they do not give us ultimatums, they have no need of it. They do what they will, and then, once they’ve done it, they can lay a spell upon the whole realm to make sure we never speak of it. Kabiri spoke to me about it. The Nain Rouge told me the Mages were going to go to war. But I cannot fathom with what, or who.’

Gwyn raised his hand until he was stroking the bridge of the mare’s nose. She hadn’t shifted once, despite the venom in Gwyn’s tone.

‘And that,’ Gwyn said, ‘is how they are so powerful. They are power multiplied. They are no longer just their own magic, but the magic of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. So, you see, I hope that Mosk can give me something I can use to defeat them. Experience has taught me that I do not need to be the most powerful. I just need to be cleverer.’

‘Than these Mages that you say are more powerful than gods.’

‘Ah, well,’ Gwyn said, drawing his hand away from the mare’s nose. He smiled quickly at Eran, all teeth. ‘I didn’t say it would be easy, did I?’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Sparks of Revelation:’

‘Like I care,’ Mosk said, smiling then. All the feelings in him went dead. What could Augus truly do to him? What could any of them? They could strip him bare and fuck him right now, hit him or torment him, and how would it compare?

‘There it is,’ Augus said. His smile was truly threatening, and as he stepped forwards, close enough that they were nearly touching, Mosk felt a tremor move through him. ‘You do care, Mosk. It smarts, doesn’t it? That’s why you do this.’ Fingers brushed over the dips between his knuckles, where his closed fingers hid the reddened, stinging marks. Mosk jerked his hand away, not wanting the soft touches. They hurt somehow, scalded him, made something bright and central roar into a painful life inside of him. He could have hit Augus then, were he not freshly scared.
‘You’re a bully,’ Mosk said, his voice strained.

‘I suppose I must be, sometimes. But so are you, Mosk. So are you.’
Luridan disappeared at the beginning of their journey, scampering back to Gille Dubh’s home with the promise that they’d see him again one day. Gwyn watched like he didn’t mind one way or another, but Eran’s eyebrows knitted and he frowned, looking to Gwyn like something bad had happened.

Mosk didn’t help them pack. He tried to draw no attention to himself. He didn’t want Augus to notice something and start using his compulsions again. He didn’t want Gwyn to question him. He didn’t want Eran to reveal that Mosk had broken one of his curses, and he remained tense as every minute passed, waiting for it. The waiting chewed up so much energy he was left staring at things, into things, seeing very little. Soon, one of them would realise he’d broken the curse, and they’d make him talk.

Everyone would realise that the world was doomed.

In a way, he wanted to stay at Gille Dubh’s like Luridan. He wanted to bathe in the lake, he wanted to hear Gille Dubh’s voice, and strangely, he wanted Eran there.

Absently, he locked his fingers over his wrist and squeezed, turning his vague attention to Eran, who was grooming the black horse with steady, confident strokes. Eran who had made sure to have a variety of sap flavours on hand, and had bought tools for tapping trees without being asked. It went against what Mosk thought of, when he thought of fire fae. Weren’t they supposed to indiscriminately burn things down? Wasn’t that why they lived in the desert in the first place? Because there was nothing left to burn there, so it was the only place they could live?

Mosk never let himself forget that Eran contained fire in him. He always imagined it, even when there were no visible signs. He saw Eran’s hands glowing, or his eyes gleaming, or sparks emerging from the back of his throat where smoke curled. Eran was dangerous. Maybe he pretended to care so much because he was compensating for what he lacked. Or maybe he just needed Mosk to be well enough to do whatever it was he imagined would be done to avenge his family.

Mosk had told Eran to give it up, he’d told him it wasn’t possible, he’d told him there was no hope.

Eran didn’t listen to him.

Mosk scowled, and then looked down at the grass beneath his new shoes. A change of clothes out of Augus and Gwyn’s magically-augmented pack and everything fit perfectly. Mosk didn’t question it. If it came from the Court, of course it fit.
The clothing was finer than he deserved. A shirt of autumnal leaves, treated to withstand wear and
 tear, light beneath his fingertips. Pants of dark brown hemp. Boots that were light brown. Of course
 they knew what Aur dryads liked to wear. Chaley would have preferred brighter colours, in vivid
 lime and neon greens. The very brightest of the new leaves.

She would always show him the gum trees in spring: ‘Look at that, Mosk, their new leaves grow in
 bright red! Isn’t that beautiful?’

It had been. She’d taken some of the newer branches from the trees – who didn’t really mind – and
 then woven them together into a leafy red crown, and placed it upon his hair. They’d walked
 together, hand in hand, and she’d said how nice it would be if his Aur tree was a eucalyptus too.

Mosk’s fingers drifted down to his pocket and he touched the curve of bone there. He thought it
 was hers. There was no true way of knowing. His other hand spasmed, as though it missed the grip
 of a bow. He’d spent so long holding it, even after his parents had banned him. Chaley helped him
 hide it in the canopy, it had been their secret.

It had gotten her killed in the end.

He dug his nails into his palm and wished they were sharp and hooked so he could cut himself
 open, spill his own blood. Eventually, the pain wasn’t enough and he pinched the tender skin
 between his fingers.

‘Mosk?’

Mosk startled, eyes focusing immediately, and Eran was standing in front of him and looking down
 at his hands.

‘What are you doing?’ Eran said. ‘Are you-? Stop it.’

Hands drawing his fingers apart, and Mosk clenched his teeth together.

‘Leave me alone.’

Eran had taken up Mosk’s hand in a firm grip – he could almost pretend it was a shackle, and
 somehow, stupidly and bizarrely, that made something unwind inside of him – and was staring at
 the red marks between his fingers. Then that bewildered gaze moved to Mosk’s eyes, and he stared
 like he couldn’t comprehend why anyone would do that to themselves. Eran was an idiot.

‘I hate you,’ Mosk said.

Some distance away, by the grey mare, Augus stopped what he was doing and turned to look at
 them both. Could he hear them? Probably. It made Mosk feel even more venomous.

‘Your family are dead.’

Eran flinched. His fingers tightened briefly on Mosk’s wrist, and then he dropped it like Mosk was
 poison. Eran took a step backwards and his jaw clenched. Mosk wanted to squeeze his wrist where
 Eran’s fingers had been. He wanted to feel his bones shift.

‘So are yours,’ Eran said, with far less bite in his voice. How did he do that? He was made of fire!
 ‘Is that why you were hurting yourself?’

‘Maybe I do it because it’s the only way I can stand you.’
‘Right,’ Eran said, rolling his eyes. ‘Eat something. We’re leaving soon.’

‘Fuck you.’

Eran said nothing, just walked back to the black mare, who nickered at him happily as he picked up the curry comb again. Mosk stared at Eran even as he pinched the inside skin joining two of his fingers again, taking a slow breath through the pain of it. Then he noticed Augus walking towards him and stopped abruptly, his breath turning shallow in his chest.

‘You’re frightened of me,’ Augus said, smiling when he was close enough. ‘That’s interesting, isn’t it? You didn’t feel anything at all when we first met. Well, not much. I suppose the underworlds would tax anyone.’

Mosk said nothing at all. Augus’ compulsions, the idea of being made to speak of his past…

‘Do you enjoy antagonising him?’ Augus said, looking towards Eran, who was either stubbornly ignoring them, or couldn’t hear as well as Augus could. ‘Tch, Mosk, darling, you really must learn how to have a civil conversation. You know I have ways I could encourage you to talk.’

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk said automatically, as though Augus had used a compulsion anyway. He might as well have. It wasn’t fair that he used them as freely as he did. As easily. They were for hunting.

‘I don’t know either,’ Augus said quietly. ‘Does it help, to hurt yourself?’

‘Maybe,’ Mosk said.

‘Would it help more, if someone else hurt you?’

Mosk looked warily at Augus then. But Augus’ expression was unreadable, perhaps only a little curiosity there, and nothing more.

‘Are you offering?’ Mosk asked spitefully, unable to help himself.

Augus smiled a little, and then the smile widened. Mosk told himself it wasn’t frightening. ‘Oh, no, I’m afraid I’m rather out of that business these days. And you’re a can of worms I’m not sure I’d want to open anyway.’

Mosk knew what business Augus referred to. Everyone knew. But hearing Augus talk about it so freely, so personally, and then reject Mosk in the same sentence was uncomfortable. Mosk had rarely thought about sex before the Aur forest had been burned. His life had been too occupied, in many ways, and he had no time to meet people. He certainly couldn’t imagine confiding his fears and goals to them, as secret as they were. So the idea of Augus existing as some dominating sexual healer that plumbed deep for secrets and dragged them to the surface…

Mosk had always been a little scared of Augus, even before those compulsions had been used on him.

‘I’m not a can of worms,’ Mosk said eventually.

‘If you like. I’m keeping an eye on you. It might give you great pleasure to create unrest in this small group we have, but we do actually have a purpose and things that need to be done, and should you delay us, or make this journey more painful than it needs to be, you’ll suffer for it. And it won’t be the kind of suffering you get to control.’
‘Like I care,’ Mosk said, smiling then. All the feelings in him went dead. What could Augus truly do to him? What could any of them? They could strip him bare and fuck him right now, hit him or torment him, and how would it compare?

‘There it is,’ Augus said. His smile was truly threatening, and as he stepped forwards, close enough that they were nearly touching, Mosk felt a tremor move through him. ‘You do care, Mosk. It smarts, doesn’t it? That’s why you do this.’ Fingers brushed over the dips between his knuckles, where his closed fingers hid the reddened, stinging marks. Mosk jerked his hand away, not wanting the soft touches. They hurt somehow, scalded him, made something bright and central roar into a painful life inside of him. He could have hit Augus then, were he not freshly scared.

‘You’re a bully,’ Mosk said, his voice strained.

‘I suppose I must be, sometimes. But so are you, Mosk. So are you.’

The words left Mosk rooted to the ground, so that he couldn’t move as Augus turned and walked back to his horse. He couldn’t move for a little while after that, unable to parse what Augus had said, or the uncomfortable sense of truth that lurked beneath.

*

There weren’t enough horses for all of them, so Mosk had to ride behind Eran. It was strange, dizzying, and even just mounting the horse made Mosk need to grip the back of the saddle for a few seconds, his breathing unsteady. He made a sound of discontent when the horse shifted her legs, getting a feel for both of their weights. Mosk’s thighs were snug around Eran’s hips, he could feel the kh’anzar, the sheathed dagger. He didn’t have his own stirrups, so his feet just hung down.

‘She won’t hurt you,’ Eran said.

‘It’s not that,’ Mosk muttered.

‘What is it?’ Eran said. He twisted, giving more of his attention to Mosk, but they were so close that Eran couldn’t see him unless he slid forwards and contorted himself.

‘Dizzy,’ Mosk muttered.

The horse smelled of sweet grass. Eran smelled of fire. His body was so warm, far hotter than a normal person’s body should be. Mosk swallowed and closed his eyes. He wrenched them open again when vertigo assailed him in that endless black, and stared at the horizon, taking slow, deep breaths.

‘Motion sickness?’ Eran said.

‘I think.’

He kept thinking of Augus quietly confirming that they were both bullies. He’d looked certain. Mosk had never been called anything like that in his life. He wanted to stare uncaring and be worse, after that. He wanted to prove that nothing Augus could say would touch him. But now months had passed and here he was, pathetically clinging to other people’s words like they might ever matter.

‘Here.’ Eran reached back and took Mosk’s arm, ignoring the way he tried to jerk his limb backwards. He wrapped it around Eran’s waist. ‘That will help for stability. You’ll need to hold onto something. Would some cherry sap help?’
Mosk couldn’t think about Mallem right now. Couldn’t think about his treacherous brother. So he shook his head and pressed his forehead to the nearest solid object, which happened to be the space between Eran’s shoulder blades.

Then, at some invisible signal from Gwyn or Augus, they were all moving towards the deep green forest. Mosk wondered if there’d be more miskatinis. Then he tried not to think at all as the gently rolling gait of the horse made him swallow down nausea. He trembled, stared down at the space of fabric and shadows and the leather of the saddle between them.

This was the closest he’d been to Eran for any reason at all. The only other times they’d ever been this close, Eran had been threatening him, or burning him. And Augus called Mosk the bully?

Mosk laughed then, at the absurdity of it.

He turned to look behind him once, surprised that the lake was already out of sight, well hidden behind reeds and trees. Maybe he’d see Gille Dubh again one day, but he doubted it.

* 

The forest was cool, though Eran’s body temperature never changed despite the increased chill around them. The sun couldn’t penetrate the canopy at all. It took less than twenty minutes of entering the forest for everything to turn dark and gloomy. Gwyn and Augus seemed unbothered, but Mosk could feel Eran tensing on occasion – he had both arms wrapped around him now – and he looked around a lot.

At one point, Augus drew forward so that he was alongside Gwyn, and they started talking about where they were headed. Augus was asking about finer details – did they need to bring gifts? Did Gwyn really think he’d get an audience with King Oengus Og? Eventually, Mosk tuned it out as background noise. It was irrelevant. He stared down the horse’s side at the moss and grass and fungi upon the ground.

The trees were so silent. Oh, their branches moved and rubbed together and creaked, their leaves rustled, but they said nothing. Mosk wondered if he had finally reached the day where he would be afraid of forests, hating them for what they represented. It made his heart feel shaky in his own chest. Could a fae be changed from what they were? If they couldn’t feed properly, if they couldn’t perform their purpose, if they hated the only biome they were supposed to live in, what then?

Absently, Mosk bridged the distance around Eran’s waist and grasped his right wrist in his left, squeezing down. An echo of manacles perhaps, or something else. He stared at the ground and felt the ache in his bones, and knew it wasn’t enough. Was a time when he could hurt himself into numbness, and now it was like he couldn’t find the right notes to the song again. It only hinted at true numbness. An echo of some strange, empty comfort he used to be able to find.

He didn’t stop when Eran shifted in the saddle. Hardly noticed.

He flinched when he felt fingers brush over Mosk’s white knuckles where he was compressing skin and muscle and bone. But he didn’t let go.

‘Here,’ Eran said, very quietly. Fingertips tracing the seam where Mosk’s palm clamped down over his wrist. The gentle touch was an anathema, and after only a few seconds of holding out against it, he yanked his free hand away, infuriated that Eran had made him stop. Eran didn’t understand. He was just some stupid, annoying-

Hot fingers slid around both of his wrists, preventing Mosk from pulling away. Warm palms circled
him and then gripped. Mosk could sense a weird nervy energy from Eran, some kind of tension in his body. Was he holding his breath? His heart seemed to be going very fast.

Or was that Mosk?

He blinked in shock as Eran simply gripped his wrists, tightly enough that it ached. Had he dropped the reins? It didn’t matter. After days of trying to find something he couldn’t name, he felt a strange recognition vibrate through him. The hairs on his flesh stood up, the skin around the bark on his body contracted. He couldn’t think.

Distantly, he considered fighting it. He considered yanking his wrists free. He knew Eran would let him go. He just knew.

Eran was doing this because he noticed that Mosk kept doing it, and wanted to help. Mosk should be disgusted, irate, spitting insults, and instead he felt better than when he’d had those shackles around his wrists. When he’d had the Mages ropes around his body. This was…nameless and dark. It captured him.

It was ruined when Eran softened the grip on Mosk’s right wrist, and stroked the side of his forearm instead. The gentle touch was like ants, like poison, and Mosk gasped, pulling his arm away.

Eran caught it, brought it back, grasped his wrist again with a tight grip. That ache was mollifying, and then Mosk almost sagged against Eran’s back when he said:

‘Okay, I get it. I get it.’

Eran didn’t sound like he understood it at all, but neither did Mosk.

The black horse followed Augus and Gwyn automatically, no doubt having followed them even riderless for some time. So Eran was free to do what he was doing, and Mosk was free to sit there, unable to understand what was happening, wanting to understand, wondering if he’d been truly shattered by what had been done to him. He’d not liked anything like this before.

But then Eran had removed the shackle with his terrifying fire, and Mosk had felt abandoned and bereft ever since.

He had a feeling Eran would be asking him about it, questioning him, if Augus and Gwyn weren’t only a few metres ahead. If they weren’t in some dark, gloomy forest that made Mosk think of miskatins, and was likely doing the same for Eran. But he was glad for the silence beyond the falling of hooves, the rustling of mute leaves.

For a moment, everything centred on the ache in his forearms, the faint numbness in the tips of his fingers. He hated how hot Eran’s skin was, but it wasn’t burning his skin to a crisp, even as it burned him all the same. It was one of the few things that felt real, in a way. He’d been floating around since Olphix had cut him free. Floating through those strangers who fucked him. Floating through his capture. Floating through Davix – how could it be Davix? – taunting them both. Floating through Augus’ interrogations and Fenwrel’s faux gentleness and the first sap he’d fed on in some time.

Then he’d found the piece of bone. Then he’d had that small cake from Gille Dubh. Now this. They left great wide wounds across what remained of his tattered personality. But this was a wound he wanted. It hurt, but somehow, it was good.

Mosk’s breath shook in his vulnerable lungs. His eyes squeezed shut. He didn’t care about the
dizziness, and it wasn’t as terrible as before, anyway.

He didn’t understand it. He didn’t understand how Eran understood. He hated that he felt anything at all, hated that he couldn’t share this moment with the trees, let alone his family.

Maybe it was private, and not meant to be shared.

‘I don’t understand,’ Mosk whispered.

Eran breathed laughter that somehow wasn’t mocking. ‘Neither do I.’

It was all they said about it, and then Mosk could only concentrate on those points of tight, aching contact, conflict in his chest even as his muscles let him rest against Eran’s back. A strange mercy, a brilliance that gleamed along the underside of his skin and made him feel something he wanted to.

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Gwyn knew where they were going. Mosk became aware with an idle fascination of how he simply picked forks in the road without hesitating. They were on Seelie land, so it made a certain amount of sense, and Mosk knew that the he was a great traveller. He remembered his mother telling him once, when he was younger.

‘The Seelie King, he adventures even now. Did you know there are still so many pockets of the fae world that are unexplored, or poorly remarked upon? And there he goes, seeking them. The Raven Prince was once the same. It is a great thing, to adventure so broadly. But you and I need none of that. We have every tree that has ever lived around us, folded into time and space, even the Immortalis.’

So Mosk had learned that some fae journeyed far and wide upon the land, and Aur dryads stayed in the Aur forest, and only ventured out to trade and to visit the Unseelie Court. He didn’t want to adventure anyway. He had no interest in learning a bevy of languages unless they were from the trees with their different dialects. He didn’t need to know the roads, because the trees told him where there was water, where house foundations rested heavy upon their roots, where farms lay over their spreading network of helpful fungi, eating nutriment or giving it back.

Mosk took his adventures into the networks of forest around him, got drunk on it sometimes. The Aur called it the heartwood daze, to live so deeply in the trees. But Mosk loved them. He loved every one. He delayed his coming of age ceremony for other reasons, but he also couldn’t tell what tree he was supposed to be. He had an affinity for almost all of them. There was no tree he didn’t like.

Now he was dependent on Eran’s hand around his wrist: only one as Eran had picked up the reins again and was holding them loosely. He probably wouldn’t ever feel the bliss of heartwood daze again. The trees held themselves back, and Mosk couldn’t tell if it was what the Mages did, or if the trees hated him somehow. They knew what Mosk had been reduced to. Could trees feel spite? Did Mosk only imagine it? He knew Aur dryads could feel spite. He’d felt it. Mallem had felt it. So trees must be able to feel it. Did they whisper to each other among their network of tangling roots? Did they hate him before he even visited them? Before he set eyes upon them?

He shuddered and drew his other wrist back from Eran’s grip, oddly feeling like he didn’t deserve it. Eran let him go, took the reins up with both hands and didn’t say a word. Mosk looked down at his wrists. They were bruised. It was very faint, but against his pale skin, he could still see the marks.
He looked around the forest, feeling more alert than before, as though he’d rested at some point despite not having slept properly for some time. He had no idea where they were, but the trees here were old and strong. Sometimes he felt like the Aur forest dying should have had more of an impact, but he wasn’t sure he could take the rest of the world’s forests withering in response.

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They came to a thick, fast flowing river. Gwyn urged their horses into a fast trot for no apparent reason and they followed the white foaming flows until the river widened and slowed. Occasionally they saw land guardian fae, the kinds that were tied to their rivers and trees and landscapes. They stared at Gwyn in amazement. Some saw Augus, pointed, and then ran away.  
A bridge then, narrow and guarded by a group of mismatched fae with hunger in their eyes and wicked looking weapons at their sides. One had a mage’s staff, though she didn’t wear a motley. Gwyn stiffened as a bow and arrow was raised.  
‘You look like you matter,’ one of the fae said. ‘Got any gold on you? Clipaks?’  
‘That’s the Unseelie King, shit-for-brains,’ said the one with the staff.  
‘Then you’ve just got more gold, don’t you?’ he leered in response. Mosk saw that he wore a necklace of bones and bracelets of quills. There were at least ten fae, and they all were readying their weapons now.  
‘Brigands,’ Gwyn sighed, sounding unimpressed. ‘Get out of the way. I am in no mood.’  
‘Then pay up,’ said Bone Necklace. Mosk wondered if they were very stupid. He also wondered why Augus just didn’t order them away with compulsions.  
Gwyn slid off his horse easily. He didn’t even withdraw his sword. He walked towards them, appeared defenceless. But Mosk tensed, and Eran did the same a few seconds later, as though realising that something was about to happen in the dim forest gloom.  
‘Are you, in all seriousness, not going to get out of the way?’ Gwyn said, rubbing his hands together. ‘Do none of you value your lives?’  
The mage did something with her staff, and a cage of glimmering bars materialised around Gwyn. He touched it, flinching, and then grasped the bars with both hands. An oozing green light crawled up his arms as Gwyn twisted the magical bars until he could step out of them. The green lingered on his skin, even as he stalked the brigands now, like a hunter. The mage began to back away. The others had swords and daggers and scimitars up.  
The archer with the recurve bow lifted it, sighted, and let the arrow fly. It was a good release, swift and true. Gwyn’s arm moved so fast that Mosk didn’t see more than a blur.  
The arrow snapped and Gwyn dropped the pieces to the ground.  
‘What?’ Eran breathed.  
‘You’re all amateurs,’ Gwyn said, and then his hand flickered with light. Once, then again. ‘You don’t even have any markers in the trees to keep an eye. If you’re going to try exploiting this lack of teleportation, at least try.’  
It was the last thing he said, before Mosk’s eyes were saturated with a blinding white light that smelled of lightning striking, even of the sparks that flung themselves everywhere when the forest
had been ignited. Mosk flinched down, hid his face between Eran’s shoulders, heard the screams and the stuttering of Eran’s breathing and the faint sound of incredulity he made. He heard the frightened whinny of one of the horses, then a blood-curdling animal sound, and something crackling through the air.

Then, only his own heartbeat pounding.

‘Needed that, did you?’ Augus said drily. ‘You didn’t even ask their fees. They could have been entirely reasonable. Unlike you, sweetness.’

‘Be quiet,’ Gwyn said.

Mosk peered over Eran’s shoulder to see Gwyn swinging back onto the horse, his hands blackened and charred. He’d burned himself?

Black, lifeless lumps had been left by the bridge. The ground beneath them dead and charcoal grey. Even some of the blue-brown stones of the bridge had been shattered beneath whatever Gwyn had done. Of course, Mosk had heard rumours, but…

His heart still pounded.

‘Let’s go,’ Gwyn said.

Mosk stared down at the bodies as they went. Eran did the same.

‘I remember when brigands used to be skilled,’ Gwyn said.

‘Mm, well what about that group we came by before we secured the horses?’

‘I suppose,’ Gwyn said.

The horses’ hooves clip-clopped across the bridge, and soon they were just staring at slow eddies of water, a wide river, a quiet day. Mosk could still smell carbon and lightning in the air. He moved the other way so he could see Gwyn’s hands on the reins, black and seeping blood and clear fluid.

‘He doesn’t feel pain,’ Mosk said, so quietly that he hoped no one else heard it.

‘He does,’ Eran said in response, his voice just as soft. ‘But he hides it well. Like you.’

Mosk frowned. That was different. He just didn’t feel pain properly most of the time. Like his body was telling him that something was wrong, but his body had been screaming that at him every minute, of every hour, of every day, for months. Was he supposed to listen? He couldn’t fix it.

‘It’s not the same,’ Mosk said.

‘I guess not,’ Eran said.

They stopped speaking, and Mosk instead looked to the side of him, at the world around them. The small bursts of flowers now appearing, the tiny patches of dappled light. He flexed his wrists sometimes, felt the aches there, and thought he didn’t feel pain properly at all, because this was welcome, and made him feel somehow more himself.

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The path became a road of glittering, rough glass winding beside the river, sometimes losing sight
of it, then returning to it. The hooves rung loudly upon it, and the glass never cracked. But everyone nearby knew they were coming, and Mosk felt the way Eran was constantly tense to be upon it. Sometimes his hand even strayed to the hilt of his kh’anzar, but never to his dagger, as though he still thought it was a ceremonial blade instead of the replacement he’d gotten.

Mosk hadn’t known it was ceremonial. He’d thought it was pretty, and golden, and that Eran didn’t use it because he had a larger blade. Then, when he’d found out he’d committed some crime against Eran’s people, his culture, he felt almost dully satisfied with himself. Of course it would be like that. He was more awful than he’d thought. Bad enough that he’d tried to kill someone, but to disrespect them like that without even realising? It was a sickness inside of him, and he’d never be rid of it.

In the distance, glowing appeared, and it was some time on the glass road before they saw that it was Magelight hanging in mid-air, glowing creamy-gold. Balls of different shapes and sizes, some no larger than the nail on Mosk’s little finger, and others the size of large, heavy fruits. They hovered above the ground, and delicate flowers and orchids grew beneath them.

The horses walked slowly, happily, seemingly unbothered. Mosk hoped it meant the path was safe, but he couldn’t imagine that Gwyn couldn’t handle whatever might meet them anyway. Gwyn would probably know how to deal with a miskatin. Any fae that could make light like that, could deal with anything at all.

Then, the forest began to open up, becoming woodland. Rabbits ate grass nearby. Deer didn’t flee from them. Mosk heard ducks in the trees and looked up, frowning in confusion. But there they were on branches, in heavy nests, staring down with plumage all of white and cream like the Magelights. Above them, clouds filled the sky, heavy and grey, even though they’d been in sunlight only a little while before.

Soon, the Magelights hovered across the river too. There, swimming gracefully, long-necked swans of a kind Mosk had never seen before. These too, white-gold, some of them with golden torcs about their neck. Some had cygnets, grey-white birds that swam in neat lines behind their parents.

In the distance, on an island where the river had broadened and was almost a lake, stood a tall, forbidding tower. Made of dark grey slabs, three turrets with pointing rooves of a grey-green shale. It was connected to the mainland by a single, narrow land-bridge. The island itself was large. Mosk could see smaller buildings, stables, and what looked like a cottage at the back surrounded by roses in shrub and climbing forms.

The tower itself had many open windows. Songbirds flew in and out of it. Mosk couldn’t yet hear the twittering – only the sonorous voices of the swans as they called to each other – but he still stared.

‘King Oengus,’ Eran whispered. ‘The tower on the lake.’

‘And the swans,’ Mosk said.

‘Are they all like that?’

‘Have you never seen a swan?’ Mosk said, frowning. Was the desert so very different? It must be. Mosk felt stupid. He’d seen desert biomes in the Aur forest, and no swans went there. ‘They’re-most are white. Some are black. There are even green ones that are rare and shy and friendly. Some are shifters too, or swan-maidens and princes. But these are his. White and gold, and twice as large as most. They say they are all related to him and his lost love, and that he bore their ancestors
when he lived as a swan.’

‘Oh,’ Eran said. ‘You’re talking to me properly.’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. It’s nothing.’

Mosk thought of Augus calling him a bully, and fell silent. Eran was the bully, not him. Eran was the one who’d caught him and burned him, wasn’t he?

‘I liked it,’ Eran said.

Mosk felt scalded somehow, and he pressed his lips together. A sudden urge to hurt Eran, really hurt him, make him stop being this way. It wasn’t fair. They were all supposed to be cruel. Mosk shuddered and drew back, and thankfully, Eran didn’t talk again.

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They had to travel single file down the bridge that grew out of the water. It was very narrow, with little pebbles and stones on the banks. Occasionally a wave of water would be large enough to lazily sweep over the path, and the horses’ hooves would get wet, which they didn’t like. But Gwyn’s horse was responsive and calm, and so the rest followed his lead.

Now Mosk could hear the songbirds, chirping and cheeping, flashes of grey and dun, some with bright marks of yellow on their tops of their heads, or little bibs of grass green. The birds with the sweetest songs rarely looked the prettiest. Leaf told a story that they traded their handsome plumage and vibrant colours for vibrant voices, and Mosk closed his eyes and shut them out, wanting to banish the echo of Leaf’s gentle, measured voice. Would he have made a story out of this?

*He’s dead. It doesn’t matter.*

They all dismounted at the same time onto damp, grassy lawn. Tiny birds flew around them, twittering away, and Gwyn looked up at them and seemed a little exasperated. Mosk and Eran followed Augus and Gwyn beneath a large patio of more of that same shale roofing, walking into gloom. A large door towered, carved of one slab of stone. Intricate knotwork was carved into it. Two swans with their necks curled around each other’s, eyes closed and smiling. Above them, a knotwork of birds with ribbons, and the words: *In essence. Love.*

Gwyn lifted his hand to rap upon the door, when it opened. Standing there, with auburn curling hair, the pointed ears of the Tuatha De, a vision of sober beauty with ancient wisdom radiating from his eyes, stood King Oengus Og in a Mage’s motley robe of yellow, green and ivory diamonds. Birds fluttered and swooped around him, and he seemed unbothered by it. A golden circlet, an otherwise bared chest, and sandals. Before Mosk could see anything more, Oengus lifted a wooden flute to his lips.

‘Oengus,’ Gwyn said, in protest.

Three notes sounded, melodious and true. A faint pause and then a rush of magical songbirds, golden and bright, flooding from the doorway and hiding Oengus from sight. They whipped around Gwyn in their tiny thousands, rushing off into the sky and vanishing into sparks. The onslaught lasted several minutes, and when it stopped, Gwyn stood there calmly, his hair dishevelled and his expression unimpressed.
‘So the Unseelie King, Gwyn ap Nudd, the Great Betrayer, the Fallen Star, has appeared at my threshold.’ His voice was calculated, and Mosk thought his face could contain great warmth, except that there was something distant in his gaze, in the downward curve of his cupid’s mouth.

It didn’t help that he had two swords strapped to his sides, and a battle horn. Was he always so prepared for danger? He still held the Irish flute in his hands, and Mosk realised that must have been his Mage’s staff.

He wrapped his arms around himself and swayed a little.

More Mages. Was this one friends with Davix and Olphix? They’d all gone to the School of the Staff. King Oengus had probably been taught by them.

‘Are you here to do what the Seelie King will not?’ Oengus said, tilting his head, the circlet about his forehead glinting in the light. ‘Are you here to seek an end to these tumultuous times? Do you not cause them, by merely wandering about the earth?’

‘Perhaps,’ Gwyn said. ‘Oengus, we’ve fought together, side by side, you and I.’

A long pause, and Mosk knew that Oengus rarely said anything ill-considered. There were rumours that went that he could make magic simply by speaking. The Poet King.

‘We’ve killed your kin together, side by side, you and I,’ said Oengus. ‘Yet when I heard you approach with your base, cruel lover, and whomever these two might be, I knew that you would be searching for answers. You are ever the one who must solve a problem that concerns all of us, whether on the battlefield or no. Do you seek entrance?’

‘For myself, my companions,’ Gwyn said. ‘Oengus, for old time’s sake… I am here to claim no favours, but I must pass a message onto the Seelie Court. Communications aren’t working clearly, and you were the only Mage nearby that I thought might help me. I will be in your debt.’

‘Gwyn,’ Augus said, cautioning.

‘Too late, waterhorse,’ Oengus said, without looking away from Gwyn. ‘The words are spilled, and like blood we cannot look away. Leave me to decide what debt you might owe the one who wants for nothing except the impossible. And that, Gwyn ap Nudd, is something even you cannot deliver me.’

Oengus sighed, and then he looked beyond them all. Mosk turned to see that he was looking at the lake and the swans. That was all. When Oengus turned his gaze back to Gwyn once more, he seemed melancholy now. Not just serious. Some of the songbirds flying about his head landed upon his shoulders, calming.

‘It still pains you so?’ Gwyn said.

‘And forevermore, it shall,’ Oengus said. ‘Come inside. I already have a guest. But you’ll be familiar, no doubt. Now you shall tell me the names of your companions who I do not know, for I will not have unnamed fae within my tower. The spells won’t allow it.’

Gwyn turned and swept his hand towards Eran and Mosk. ‘This is Eran Iliakambar, Seelie son of Ifir and Adali, the last of the ambaros and blessed by Kabiri. This is Mosk Manytrees, Unseelie son of Amaley and Imshiel Manytrees, the last of the Aur dryads. He is unwell. We seek more than only communication.’

Oengus looked for a long time at Eran, and then his brown gaze finally settled on Mosk. In
response, Mosk’s heart beat a sickening rhythm in his chest, he swallowed down nausea. Oengus saw too much. Mosk didn’t know how. He just saw too much. Mosk had to blink down and stare at the stones with their mud stains on them instead. Oengus could have them be magically clean, but for some reason he didn’t.

Mosk flinched when tiny birds fluttered about his head. One landed on his shoulder, and Mosk cringed away.

‘I will leave you be, Mosk Manytrees. I apologise,’ Oengus said. ‘I invite you all into my tower, Gwyn ap Nudd, Augus Each Uisge, Eran Iliakambar and Mosk Manytrees. You are welcome.’

The birds left Mosk alone at once, and Mosk dared look up, but Oengus was already turning around and walking back into the gloom of his tower. Wall torches glowed at widely spaced intervals, frequently plunging them into shadows. The stone door closed with a boom behind them, and Eran flinched and turned, staring with wide eyes.

As they walked along, Mosk felt a strange tingling that started at his fingertips and then cloaked him. At first he thought it was magic. Then he realised – with the warming of his blood, the increasing heaviness of his breath – that it was…something like lust.

‘Ah,’ Augus said quietly, ‘I know who your guest is.’

‘What is this?’ Eran said, sounding indignant.

‘It is my guest,’ Oengus said. ‘He cannot help his natural dra’ocht. Master yourself.’

The feeling only got stronger as the corridor opened into a huge dining hall that looked like it hadn’t seen any joy at all for hundreds of years. Grey stone and Magelight, and cobwebs and bird’s nests up by the many windows. Occasionally droppings would fall onto one of the bare stone tables, which were covered in muck.

Sitting by the only clean table was another fae that stood when he saw them. He had the very long pointed ears of an aelf, and Mosk wondered at it, for he’d only seen a few others before at the Court. The fae bowed politely, straight black hair falling forwards and brushing his cheeks and jaw at the motion, and then stood back from the table, offering his own seat.

‘You’re after some new guests, now, Oengus,’ the fae said, directing a warm, soft gaze to Oengus. Mosk’s breathing was shallower, he thought his cock might be getting hard. This fae was doing it? Without even trying?

‘Gancanagh,’ Gwyn said. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘He is my guest,’ Oengus said. ‘He has been my guest before.’

Only Augus walked forwards, with an easy confidence. The Gancanagh straightened, his black eyes narrowing to a lazy, pleased smile. At that, the spike of heat in the air sharpened, and Gwyn shifted from foot to foot. Was he feeling it too? Oengus seemed to be the only one unaffected.

‘I’ve been his guest too,’ the Gancanagh said to Augus, walking forwards. ‘This man here, it’s him what saved me, to be sure. A pleasure it is, to see this face of yours again in these trying times.’

They embraced each other like old friends, and then kissed languidly on the mouth. The kiss wasn’t aggressive, but it was definitely intimate. When they drew back, Augus raised his hands and brushed his fingertips against the Gancanagh’s jaw.
‘You’re a sight for sore eyes. Truly, what brings you here?’

‘A rest, a safehouse, ’tis a place I’ve always come. Oengus cares not for my dra’ocht, and I like the poetical dreariness of the place. It’s good for smoking my dudeen, it is. And this man here, the King? Good day to you, Your Majesty, and fine things you’re doing for our Court now. This here one lost his way,’ he said, nodding towards Augus, ‘I’m glad to see he’s found it again.’

He idly scratched the obsidian black snake piercing that dangled and curled around the cartilage of one of his pointed ears.

‘Perhaps a luchorpan will find his luck then, tonight?’ the Gancanagh stared at each of them in turn, until finally he looked upon Mosk and his lips curled up, his expressive eyebrows arched. One was marred with a vicious scar, splitting it in two. ‘You’re a fine wee one now, aren’t you?’

‘I shall organise a repast,’ said Oengus, walking off, as though uninterested.

Augus drew up a chair next to the Gancanagh’s, and Gwyn sat opposite them both. Eventually, Eran and Mosk sat too. Mosk ended up at the head of the table, feeling awkward and dwarfed by the intimidating stone furniture. His cock was half-hard, but he didn’t think anyone else had escaped that influence. It was harder to concentrate than normal, and he stared at his fingers where they rested upon the polished stone.

The Gancanagh drew out his dudeen and a pouch of tobacco. He filled and packed it carefully, then stood up and walked over to Eran, bending down and offering the dudeen to Eran.

‘Young man, I see you have eyes of amber, will you help this luchorpan with a light?’

Eran hesitated, but no one intervened, and Eran reached up carefully with his fingers, placing them on the clay pipe, over the intricately carved charms of knotwork. Soon, the pipe smoked, and then filaments of tobacco glowed orange. The Gancanagh drew the pipe away, already smoking it, before blowing out a thin stream towards the ceiling. He sat down once more, and then leaned back lazily in this chair, pipe cradled in one hand and eyes trained on no one.

Mosk tried not to squirm in his chair and managed to not ask anyone to fuck him, but he thought that if they stayed here, he was going to find a way. It had been too long since he’d gotten laid.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘Stronger than Love:’

‘Don’t touch it,’ Oengus said, stepping forwards and looking over Mosk. ‘Don’t touch him.’

‘What’s happening?’ Eran said. ‘What’s happening to him? Is he doing it?’

‘No,’ Oengus said.

They both watched as Mosk arched, and then a pained whine spilled out of him. He absently clawed at his own chest.

Oengus lifted his Irish flute – his Mage’s staff made musical – to his lips, and played a short, disharmonic tone that hurt Eran’s ears even though it was soft. The colours that
had been smoothly rippling over Mosk’s body stopped, and then became frenzied. Oengus played the song again, even as Gwyn turned up in the doorway, sword at his side.

‘Don’t interrupt,’ Oengus said, holding up a hand to stop Gwyn, who already wasn’t moving. Then: ‘Olphix, you come into my home uninvited, you will at the least show yourself.’
Eran

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The whole place stunk of bird musk. Feathers. Bird shit.

He paced the room he’d been given – Mosk’s room adjoining – and didn’t like this cold, dreary place at all. Outside of the open stone window, swans swam on the still waters, fluting to each other, crooning noises. Birds zipped by. But the whole place felt damp and old, uncared for. He didn’t want to be here.

At least in this part of Oengus’ home, he couldn’t feel the Gancanagh’s glamour crawling into him and turning him inside out, like that other fae’s power had in Summervale.

That’s what it was like. Different, but still unwelcome, unwanted. Eran had looked at the fae that was the cause of everyone feeling different levels of arousal, and realised he couldn’t even push away the arousal in his own body, and the Gancanagh couldn’t – or wouldn’t – control it himself. He seemed quiet and kind enough, but it was probably easy to be both when he was controlling everyone around him.

He’d spent time at the long table, vaguely listening to them talking and acutely aware of his cock tight in his pants with his hands curled into tight fists. He felt like he was sitting back in that room in the tavern, Mosk being raped, even if he’d asked for it, that’s what it was. He felt like he was pinned in place by that horrid stare, unable to close his eyes, unable to move. Paralysed.

He curled his fingers in and out, he made a point of blinking just to prove to himself that he could. But he couldn’t wait to get out of there.

Oengus showed them to their rooms. He didn’t seem to have any servants. Gwyn and the Each Uisge were given a place on the lower level, and Mosk and Eran were above them, probably to make it harder for them to escape or something. Eran didn’t know. He just wanted to get clear of that influence. He felt like he couldn’t breathe.

He distracted himself by pulling sap out of his pack. He looked at two flasks and walked through the large archway into Mosk’s room. They didn’t even have a door between their rooms to offer privacy. And the wooden door that led into Mosk’s room had engravings of animals mating upon it, which was both unexpectedly carnal and led Eran to realise they’d been placed in some kind of strange bridal suite. With separate rooms.

‘You should eat,’ Eran said. He handed both flasks to Mosk, who took them and looked at both considering, before taking the caps off them and sniffing. He sat on the bed, legs drawn up under him. He had shadows upon his wrists, too light to look like bad bruising, but still there like a beacon. He was surprised no one else had commented on them.

Eran couldn’t stop himself from staring, and then he forced himself to walk away and stare out the window. At all that water. He shuddered.

‘I don’t like it here,’ he said.
‘There’s a bed,’ Mosk said. ‘The Gancanagh seems all right. I don’t like Oengus.’

‘Are your wrists okay?’

Mosk looked up, the flask halfway to his mouth. He looked down at one wrist, then the other, and then nodded, looking away.

Eran didn’t know what had possessed him to do what he’d done while they’d been on the road. It was only that Mosk kept grasping at his wrists, and Eran wanted to help, and he wanted to…offer some kind of interaction that was more than what he’d had so far. It was natural at the time to do it. To shoo Mosk’s hands away from his own wrists and take over.

He’d had lovers that he’d held down by the wrists. He’d pinned them by their hips or waist. He was used to taking over in the bedroom, used to lovers that enjoyed it, used to laughing about it with them. But there was no laughter with Mosk, and every small thing he did could have momentous consequences and he never knew what they’d be.

Mosk wasn’t a lover. Eran couldn’t imagine Mosk ever being ready for any kind of sex that might be healthy. Yet what he’d done with Mosk’s wrists went beyond simple comfort, and Eran didn’t understand why he’d done it.

He didn’t understand why he wanted to do it again.

‘Did it help?’ Eran said haltingly.

Mosk nodded and his cheeks were definitely flushed now. Eventually, Mosk turned away – just a little – and began drinking the sap in slow, steady sips. Eran watched him swallow it down, watched his throat, then looked outside of the window again, wondering if he’d not fully shaken the Gancanagh’s influence.

‘His power is awful,’ Eran said. ‘It’s awful. How can anyone live with that? Oengus must be charmed to not be affected. No wonder some Unseelie fae just get killed for who they are. I’m amazed no one’s done it so far.’

‘The Gancanagh?’ Mosk said, sounding confused. ‘He can’t help it. After- You could say that about the miskatin, but the Gancanagh?’

‘Yes!’ Eran said, turning back, reeling back the fire that coursed through him, tickling at the edges of his fingertips. ‘Of course! He doesn’t even ask, he just does it.’

Mosk’s eyebrows arched. ‘Why is it bothering you so much?’

‘How do you not mind it?’

Mosk shrugged. Eran wondered what would happen if he just shook Mosk really hard for a long time. Probably nothing except sap spilling. He grit his teeth together and leaned against the windowsill after checking it for bird shit.

‘It’s like Summervale,’ Eran said, though he wasn’t sure it was a good idea to talk about any of this.

Mosk just looked at him like he didn’t understand, and Eran stared at Mosk’s unlit fireplace. He wanted to shove his hands in it and make the fire come, like he’d done in his own room. Instead, he grounded the heat rising in him down to his feet, so it dispersed through the stone.
‘That last…fae. When he paralysed me. Before we got our proper room.’

Saying that much felt like choking, and he wanted to rub his arms to get rid of the gooseflesh. Mosk just stared back, uncomprehending. For the first time, Eran wondered what Mosk actually remembered of that evening. Then again, why would Mosk have known that anything at all happened to Eran? Aside from Eran being threatened by the fae, it wasn’t like Eran had explained what the fae had done to him. He’d never properly explained why they had to leave as soon as they left.

‘He paralysed you?’ Mosk said. ‘But he was there for me, not for you.’

Eran didn’t want to talk about it. He half-believed he deserved what happened anyway, for selling Mosk off for a room. After a few seconds, he walked out of Mosk’s room and back into his own. He sat down by the fireplace, and wished the stones didn’t still feel so cold. He pressed his palms flat to them and sent heat into them, but he knew it wouldn’t last. The lake radiated a gloomy wetness into the place, and Eran couldn’t convince the stones to hold the heat for long. King Oengus was the guardian of the tower, and guardians could innately keep homes clean, immaculate, so he must have liked the moisture in the air, the bird shit everywhere.

Slow but steady steps, and Eran looked up to see Mosk leaning against the doorway holding a flask of sap, still sipping at it. His eyes were trained on Eran, the gaze unnervingly direct.

‘I don’t remember much of Summervale,’ Mosk said over the rim of the flask. ‘Just that we needed somewhere to stay and I was fucked and then we stayed somewhere. And then we left. Everything after was far more memorable.’

Eran supposed it would have been. They’d seen Davix not long after.

‘You talk about it,’ Mosk said. ‘A lot. But I don’t even remember what happened. I didn’t know something happened to you.’

‘I didn’t tell you.’

Marvel of marvels, that Mosk was actually talking to him. Initiating civil conversation. Eran felt strangely tense, waiting for it to end. Mosk had a way of turning phrases, making Eran regret opening his mouth at all. Was Mosk angry about what Eran had done to his wrists?

‘But you were paralysed,’ Mosk said, looking down.

‘The last one, he just- He made it so that I couldn’t look away. Or blink. Or…move, really. I didn’t like it.’

‘He was only fucking me.’

A flash of frustration came and went. How could Mosk even understand? Eran shifted on the floor and flooded more heat into the stones, wishing that the fireplace was larger.

‘He made you watch,’ Mosk said, like it was a puzzle.

‘I didn’t want to,’ Eran said, ‘and he made me.’

‘The Gancanagh isn’t the same.’

‘Honestly, I don’t care. He shouldn’t be allowed to do it. What does he even feed on?’
‘Unrequited love,’ Mosk said. ‘The lust is his glamour, it helps him hunt. But unrequited love is the food. Humans pine after him, and he eats that.’

Eran wanted to be disgusted, but he wasn’t. At least he didn’t feed on his lust. It seemed to just be a byproduct of his unchangeable, Unseelie appetite. Eran had long come to accept that for all the problems he had with the Unseelie, they couldn’t help their biology any more than a shark or a spider.

‘But…’ Mosk said, as though feeling out his sentence, ‘it’s not nice to be made to feel things you don’t want to feel.’

Shock made his fingers scrape on the stone as he looked up. He hadn’t expected anything like empathy. He hadn’t even known that Mosk was capable of it. Mosk tended to watch Eran’s nightmares and his pain with – at best – a kind of alien curiosity.

‘It’s not,’ Eran said, staring at him.

‘At least his glamour doesn’t reach up here,’ Mosk said. He waited a few more seconds, and then turned and walked away back into his own room. Eran heard him settle on his bed. After a couple of minutes, Eran scooted onto the raised hearth and leaned back against the stone legs, sighing to be so close to the fire in a place so wet and cold.

The next morning, breakfast was served at the long stone table they’d sat at the day before. Two pots of porridge and some apples. Gwyn was already there eating porridge when Eran risked coming down. Gwyn wore far more casual wear than Eran had seen him in; a peasant shirt of cream linen, the collar dipping low enough to show a pattern of dark bruising across one collarbone. Eran stared at it, and Gwyn watched him, before eventually twitching up the fabric and continuing to eat.

Eran couldn’t feel the Gancanagh’s power, which was a relief.

‘Sleep well?’ Eran risked saying, as he spooned some porridge into a wooden bowl. He couldn’t burn a host’s bowl, but at least the porridge was already cooked. It was very plain, and he wondered if Oengus had ever heard of any kind of spice.

‘I didn’t sleep,’ Gwyn said.

Eran wondered what the bruises were from. Certainly not killing the fae the day before with his light. Eran’s eyes looked to Gwyn’s hands, but they were almost completely healed now. Except for the bruises around his wrists.

Eran stared.

‘And you?’ Gwyn said, looking from Eran’s gaze to the bruises on his own wrists, before sighing. He kept eating.

Eran knew how people got those kinds of bruises. He knew because Mosk had a pale facsimile of those bruises on his wrists now, he knew because he’d given them to other fae. But Gwyn was King, he had an incredible healing capacity, which meant that unless he’d just been given them, the bruises must have been far worse than what they were now. Maybe they’d even broken the skin.

He knew of the Each Uisge’s reputation, but he’d just assumed…
He also knew of Gwyn’s reputation on the battlefield. His father said Gwyn didn’t do it as much with the Unseelie military – rutting after battle – but that he’d been famous for it once. Soldiers gossiped amongst each other, they were known for it. Afrit stood around campfires assuming that the Each Uisge took it up the ass and liked it.

So then why…

‘Eran,’ Gwyn said, his voice impatient.

‘What? Right. Fine. I slept. What happens now? Are you going to go to the Seelie Court?’

‘First, I need to get Oengus to send a message for me. We’ve tried a few other lesser mages, and they haven’t been able to get through on communication channels to the Unseelie Court. I’m certain our tracking spells aren’t working, or that Fenwrel’s ability to work any kind of locating or communication magic has been tampered with. She would have been in touch otherwise. It will be easiest for us to stay still in one location for a time, and Oengus is a fierce Mage and fighter. It was the safest place I could think of.’

‘Is it true that the swans in the lake are like…related to him?’

‘It’s true,’ Gwyn said. ‘They’re his great, great, great…grandchildren. Add in a few more greats and you’ll get the idea. He’s out feeding them right now.’

‘He tolerates you. I’m- I didn’t expect… After how the Seelie Court turned against you.’

Gwyn smiled a little, reaching for two apples after clearing out his bowl of porridge.

‘Oengus has never been one for Court politics,’ Gwyn said, ‘which helped. We’ve fought side by side, which also helped. It’s been over ten years – no small thing even though we live for so long. I suspect he can divine more truth than rumour from what’s out there.’

‘There are a lot of rumours,’ Eran said, serving more porridge for himself. He hoped it wouldn’t make him queasy, but it was definitely well-cooked.

‘Some of them are ours,’ Gwyn said, grinning. ‘The Seelie have their own. Some of them even look the same. Not many know the real truth.’

‘That you deceived the Court for three thousand years?’

Gwyn’s grin turned sharp, even as he bit into the apple. It split nearly in half and Gwyn seemed unphased at the huge mouthful, eating like a hyena might. Eran had the weirdest feeling that he didn’t know the whole truth at all. But Gwyn was a liar. Eran’s eyes dropped to the bruises on one of Gwyn’s wrists, and then he looked at his own bowl and kept eating. He couldn’t trust anything about Gwyn, even if Gwyn had done well by Eran and Mosk so far, he was also doing it to his own ends.

When Eran was done, he pushed his bowl back and looked up at the birds flying across the ceiling. The silence was almost companionable and he spent some time just thinking about the situation he found himself in. There were a lot of swallow nests in the rafters above. Oengus really liked tiny birds. Eran wondered if he liked them even before he’d gone and had a bunch of swan babies.

‘Are the swans out there shifters?’ Eran said.

Gwyn, who was on his fifth apple, shrugged. He nodded his head as though indicating someone, and Eran turned and saw Oengus in the archway leading to the front of the tower. He felt
embarrassed, but Oengus only walked calmly towards them, swords strapped to his side, melancholy eyes not looking away from Eran.

‘There are some that could shift if they wished to,’ Oengus said, ‘but many no longer remember any life except that of a swan. They have no dreams of any form except their true form. Good morning to you.’

‘Good morning.’

Oengus pulled up a chair next to Gwyn, before leaning forwards to look at how many apples were left. Gwyn didn’t even leave cores behind. Oengus looked at Gwyn, who didn’t seem bothered with someone noticing how much he could eat.

A strong hand reached out and grasped Gwyn’s forearm, and at that, Gwyn stilled. Eran felt the tension in the air ratchet so sharply that his breath faltered.

‘Interesting,’ Oengus said, touching an index finger to the bruises on Gwyn’s wrist. ‘The Gancanagh’s glamour? Or was the Each Uisge taken with the romance of the place? A weaving of both. At least my tower is being used for love once more. It has been ever so long.’

Oengus let go and pursed his lips. He didn’t seem to care about what Gwyn’s response would be. After a moment he placed his Irish flute on the table and placed his fingers lightly upon it.

‘It will be a significant working, to break through Olphix’s and Davix’s ropes upon the communication channels between Mages. It may take some days. It will not be a working of but an hour.’

‘You know it’s them?’ Eran said. ‘Why isn’t- Why isn’t anyone doing anything about them? Are they really that strong?’

‘I was born to the river Boann and High King Dagda,’ Oengus said slowly, eyes turning wistful. ‘I was fostered to Midir, and killed Elcmar for killing him. Many years passed and I became a Mage with the School of the Staff. Many years passed and I became one of the Thirteen, holding its power and the school itself, tutoring there. I began to have strange dreams of a love so strong I would never feel anything else like it. I dreamt of a beautiful woman, taking my breath away every evening, and the love I felt for her – this dream woman – stole my thoughts and my passions and my wants and I could think of nothing else.

‘So I left the School of the Staff and I retired from the Thirteen, and I searched. Those remaining in my family helped me search though they thought it was folly. Those of my friends helped me search though they thought I was a fool. But this love, Eran Iliakambar, was so strong, so eternal, that I could do nothing but search for her. Every evening, I dreamed of her.

‘Eventually, I found her. Caer Ibormeith. A cursed swan-maiden who was only allowed to leave her true form once a year, on Samhain. And I, one of the strongest Mages, who had once tutored Mages in the arts of song and charm and wordplay, who had even tutored Davix and Olphix to strengthen their skills – I could not break her curse. So, instead, I became a swan.

‘We lived together in lakes and skies, singing our songs, a blissful infinity of the like that will never be seen again. Eventually, she was slaughtered, and I remembered that I had another form and became Tuatha De once more,’ Oengus gestured to his current form, his pointed ears, his auburn curling hair like the turning leaves in fall forests. ‘I was heartbroken, but the love remained and will ever remain. I will never love another like I loved Caer Ibormeith, and my life will be
ruled by that truth until the day I die. Now, to answer your question, Davix’s and Olphix’s powers are far stronger than that love. They are stronger than the members of the Thirteen. They are stronger than the School of the Staff.’

Eran didn’t know what to say. Oengus’ words were like stones, or bricks being laid on a giant wall that would stop Eran from being able to see those who had killed his family, destroyed Sounhaqh. He thought of Mosk’s hopelessness, his insistence that even knowing what Mosk knew wouldn’t help anything. Even Gwyn admitted they were too strong.

‘Why did you let them get this powerful?’ Eran said slowly. ‘Why would anyone let that kind of power run unchecked?’

‘They were this powerful before I was born,’ Oengus said. ‘They are relics of a time almost no one remembers.’

Gwyn was looking pensively at Oengus. For someone who was facing down an enemy so frightening, he didn’t look all that bothered by it.

‘Can we lock them in the underworlds, like Gwyn did with the Nightingale?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said. ‘And it doesn’t solve anything. Nor does it remove the plague of ice, which doesn’t seem to be running out of steam on its own.’

‘Meanwhile your waterhorse slowly starves,’ Oengus said, staring at Gwyn.

‘He’s gone longer without hunting.’

‘I assume you talk of that time in which he resided in the Seelie Court,’ Oengus said. The words were calm, but there was something in the way he said them that made Gwyn’s back straighten. Even Eran felt more alert. ‘But presumably he was still in the prison for some time. He is not being still now. Have you considered if the veils are down for a year? Two years? Two hundred?’

It was clear that Gwyn had. He didn’t respond, but he didn’t look comfortable with the way the conversation had turned.

‘Inner Court status means he won’t die from it, but it will hurt him and every other fae that can’t die from starvation. The ones who can are already beginning to feel it. They will become desperate, Gwyn ap Nudd. What then? What will the King of the Unseelie do then?’

‘It is so like you,’ Gwyn said, a half-smile on his face, ‘to live in the future instead of daring to stay in the present, where we might actually see change done. Why don’t you reel yourself down from imagining dire straits in two hundred years’ time? Work on getting me a line to the Unseelie Court, would you?’

Oengus smiled and stood. He pointed to the almost empty bowl of apples. ‘I forgot your appetite.’

‘I can hunt for myself, if you wish.’

‘Nay, just avail yourself of the kitchen directly. I’ll not lug up sacks of apples for you, when most of us do fine with one or two.’

With that, Oengus excused himself. When he was gone, Eran said:

‘I thought more of them would hate you. The Seelie.’
'They do,' Gwyn said, laughing. ‘Were you not there at the marketplace? They would have tried to kill us.’

‘But Oengus Og treats with you like…a friend.’

‘I am a guest in his house,’ Gwyn said, standing and pushing out from the table. ‘But I suppose he does. Honestly, Eran, it surprises me as much as it does you, sometimes, what corners mercy can come from.’

Eran was left sitting at the table by himself, a hundred birds in the huge ceiling above him, singing endlessly.

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Oengus apparently needed to be on his own for the magic he needed to work to break through the communication barrier. The Gancanagh may have been around, but Eran avoided spending too much time outside of the rooms they were given. He didn’t want to feel any of that arousal he couldn’t control, and he felt like a coward, like he was missing out. He wondered how Mosk dealt with it, except Mosk just seemed to prefer to be left alone in a quiet space.

‘I think the Each Uisge is the one who…’ Eran trailed off, because he didn’t know how to finish that sentence. It was a strange subject to bring up with Mosk anyway. He didn’t leave though. He sat in an old wooden chair by Mosk’s window, because even though he didn’t want anything to do with the Gancanagh, he didn’t want to be completely on his own all the time.

‘The one who what?’

A novelty, to have Mosk actually engaging with him, talking to him. Eran still expected it to stop at any moment. Mosk still had his moments – hours really – of staring off into space, after all.

‘It’s nothing,’ Eran said, and then he laughed. ‘I mean it’s gossip. So it doesn’t matter.’

‘You could still tell me,’ Mosk said.

‘I think the Each Uisge is the one who fucks the King? In the bedroom? Gwyn had bruises on his wrists this morning, like yours. But way worse. Like- And on his collarbone too.’

Mosk shifted where he was laying on pillows and rolled to his side to face Eran. Then he shrugged.

‘That doesn’t surprise you?’ Eran said.

‘They were probably taking advantage of the Gancanagh’s glamour. Or maybe that’s just what they would’ve done anyway. He is the King’s consort.’

‘But I thought- How could…?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk said. ‘I don’t know much about those kinds of things.’

‘But you like it when I hold your wrists,’ Eran said. His ears were burning. His whole body felt strange. Had he been wanting to talk about this all along? He didn’t even know. Mosk was pretty enough, but Mosk was also a mess, and Eran usually liked the people he felt attraction for to be complication free. Sex was supposed to be easy and fun and full of joy. Mosk was…none of those things.

Yet Eran’s palms felt itchy to try it again. As though there was one part of his life he could control,
and by some miracle, Mosk just happened to like it too.

Mosk looked down at his wrists. The bruising was already gone.

‘I think so,’ Mosk said. ‘I don’t know much about those kinds of things, either.’

‘Should I do it again?’

‘You should fuck me.’

‘You don’t want me to fuck you, you want anyone to fuck you. I could have a sack on my face and you still wouldn’t care.’

Mosk closed his eyes. ‘Do you think the Gancanagh would?’

‘I don’t want to think about what the Gancanagh wants,’ Eran said abruptly. ‘Why are you like this?’

‘I’m so tired,’ Mosk said, rolling onto his back. He’d been quite alert, but now his movements were heavy, weak. He lay a limp hand on his face. ‘Feel strange.’

Maybe Eran had kicked it off. He’d been pestering Mosk with questions, making him talk, and Mosk was still unwell. Eran stood up and almost apologised, but in the end he just went back to his room, leaving Mosk to sleep, stirring in his own agitated, twisting thoughts.

*

Eran felt strange too, though he wrote it off to a combination of the Gancanagh being somewhere in the tower, and Oengus doing whatever magic he needed to do in order to fix whatever was going on in the world of magic. Eran didn’t know much about it. He had some capacity, especially for fire magic, but he’d never been interested in going into magecraft, and his magic wasn’t out of control or anything, so he didn’t need to go just to make himself safe to be around anyway.

His sisters were way better at it. His mother… She could have been a great magician of flames and fire, but she’d always said that she was in no rush, that she’d always have time in the future to go in that direction if she wanted to.

The bed was too soft beneath his back. He pressed his hands over his face and couldn’t seem to stop himself thinking of his family. The air prickled around him. It was sharp and needling, like he couldn’t quite draw full breaths without puncturing himself. The dark pressed in on him, even though he could hear the fire in the fireplace crackling away. The room was warm, but it felt stifling. Did he need air? Was it the damp from the lake?

Mosk had been tossing and turning since he’d fallen asleep. An hour before, he’d started letting off small, wounded noises. Eran had checked on him a couple of times, but they just seemed to be nightmares. Eran didn’t think he should wake him.

Another low noise, a mumbling of some distressed sentence, and Mosk’s voice trailed up at the end in a question. He sounded plaintive. Somehow more vulnerable than Mosk had ever sounded around Eran, even though Eran had seen him terrified.

The noises came closer together, and Eran gave up on falling asleep, dropping his hands from his face and noticing the orange glow in his room.

The orange glow…
He sat upright, staring at the glow of colour coming from Mosk’s room, pulsing with a sick dinge. He grabbed his kh’anzar without thinking and ran through their shared doorway. He stared, mouth open, as Mosk was enveloped in swirling reds, oranges, yellows. Mosk himself was covered in sweat, distressed, but asleep. Was Mosk doing it?

Eran looked around, but no one was there. A split second to decide what to do, and he ran to Mosk’s bedside. First he touched his sabre to the colours, afraid of touching the prickling, shifting magic that felt suffocating even from a distance. The sabre seemed fine, so Eran reached out to touch it, his fingers shaking.

Pounding footsteps beyond the door, and then it slammed open and Oengus was there, large sword in one hand and Irish flute in the other, his eyes bright and hard, his hair wild. He wore his Mage’s motley coat, and it fluttered around him, the colours rippling.

‘Don’t touch it,’ Oengus said, stepping forwards and looking over Mosk. ‘Don’t touch him.’

‘What’s happening?’ Eran said. ‘What’s happening to him? Is he doing it?’

‘No,’ Oengus said.

They both watched as Mosk arched, and then a pained whine spilled out of him. He absently clawed at his own chest.

Oengus lifted his Irish flute – his Mage’s staff made musical – to his lips, and played a short, disharmonic tone that hurt Eran’s ears even though it was soft. The colours that had been smoothly rippling over Mosk’s body stopped, and then became frenzied. Oengus played the song again, even as Gwyn turned up in the doorway, sword at his side.

‘Don’t interrupt,’ Oengus said, holding up a hand to stop Gwyn, who already wasn’t moving. Then: ‘Olphix, you come into my home uninvited, you will at the least show yourself.’

The colours of flame withdrew like smoke, flowing off the bed, and Eran got out of the way quickly when they assembled themselves into a ghost of a person standing there, Mage’s wand in one hand, two necklaces around his neck. This Mage was tall, handsome, even as he glowed like embers. A fiery warmth to Davix’s coolness. They were identical though. They could have been the same person. Mosk remained asleep, a trail of blood trickled from his nose. Eran wondered if he was even conscious, he breathed so shallowly.

‘You as good as invited me. You drew me here, how devilish of you,’ said Olphix, for it must have been him. His voice faded in and out, its volume inconsistent, as though Olphix had to fight to keep his form, to be heard. But his Mage’s motley was clear, his gaze moving leisurely between Mosk and Oengus. ‘Your magic is a song heard the world around, of course I came to pay audience to it.’

‘To the song? Or to him?’ Oengus said, indicating Mosk. He moved closer to Mosk and passed his wooden flute over him, and a pale light infused his skin. Eran had no idea what it meant.

Gwyn stepped into the room, and Olphix looked at him.

‘Gwyn ap Nudd, in the flesh. High time we met. Apologies for the incorporeality, you see, I came as soon as I could.’

‘Why have you made the plague of ice?’ Gwyn said, voice hard, strident. ‘And why have you blocked fae from teleporting?’

‘Why are there stars in the sky, and why is there water in the seas?’ Olphix said, and then he
looked at Mosk. ‘Perhaps, Gwyn, it wasn’t even me.’

‘You have taken his heartsong, his family, his forest, and now you return to him on a night when Oengus is doing magic? What else is there left to take?’

‘I was only visiting,’ Olphix said, his filmy form moving closer to Mosk. He casually touched his wand to the bed, and Mosk screamed. The pale light that had infused Mosk vanished, and the dingy orange-red returned.

A brief, jarring song on the flute dispelled it once more, and Mosk sagged back to the bed. Gwyn had his sword up now, even though he couldn’t do anything with it.

‘You ask what I’ve taken from him,’ Olphix said, spinning his wand in his fingers and beginning to fade. ‘Perhaps you should ask him what he’s taken from me.’

‘So tell us,’ Gwyn commanded.

‘Child, how is it that you cannot already know something so cruelly momentous already? And you, Oengus, you’re trying to break my spell? But it’s such a pretty one.’

‘Get out,’ Oengus said, ‘before I cast you out.’

‘Big words from a bird that lives in a midden of memories. I can relate, almost,’ Olphix said. ‘Well, I won’t stop you. You’ve always been the master of song and words, which was always fascinating, really. You’ll not let me stay and finish up? I was nearly done with this.’ Olphix waved his wand-hand towards Mosk casually.

Eran wanted to be angry. He wanted to be furious. He couldn’t even properly feel his own fire. Something about Olphix’s manifestation sucked all the warmth from the room.

‘Leave,’ Oengus said.

‘If you don’t want someone to answer the summons of your songs, then don’t summon them,’ Olphix chastised, sounding like a school teacher.

‘If you don’t want to be summoned, then let not your filthy, wretched words sully the entire world of Mages.’

Olpix only looked at Mosk once more. He reached out with his wand-hand, wand pointing towards the bed again, a lazy kind of curiosity on his face. Eran tensed, Gwyn stepped forwards, but it was Oengus who jumped onto the bed – motley coat flaring – and pushed his own flute forward. Olphix jerked backwards, not letting himself be touched by Oengus’ form.

‘You might be one of the most powerful Mages in existence,’ Oengus said, his voice resonating with threat, ‘but you are incorporeal in the home of a Master Mage who once carried the Thirteen. You may have dominion over the world, over the subjects of that world, but you do not have dominion in this tower.’

The words themselves rung out, and Olphix vanished, the colour in the room dying and all of them left standing there in the dark.

‘I would have liked to question him more,’ Gwyn said angrily.

‘If you think you’ll get the answers you want from someone like him, you are more foolish than I first thought,’ said Oengus, jumping off Mosk’s bed – who was still unconscious or sleeping – and
walking to the window. He passed the hand holding his flute over it, and the window glowed briefly, that same pale green-ivory colour of before.

‘He wants to talk,’ Gwyn said.

‘He’s upset that I’m making progress in breaching his spell, and he came to make mischief. It is what he does. Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I have my work to get back to.’

‘And Mosk?’ Gwyn said.

‘Likely Olphix was scouring for any leftover power, but this one is barren. They did it right the first time. He’ll loosen from the enchantment over his sleep in an hour. I can force him now, but the experience is already traumatising for him. Do you wish to wait by his side?’

Gwyn looked at Eran, who nodded like he was asked a question. ‘I can wait. I was up already.’

‘I shall sense if Olphix returns,’ Oengus said soberly, ‘though I doubt he’ll attempt it again with additional wards. If you notice anything out of the ordinary, come and fetch one of us. Good evening.’

Oengus swept out, his coat billowing behind him. The outline of the ward on the window glowed occasionally, but otherwise it didn’t look like he’d done anything at all.

Gwyn stood on the other side of the bed, then lowered his sword. He wasn’t even wearing his sheath.

‘How did you know to come up here?’ Eran said, rubbing his face and looking over at Mosk. The prickly energy in the air had faded, Eran’s fire – which hadn’t felt banked but must have been – stirred to life, feeling homely after all the agitated heat of whatever Olphix’s magic had been. He took a breath, and then another one, and realised where he’d felt that before. ‘Oolphix must have burned down the Aur forest. The fire feels the same.’

‘It does,’ Gwyn said grimly. ‘It’s why I came. I thought someone had set the floors alight.’

‘You didn’t know his magical signature before now?’

‘Oolphix doesn’t like to show himself. It’s usually his brother who does the dealing.’ Gwyn groaned softly. ‘I much prefer enemies I can run through with a blade. Do you want me to wait with you? I can.’

Eran thought of what it would be like, waiting up here in silence with the King of the Unseelie fae. He didn’t feel unsafe, exactly, knowing Oengus was in the building, that Gwyn could sense the magic himself, but he didn’t want to spend that much time in an awkward situation if it could be avoided. He also felt like Mosk shouldn’t have a lot of people crowding him when he woke up. It was strange enough as it was, all of them talking over Mosk’s limp, clammy body, like he didn’t matter, even though Oolphix visited *him*, not Oengus.

Secretly, Eran wanted to know if it was about the curses that Oolphix had set upon him. If that swirling bright-fire magic were new curses, or some other torment.

‘I think I’ll just wait it out on my own, if that’s okay,’ Eran said.

‘Of course. Well. I’ll be awake if you need me.’ Gwyn nodded his head. ‘Good evening.’

‘Goodnight.’
Gwyn closed the door quietly behind him, and Eran walked over to Mosk’s bed and sat at the end of it, placing his palm flat against the bed. After a moment, he thumbed away the trickle of blood from Mosk’s nose, licking his index finger absently to rub at the parts that had started to dry. Mosk didn’t shift once.

Maybe it was wrong of him to send Gwyn away, but Eran needed to know if Mosk could talk about what had happened to him, and he still wasn’t ready to betray Mosk’s secret. It was a strange pact between them. Mosk had broken that curse saving Eran’s life.

Mosk’s scream when a ghostly, incorporeal Olphix had only touched his wand to the bed haunted him. Eran was the last person Mosk would go to for comfort, but Eran felt that somehow, he cared more about Mosk as a person than Oengus or Gwyn did. The King saw Mosk as a potentially necessary tool for figuring out a puzzle, and Oengus saw him as an empty vessel that once held magic.

So Eran sat there and waited, unsure of what Mosk was to him, but knowing that it was important Mosk have someone there who didn’t think he was expendable.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Night Terrors:'

‘I need to tell you something before he curses me again.’

‘He won’t curse you again,’ Eran said fiercely.

Mosk laughed high and wild into his knees. Eran moved closer, and Mosk thought he did want that, even as he thought Eran was maybe the stupidest fae he’d ever met. Olphix would do whatever he wanted. Olphix hated him. Mosk had never been hated like that before, not ever, in his whole life. He would have quailed if someone regular had hated him like that. Would have cowered and wanted it to be over.

But when it was one of the strongest Mages in the world, finding him in his dreams just to terrorise him…

‘I have to,’ Mosk said, convincing himself. He didn’t want to talk about any of it. He didn’t want to remember. He wanted to be wrong. If he didn’t say the words, then his family wouldn’t be dead. It was just a nightmare of them torturing him, a fever dream he’d wake up from. ‘I have to.’
Night Terrors

Chapter Notes

Hi folks! Some quick housekeeping:

The Ice Plague is going on a 5 week hiatus at the very least after this chapter, as I start radiotherapy on head/neck cancer next week and it runs for five weeks. I'm pretty happy with where this chapter will leave us (it's a MASSIVE chapter re: what it reveals), but I apologise for the hiatus! I'm hoping once I come back things flow a lot more smoothly from here on out. :D /crosses fingers

(Glen said to think of it like a 'mid-season break' lol).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mosk

*

When the pain cleared enough that his voice wasn’t locked up in his chest, Mosk realised he could scream.

In the end, it was the sounds ripping out of his chest that woke him up, and he bolted upright, slamming both hands over his mouth and trying to blink the image of flames out of his mind. Flames and that voice and that magic and that pain.

At first he thought he was back in the cabin with them.

But the place smelled of stone and damp, not wood and smoke. He clawed at his own face as he tried to understand…

He’d been trapped. Olphix had come to him, and he’d been trapped. Normally his nightmares were of old things. His family dying. The cabin. The Mages. Now it was something new. Olphix coming and talking to him in that disappointed voice, his disapproval meaning torture would follow.

Had he been trapped for hours? Could someone dream for that long?

As his vision cleared, Mosk realised that Eran was there in the room, watching with something like fear on his face. Mosk stared at him, heart knocking in his chest, limbs still shaking, skin crawling. Eran took several steps closer, and Mosk wanted to cringe backwards, but focused on sucking down air instead.

‘Olpix,’ Mosk said, mouth opening and closing. He didn’t know how to convey any of what had happened.

‘Yes,’ Eran said, sounding…sympathetic? Was it just a nightmare? That had been no nightmare. ‘He came to you. Oengus came and warded the windows and sent him away. Are you- Are you okay? Did he curse you again?’

He came to me?
Olphix, here, and Mosk looked around wildly for any sign of the Mage. He could see none, but it didn’t change the sharp pains in his chest, the awful confirmation of learning it wasn’t just a nightmare, some thing his mind had manufactured. Olphix could visit his dreams.

‘Did he curse you again?’ Eran said.

‘I don’t…’ Mosk shook his head, reaching up and clawing at his hair. Did he? Olphix had wanted to, but then he’d gone. He’d left Mosk paralysed in some place, limbs shaking with pain. Mosk hadn’t wanted to care. He was supposed to stop caring!

It was the only way to make it hurt less.

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk said.

‘Try something,’ Eran said. ‘Try saying anything.’

He killed my family.

Mosk whined thinly and knocked the back of his fist into his forehead, as though he could drive that voice away. Olphix had come, had stood over him, had tormented him for fun, and talked to him idly and said something about being called here. Being called. But how could Mosk have called him?

‘How did he do that?’ Mosk said. ‘How? He’s never- Never done that before.’

‘Oengus said it was because of his magic to break the communication barriers. Because it’s Olphix’s spell, he can come if another Mage interferes with it, but he came to you. I- I couldn’t wake you. He hurt you, didn’t he?’

Mosk didn’t have words for the way Olphix could make him hurt. Olphix just had to point his wand and Mosk’s nerves turned to fire. He knew Olphix could make him feel like he was burning to death too, what he hadn’t realised was how many times he could do it. His family had lived through it once. Mosk, on the other hand…

‘Mosk,’ Eran said, voice urgent. ‘Talk to me.’

Somehow, Mosk knew he wasn’t cursed again. At least, not with an inability to talk about what happened. He felt as though he were on the edge of a cliff looking down. The rocks below would smash him up and he’d never be able to talk about what happened, what was done. Olphix would only have to lightly push him, not even touch him, and Mosk would fall.

It was Olphix who had come to him, in his robe of diamonds that reminded him of flames. Not Davix. And now Mosk wondered…

‘I need…’ Mosk said, his voice shaking. His knees drew up until they were touching his chest. He wrapped his arms around them, staring ahead, trying to convince himself that he was safe.

But Olphix had found him here, in another Mage’s home.

He squeezed his eyes shut, wished that Eran wasn’t there. Wished that Eran would move closer. Wanted to tear his own hair out, claw the bark off his arms, scream into his palms until his throat bled. But he’d screamed like that before, and his throat was already sore.

‘I need to tell you something,’ Mosk whispered. His voice broke.
He’d been sure he was wrong about something. Now, he didn’t know what to think. Not after that. He needed to say it, he had to, they’d taken everything from him, and all he had left was his own memories, and if they were locked inside of him again with no chance of speaking them, maybe he’d gouge his own eyes out.

Omphix would like that.

‘I need to tell you something before he curses me again.’

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‘So tell me,’ Eran said. Then a hand rested on his shin. Mosk twitched from the gentle touch. Then he a flash of movement, he lashed out and dragged his nails down the back of Eran’s palm, hissing like an animal.

His wrist was grabbed, fingers clenching around it, and Mosk yanked back once – Eran refusing to let him go – and then made a small sound of relief. It helped. He’d never understand why, but it helped. Even his breathing seemed wrapped up in that tight grip. It settled just enough that his mind cleared. His fingers went limp, and Eran moved closer so that he could keep holding Mosk’s wrist like that.

‘Tell me,’ Eran said.

Eran was supposed to be frightening. His eyes were brighter than usual, that honey-gold amber that Mosk couldn’t stop associating with tree resin. He was made of fire. He was like Omphix. But somehow it was just easier to tell the difference, especially after being visited by Omphix once more. Eran wasn’t Omphix, Eran was annoying and didn’t understand a lot of things and hadn’t run off to tell Gwyn and Augus his secrets yet.

‘Because you’ll know if it’s something you should tell them,’ Mosk said, closing his eyes. ‘I can’t tell them.’

‘Okay,’ Eran said, like it was the most serious thing he’d ever agreed to in his life.

Now that he was on the precipice of it, he didn’t want to say a thing. He pressed his closed mouth to his knees, tried to move his wrist in the circle of Eran’s touch. Eran’s fingers only closed harder on the skin of his wrist, and it shouldn’t have helped, should have felt awful. It ached a little, but it wasn’t someone petting him on the head like an animal, it wasn’t the way Davix and Omphix had touched him.

‘When they had me,’ Mosk said, his voice smaller, muffled against his knees. He shifted and turned his head to the side and kept his eyes closed, trying not to think. ‘When they had me, in
some…house or cabin, I don’t know, they- They started… They didn’t let me feed. They said I needed to be weak for what they wanted to do. I didn’t know at the time they meant…they meant my heartsong or whatever.’

He didn’t want to see it, but he couldn’t help see it. They kept him tied in a chair most of the time. Mosk realised after a few days that his burns weren’t healing naturally and they’d either stunted his healing on purpose, or he would just never heal from what took his family. He hoped it was the latter. He hoped he’d be reminded of what he’d done to them for the rest of his life. Which he hoped would be short.

‘They started siphoning my magic,’ Mosk said roughly. ‘I don’t know how. I don’t- I couldn’t even use it. I knew it was there, but I didn’t know I had so much. People told me. My parents told me what I was when I was young. It just felt normal. I didn’t have strange magical things happening around me. I wasn’t charmed. My words didn’t mean anything extra. I was just… I was just me.’

It was so hard to find the words. It didn’t feel good to speak about it, or cathartic. He wished he could explain to Eran why it made him so hopeless to even think about it.

‘It hurt. The first day, I thought they would take my magic quickly. That it would be gone in ten minutes, then an hour, then two hours. I didn’t know anyone could feel agony like that, for that long. I thought someone couldn’t rip that much from you, and you’d live through it.’

They’d touched him while they’d done it. The skin-to-skin contact helped, they’d said. Davix’s touch was firmer, sometimes just resting his hand on top of Mosk’s head, at the back of his neck, at the front of his throat, palm to palm. Places – he’d said – where magic gathered into loci of power. He’d smiled as he’d done it, but he was dispassionate too, which was better than Olphix.

Olphix had touched Mosk too softly. A caress over his cheek. The tip of his index finger dragging a soft line down the back of his neck. Mosk hadn’t known any touch before them, except being hugged by his family, or sitting next to them, leaning into them, steady things. Olphix would use just his fingers and slide them up under Mosk’s shirt, and the pain would gather inside of him, the magic fighting whatever spell or raw power they were using, and Olphix would smile at Mosk like he was a faintly amusing creature for trying to fight, even as he used those touches to rip Mosk’s magic free.

Sometimes, Davix plastered himself to Olphix’s back while Olphix was touching Mosk. Had pressed his identical face into the crook of Olphix’s neck and shoulder and breathed in. Sometimes, then, the pain would waver as though Olphix was getting distracted.

‘Don’t be so possessive, heart of mine,’ Olphix said. Davix laughed into his brother’s skin, and the pain waned just enough that Mosk didn’t feel the urge to constantly scream anymore. He choked and hiccupped and coughed and caught his breath.

‘I’m not possessive. Pray, do you think that’s like me?’

‘Jealous, then. You’ve never liked me touching anyone else.’

‘An auspicious aphrodisiac, watching you at work,’ Davix purred. ‘You’re so strong. There’s one person in the world stronger than I am, and it’s you.’

‘After this, you’ll be the same,’ Olphix said. ‘You’ll learn.’

‘After this…’ Davix said. Then a hand at Olphix’s jaw and they were kissing, and Mosk stared up at them through his tears. They were the same, but different too. Olphix used his other hand – the
one not resting upon Mosk’s neck – to slide his fingers down his brother’s side, and Davix breathed heavily and sighed out a pleased sound. ‘After this, Olphix, I’d like more of this, pretty please.’

‘After this,’ Olphix echoed.

Then Olphix had turned his attention back to Mosk, a hungriness in his eyes that was dark with promise, and done something to Mosk’s magic that had him arch back so hard in the chair that the wood creaked. He screamed until he sprayed blood across Olphix’s fire-coloured robe.

They hadn’t let him heal. Day after day, they kept taking his magic. Mosk shook to think about it. It had gone on so long, he was getting distracted from his point. This part wasn’t important. No one needed to know.

‘It took a long time,’ Mosk said, covering over weeks of torture with five words. ‘Then I had no more magic. But it wasn’t enough. They took my feeding teeth. They said I was still too strong. They waited more, tried…other things. Then…’

Mosk shook his head, shook it again, and felt Eran moving closer until he was touching the side of one of Mosk’s bent legs.

‘Tell me,’ Eran said. The words sounded strained.

‘Oolphix was called away, or went away. I don’t remember. He was supposed to be there, but he wasn’t, but he said Davix could try on his own.’

‘The first were ours, the last was mine, and this one is yours,’ Olphix said as he donned his Mage’s motley and left through the front door. It was night outside. Mosk stared at it and wondered how the rest of the world would dare to keep existing after everything he’d gone through. He was too weak to understand it. He was dying.

They’d told him he was dying.

They said he wouldn’t live. They were torturing him to death, and at first he hoped he’d be tortured for as long as he deserved. Then he hoped he’d die, because he couldn’t handle what he deserved.

After a day of preparations, Davix had placed a hand at his chest, another on his shoulder and done something just by closing his eyes. Done something that had wrenched at Mosk’s very being. He’d stopped soon after, but it left Mosk breathless, queasy, retching up nothing at all. They weren’t giving him water either. He could no longer moisten his mouth.

‘Your heartsong?’ Eran said.

Mosk nodded. ‘It went wrong. I don’t know- It was… There were a few false starts, and then Davix seemed to know what he was doing. I don’t know. I don’t- It hurt. I’d never- I knew it would kill me. It was supposed to. They’d said it would, and I deserved it anyway, so I just…I was just going to let it happen. But it hurt. I couldn’t help it.’

‘Help what?’

‘He tried to take it, and I couldn’t let him?’ Mosk said, shaking his head, hearing the question in his own voice. The moment in his mind was so clear, and he didn’t know how it could be after everything else he’d gone through. The look on Davix’s face as he said something about Mosk’s heartsong being ‘sorely stubborn’ and the way it felt like his last act would be to dislocate Mosk’s entire being from his body. It had felt fundamentally wrong in a way that made his entire body and
mind rebel. His brain had shrieked and shrieked. Mentally he twisted and turned, trying to find a way out of it. A way free. He’d kill himself after, if he had to – he would have to – but he couldn’t let Davix do what he was trying to do.

‘I don’t know how,’ Mosk said. ‘I don’t think I had any magic left, but maybe there was some left in the heartsong. They said something about the anchor, a lot, and maybe that was it. I don’t know how. But it was like he ripped my heartsong free and in that moment I could use it, like it was mine to use instead of his, and I turned it against him. What was left, I turned it against him. It was like I found his heartsong with my own, because that’s how he made the connection, I think…I think. Do you see? I don’t know how. But I did. I had to. And then he was on the floor.’

Mosk covered his face with his other hand.

‘He was on the floor and he wasn’t moving. He wouldn’t move. He didn’t move.’

He could hear Eran’s breathing, which was trembling, but not nearly as shaky as Mosk’s had been back then. Mosk hadn’t even realised for hours. He’d been insensate from what Davix had done to him, what Mosk had done to himself. He was sure he’d killed himself with it. His last act, to turn his heartsong against Davix. To turn whatever Davix was trying to rip from him, to find his way down the ice-cold runnels of Davix’s magic and blow something apart. He hadn’t known it was Davix’s life. He'd just thought it was his magic.

‘I didn’t know,’ Mosk whispered. ‘I didn’t know that’s what I was doing.’

‘But we saw Davix,’ Eran said, his voice shaking too.

‘I don’t think we did?’ Mosk said. ‘I thought we did but I don’t think we did? He talked like Olphix talked. He talked like- Olphix-’ Mosk made a sound of nausea, swallowing back sap. He hated thinking of it. What happened next. ‘Oolphix came back and saw. He saw. He tried to bring him back and he couldn’t. Then he pointed at me. He hurt me. He was mad and upset. He kept… He kept saying it was my fault. I knew it was my fault. They’d said everything was my fault. So of course…’

‘Not even a proper death,’ Olphix had said, his voice grim, his eyes serious and tear-free. Mosk’s were also free of tears, he had no more water left. ‘You’ve set his magic loose.’

‘I set his magic loose,’ Mosk said. ‘When I did it. I don’t know how. But his magic- Olphix is fire, and Davix…’

‘Davix is ice,’ Eran whispered.

‘I don’t know how,’ Mosk said. ‘But the ice… That ice out there- It’s not…some intentional thing. It’s not them cursing the world. It’s not Mages making fun. It was me. He took my heartsong and I did something with it and now there’s ice alive in the world, and it can’t die, and it can’t be killed. Olphix put his curses, his magic on me and tested it, and then he let me free and said I didn’t deserve to die. Said I would wish for it before he was done with me like I hadn’t already, a thousand times, a hundred thousand times, wished for it.’

Eran’s breathing was louder than Mosk’s, and Mosk buried his head in his knees and wished none of it was true. Wished, yet again, that he hadn’t survived.

‘But Olphix came back,’ Mosk said. ‘In my dream. I wasn’t sure, when we saw Davix in the Court. I thought I was wrong. Maybe I’d hallucinated, gotten it wrong. How did Olphix get into the Court and pretend like that? But he is so strong. And tonight, when he came to me, he told me that it was
my fault still, that Davix was gone, and I realised I was right the first time and Davix is dead. I
don’t even know if Olphix can stop the plague of ice without his brother there. But Olphix is
pretending to be Davix. There’s only one of them now. There’s only been one of them left for a
year. There’s no way to stop the ice. There’s no way. And it’s my fault.’

‘I have to tell Gwyn,’ Eran said.

The words didn’t register straight away, and when they did, Mosk felt like he’d been doused with
cold water. He looked up in horror.

‘No,’ he said.

Eran’s eyes were truly bright now, casting a glow on his face. He let go of Mosk’s wrist long
enough to slide his fingers between Mosk’s and grip his hand tight. Palm to palm, like Olphix.
Mosk tried to jerk his hand away.

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘I know,’ Eran said. ‘But this is really important. This isn’t- I have to tell them. By Kabiri’s fires,
Mosk, how can you think it’s your fault?’

‘Don’t tell them. He’ll compel me. I can’t.’

‘I’ll tell him not to.’

Mosk stared at Eran uncomprehending. Then he tightened his own hand against Eran’s, holding
him in place, and punched him in the face with his free hand.

Eran made a sharp sound of shock, and Mosk almost liked it. Wasn’t this just what he was
anyway? Unknowingly violent? His family dead because of him. The plague of ice out there
because of him. Davix dead because of him. Mosk pulled his arm back and swung again,
connected again, amazed at how much more strength he had these days.

He saw the moment Eran gathered himself, saw the moment Eran turned angry eyes towards him
and made an animal noise of refusal as he tried to pull away, but Eran hadn’t let go of his wrist at
all.

Eran made short work of Mosk’s resistance, pinning him to the bed by both wrists, straddling his
chest. Mosk waited to be burned. Waited, squeezed his eyes shut.

‘You told me,’ Eran said, his voice thick, ‘because you wanted me to decide if it’s something they
should know. It is something they should know. Olphix might be strong, but he’s half as strong
without his brother there.’

‘No,’ Mosk said, his eyes growing wet. He could feel tears wanting to press free. He hated this.
‘Kill me.’

‘No light on that,’ Eran whispered, his stupid phrase that Mosk knew the meaning of now. Then:
‘No. I’m not going to kill you.’

‘Please.’

‘If you set his magic loose, maybe…maybe that’s why it’s looking for fire fae. Maybe it’s trying to
find Olphix again, I don’t know. But he took your heartsong, maybe you set that loose too. Maybe
there is something you can do about what’s happening. Maybe not. But…fuck, all of that aside,
you can’t tell me all this and then think I’ll kill you. You should be alive to see your family avenged, to get justice for yourself. Maybe you can’t see it, because it hurts too much, because you’re blaming yourself for it, but this was done to you.’

‘It wasn’t,’ Mosk said miserably. ‘It wasn’t. The forest burned down because of me. Olphix came. Because of me. Because of me. I betrayed them all.’

‘How?’ Eran said, half-wondering.

Mosk couldn’t talk about that too. That wasn’t what he’d needed to say. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. Then he rolled to his side and drew his knees up to his chest. There, he’d said something. It wouldn’t help anyone. Olphix was still powerful enough to visit someone in their dreams, and the world was falling apart. Without Davix, Mosk didn’t think Olphix could stop the ice on his own. Maybe both Mages could have been made to do it – but both of them weren’t going to create that in the first place – they’d been talking about doing something else.

Removing...something. Not teleportation, Mosk would have remembered that. But then, Olphix and Davix had liked to talk in nebulous circles, leaving their meanings indistinct. Davix with his alliterative riddles, and Olphix with his flatter, emptier enigmas.

‘Okay,’ Eran said. ‘Okay, I’m going to- I’m sorry, I have to. I just… I’ll be back, I promise.’

Eran ran out of their joined rooms, the door closing behind him, and Mosk hunched on himself at the thought that Olphix could visit again now, if he wanted to. Though maybe he would have visited even if Eran was there. Maybe he’d already done everything he wanted to do.

‘I see you’ve broken some of my magic,’ he’d said.

Mosk couldn’t even reply. Olphix shone with an inner flame. His coat was red, orange and yellow diamonds, his wand was out. He looked around the tower and his eyes narrowed. His brother had humour, and Olphix was serious. His brother had ice, and Olphix was fire. Not a playful flame, or even a warm one. It was something designed to ruin worlds.

‘Maybe that means you have something left that I can take,’ Olphix said.

Mosk shook his head.

‘No?’ Olphix said. ‘You’re still able to hurt, aren’t you?’

The wand pointing at him, and then a pain that should have made him pass out. He didn’t.

Mosk reached out blindly for the blankets and dragged them over himself until he was almost completely hidden. He pulled the pillows around his head. He smelled the feather down preserved inside the mattress. He wished he could vanish. If he was in a bar, if someone was fucking him, he’d be too distracted to think.

Later, as Mosk’s fear was beginning to give way to fatigue, four sets of footsteps returned, and with it, a steadily increasing warmth that had Mosk peeping out of the covers. The Gancanagh was there, his dudeen in one hand, sober eyes taking in the scene. Gwyn and Augus were there too. Eran was about as far away from the Gancanagh as he could reasonably be, without being on the other side of the room.

Mosk stared at the Gancanagh, wondering if the Gancanagh would fuck him. Probably. With dra’ocht like that, he probably would.
‘Davix is dead,’ Gwyn said, staring hard at Mosk like he couldn’t believe it. ‘He’s dead?’

‘I-I think so,’ Mosk said.

‘Is he dead or not?’ Augus said, and Mosk flinched hard, didn’t bother trying to fight it.

‘Yes.’ Mosk shrunk down beneath the blankets, leaving only his eyes free. Eran turned to face Augus with rage in his eyes.

‘Aye, don’t be cruel now,’ the Gancanagh said reprovingly, looking at Augus. ‘The wee dryad’s been tortured enough, hasn’t he?’

‘It’s expedient,’ Augus said.

‘He told me all of that, what I just told you,’ Eran said. ‘Why would he lie about it? Maybe if you want him to volunteer information to you in the future, stop using the compulsions on him. If he used to be gentle and shy, then like, why not treat him like he used to be that?’

Augus grimaced, and then folded his arms. After a few seconds, he gestured at Gwyn, who walked towards the bed and sat down on it. The mattress leaned in his direction. Mosk felt his body tilt. They looked at each other, and Gwyn seemed contemplative.

‘Eran explained to us that when Davix tried to take your heartsong, you turned it on him, and he died. This means that Olphix is both able to get into the Seelie Court and pretend to be his twin. Likely some combination of shapeshifting and…well, I’m not quite sure. He was the one who set the Aur forest on fire?’

Mosk nodded.

‘And you broke your curse,’ Gwyn said, frowning. ‘How? When?’

‘The miskatin,’ Eran interjected, saving Mosk from having to waste what little words remained to him. ‘He came back and told the miskatin’s worst memory to it, and it ran. But it was enough.’

‘So,’ Augus said, lifting a hand, ‘you mean to tell us that you could have imparted this information some time ago?’

Mosk did nothing in response to that.

‘He doesn’t think it’s useful,’ Eran said, sounding angry now. Bizarre. Mosk didn’t expect anything like an ally, and he didn’t expect one to have his back and stand up to the King and the King’s Consort. Mosk didn’t know how anyone could stand up to the Each Uisge, when he had those compulsions. ‘He doesn’t believe anything can be done.’

‘Hm.’ Gwyn pressed fingers to the bed and leaned towards Mosk, scrutinising him. ‘It’s important, that Davix is dead. If he is truly dead. Davix and Olphix together were an unstoppable force. Likely some combination of shapeshifting and…well, I’m not quite sure. He was the one who set the Aur forest on fire?’

Mosk shook his head. ‘I didn’t. I just wanted him to stop what he was doing.’

‘My good friend will have some theories,’ the Gancanagh said, ‘once he’s done all his magic-works and is free to chat some more.’

‘Could the ice be looking for, I don’t know, fire?’ Eran said, and Gwyn’s head shot up, eyes
widening. ‘Because- Is Davix trying to find Olphix?’

‘What makes you say that?’ Gwyn said.

‘I don’t know. I just think- It’s been seeking fire fae. It looks for populations. It doesn’t seem to have any rhyme or reason to it, that’s what Amhar said. If it’s alive but…not alive at the same time. If it’s got a heartsong in it, and all that magic, maybe all it can do now is try to look for what its lost.’

‘That has a ring of truth to it,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘Where did you find this one, Majesty?’

‘He found us,’ Augus said, though his voice wasn’t wry like Mosk expected, but curious.

‘But-’ Gwyn said.

‘-I know what it’s like to lose family,’ Eran interjected. ‘They’re identical twins, right? Mosk has lost his family too. What if-? What if…Mosk set Davix’s magic loose, and it turned itself towards finding family? Except…Except it’s twisted up somehow? And it just looks for fire now? Or people who can make fire? Can magic even do that?’

‘What would be lovely,’ Augus said, ‘is if we could just sit Olphix down for a nice chat, and actually make him say anything at all to us.’

‘My friend will know,’ the Gancanagh said mildly. Everything he did was calm and steady, as though he had no need to be anywhere, no sense of urgency about anything. Still, he emitted that lust which curled up softly in Mosk’s gut and made him think of things that weren’t torture or flames. ‘Though it doesn’t explain the blocked teleportation, now, does it? Or whatever else Olphix might be doing.’

‘They had a plan,’ Gwyn said, slowly looking from Eran back down to Mosk. ‘They had a plan that they needed your power for, and then your heartsong. Maybe he can no longer execute the whole of the plan, but he may still be attempting it. And I have to say, you killing Davix goes some way to explaining why Olphix came to you, instead of Oengus. Why he torments you, specifically.’

Mosk swallowed, and Gwyn nodded like that was answer enough.

‘Poor little leaflet,’ the Gancanagh said, his black eyes finding Mosk’s. ‘Tisn’t fair now, is it? What a story, to be tortured by someone such as Olphix. And only a small sapling, too. Never a good thing, to be a seventh son of a seventh son. I’d tell you stories, but you’re too busy being one, I doubt you want to hear the others.’

 Fuck me, Mosk thought.

The Gancanagh kept up that steady, unblinking gaze, and Mosk returned it. There was something melancholy and sweet about the way the Gancanagh spoke. Mosk didn’t know what the sex would be like, he didn’t care, but he wondered if it would just be a sad, distant thing that would turn his thoughts to other matters. That would be enough. It was all he needed.

‘We’re not going to make much progress without Oengus,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘Fenwrel will know more if we can get through to her. She’s been keeping tabs for some time. Gulvi may have some idea of what’s going on with her contacts. In the meantime, I think Mosk needs some rest.’

‘I still think we should use compulsions,’ Augus said.

Gwyn stood and shook his head. ‘Another time.’
Mosk had the impression that the compulsions would come out in force when there weren’t other fae around to censure them. He didn’t know what else he could say that would help. He sagged back into the bed and watched the Gancanagh as he left, wondering where his room was. He could find it, if he followed the lust that the Gancanagh manufactured, like a little compass inside of himself.

‘They know,’ Eran said, sighing, once the door was closed. ‘At least they know. They can do something with that, Mosk. It will help.’

He heard Eran walking closer. Felt Eran sit on the bed, near where Gwyn had sat. Once more, Mosk’s body tilted towards it. The Gancanagh’s glamour lingered in the room, and Mosk couldn’t stop thinking that after the night he’d had, after the months he’d had, after the year, he just wanted someone to take him outside of himself.

A hand came and settled on his shoulder. The touch was careful.

Mosk stiffened, eyes widening. No. That- Whatever Eran did, it didn’t take Mosk outside of himself, it made him feel things. It was like an infection, a virus, not that Mosk had ever had either, but he’d seen sickened trees before, he knew how poisonous those things could be.

‘Stop it,’ Mosk said.

‘Why don’t you like it?’ Eran said. He sat down next to Mosk and removed his touch, but now he was so close that Mosk could feel his body heat. Eran ran so much warmer than Mosk did. ‘I’m not trying to hurt you.’

Mosk stared at Eran, who stared back until his lips pressed together in a grim line. Mosk hated it, made himself look away. There was nothing wrong with him!

‘You’ve had a really hard night,’ Eran said patiently. ‘I’m trying to help.’

‘So you say,’ Mosk said.

Then, a flash of an idea, a rush of desperation, and he shoved all the blankets off of him as he moved. A moment to brace for the wave of dizziness, ride it out, and then he knelt up and placed a hand on Eran’s shoulder. It was thick beneath his palm. He ignored the way Eran looked at him in confusion, and reached between Eran’s legs, pressing his hand gamely against the soft fabric, the heat beneath. Eran wasn’t hard, but everything was so warm.

‘What-?’

‘-You know what I want,’ Mosk said. ‘You know what will help me.’

‘Mosk,’ Eran said, palm pressing against Mosk’s chest, another curling loosely around Mosk’s wrist where he was shifting his fingers and finding the shape of Eran’s cock through fabric. ‘Just wait, you can’t-’

‘I know you’re not a virgin. And you keep saying that you won’t do it, because you know I won’t enjoy it, but you don’t know. You’ve only seen it…in taverns.’

Mosk didn’t believe what he was saying. He’d never enjoyed it. Even the ones that had tried to make him, even the ones that had pulled him off and made him come. Even then, he’d not really enjoyed it. The mess of fluid was just something his body did. Stroke someone’s dick long enough, and a lot of the time, they couldn’t help it.
The same would go for Eran, Mosk was sure.

‘Mosk, stop it,’ Eran hissed, and Mosk reared back long enough to make sure there was no smoke, no sparks coming from Eran’s mouth. ‘You’ve had- You’re upset. You can’t-’

Eran’s hand tightened reflexively on Mosk’s wrist, and Mosk felt the moment when the shape of the cock in his fingers, through loose fabric, twitched. There, Mosk wasn’t so bad at this, he started to move his hand, and Eran made a strangled sound.

‘You’re so useless,’ Mosk said, hearing Augus calling him a bully and hating that it echoed through his mind, as Eran pushed back against Mosk’s chest. ‘Why won’t you fuck me?’

Eran’s grip on Mosk’s wrist was so hard that Mosk had to let go of the cock he was working, even though it was responding. He closed his eyes in despair as Eran got his other wrist up in that grip and pushed him back down towards the bed, holding him down. It was like they got so close to what Mosk was asking for, and Mosk needed more than this. He needed…

‘Just stop,’ Eran said, breathing uneven. ‘I don’t want to be a part of that. I will do…I will do what I can, but not that. Does this help?’

It did, but Mosk didn’t want it. He didn’t want to feel held down and contained by Eran’s grip. Or, he did, but he wanted more of it. Wanted to burn the way Olphix wanted him to burn.

‘Mosk,’ Eran said helplessly. ‘Tell me what you need.’

‘I need you to let go,’ Mosk said woodenly.

Eran did, though it was reluctant. Mosk could tell from the way Eran’s grip opened slowly, the way his fingers moved back, caressing as they went. The way Eran snuck in something soft like Mosk deserved it, and his chest hurt to feel it.

‘I need to clear my head,’ Mosk said, pushing himself away, off the bed. Eran let him go, and Mosk stood there, thinking of what he should do. He hated the expression on Eran’s face. It was almost hard to remember that there was a time when Eran looked at him with hatred. Mosk dragged a hand through his hair and didn’t make eye contact. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

Eran didn’t stop him, and Mosk closed the door behind him, standing in a dim corridor lit by mild torches spaced too widely.

Somewhere in this place, the Gancanagh had a room, or rooms. Mosk felt the trail of arousal in his gut and followed it, hoping it didn’t lead him to some place where the Gancanagh and Oengus were talking, or the Gancanagh was still with Augus and Gwyn.

He padded barefoot along cold stone, down some stairs, along a hall, feeling that curling prickle in his gut get stronger. He stopped before grand doors carved with a single swan and pressed his hand above the door knocker. He didn’t want to use it. The sound would echo loudly.

The door swung open without him doing anything, and Mosk looked up into the Gancanagh’s dark gaze. The Gancanagh stared down, black eyes glittering, a half-smile at the corner of his mouth. The arousal around him, in him, it built slowly, and Mosk looked past the Gancanagh’s standing form into the room behind him. Huge, with a large bed, and a desk covered in parchment. Had he been writing letters? The chair was pushed back. A candle flickered.

‘A wee little leaflet has blown onto my doorstep,’ the Gancanagh said with his mild voice. ‘Are you lost, young one?’
'No,’ Mosk said.

‘Indeed, it doesn’t seem so, does it? What brings you here?’

‘Will you fuck me?’

The Gancanagh reached out and placed gentle fingers against Mosk’s cheekbone, his eyes narrowing with something like triumph or consideration. Maybe both. The clutch of lust in Mosk’s belly strengthened, lanced along his spine, and Mosk could already feel his connection to the night’s events fading away. Could already tell this would work.

‘You’d best come inside, to be sure. We’ll see what the love talker can do for you, how does that sound?’

Mosk leaned into that touch, and the Gancanagh drew him in, never removing his fingers. Mosk heard the heavy stone doors close behind him, and closed his eyes in relief.

Chapter End Notes

Want to come send me asks about what you just read! I’m on Tumblr!

* 

In our next chapter, ‘Truths Will Out’

‘I said stop,’ Mosk breathed.

‘You hate me anyway,’ Eran said. ‘Right? I’ve tried to do the right thing, what I thought was the right thing. I tried to respect… I- By Kabiri, you’d drive anyone to distraction. But you still just went off to get molested by someone else. If you’re going to be like that about it, then maybe the right thing is this.’

‘It’s not about this.’

‘Feeling good?’ Eran said, and then he laughed darkly. ‘Yes, I’d figured that out for myself. Are you punishing yourself? Or is it something else? You’ve probably got really good reasons to hate all of this, but that still doesn’t change the fact that you’re completely out of control, and nothing else is working. Not talking rationally. Not telling you. Not the Each Uisge or Gwyn. Not even those wounds in your side.’
AAAAAAND WE'RE BACK! WOO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Mosk*

*The Gancanagh kissed him slowly, a languid grace in all of his movements. Soft, compelling, gentle, and normally Mosk would have protested, would have hated it, but he couldn’t think past the lust growing all the way through him, making it feel like his ears were warm and his hair was prickling, turning his leg muscles limp so that he had to be held up by strong hands.*

‘Look at you now,’ the Gancanagh said sweetly against Mosk’s mouth. ‘This is my favourite type of late night visitor, I must admit. And you such a graceful slip of a thing. What do you want, my Prince?’

‘Fuck me,’ Mosk breathed. ‘Don’t be gentle.’

A questioning noise, like the Gancanagh wasn’t sure he’d heard that correctly, and then Mosk blinked in a daze as the Gancanagh held him back by his upper arms. The lust in Mosk’s gut receded, and Mosk stared down at the heavy stone blocks in the floor. Why wouldn’t he just…?

‘Yeah,’ the Gancanagh said, ‘we will. We will. Come lie down with me for a bit. Let’s get to know each other better, dove.’

‘Not a dove.’

‘Leaflet, then,’ the Gancanagh said, pressing the bridge of his nose affectionately to the side of Mosk’s face. His breath smelled of smoke. Not like Eran’s smoke, or Olphix’s, but Mosk bitterly wondered if he’d be cursed to be around people like this for the rest of his life. If this scent would always be wrapped around him. ‘Tough night you’ve had, isn’t that right?’

The Gancanagh was leading him back towards the bed, then pulling him onto it. As he went, he unbuttoned his own shirt easily, slipping it off his shoulders. He undid the buckle of his black leather belt, and then he carelessly pushed Mosk down onto the mattress as he slid out of his leather pants. With no underwear, he was now completely bare but for a necklace and the black stone snake earring woven through the cartilage of his pointed left ear. The necklace was a charm of three feathers pointing down in the shape of the Awen. Mosk knew that shape.

He reached up and pressed his fingers to it blankly. Those radiating lines, like a triangle without a bottom, and a line hanging vertically through the middle.

‘It’s magic,’ Mosk said stupidly. He couldn’t think.

‘My love gave it to me,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘To keep me safe now. See?’ He curled his fingers around Mosk’s hand and kissed the palm gently – Mosk cringed – and then pressed Mosk’s fingers...
to the first feather. ‘This one is protection. This second is for foresight. This third now, that’s for solace.’

Mosk’s finger had been placed against the third feather, and Mosk didn’t feel anything at all. Could he even feel magic these days? He’d not thought about it until now.

‘Why do you need solace?’ Mosk asked.

The Gancanagh rucked up Mosk’s shirt and bent down, and Mosk expected gentleness, already tensing with horror at the thought. Instead, the Gancanagh bit down hard into the flesh above Mosk’s hip, and Mosk cried out and flinched and hated it. Good. Good. Hard to think about anything at all when he had to endure something like this.

A tongue licking over the bruise, feeling like it was carving into him when it was only painting saliva over goose bumps. His hips moved up fractiously, he hardly knew what he was doing. He almost never responded to the people in bars, unless they were being too nice, going too slow.

The Gancanagh was doing both of those things, but this was…different. He’d never felt turned on like this before. Not since before the forest burned down, when he woke up from dreams wet and sticky between his legs and embarrassed then to be living in a house that would feel crowded in that moment. Crowded, oppressive, they’d all know.

Even when they knew, could tell, they were fine with it. But Mosk didn’t like it.

The feeling in his dreams though, he’d liked that, hadn’t he?

‘I need it as I’m fair broken-hearted, my sweet,’ the Gancanagh said. He looked up from Mosk’s belly and smiled in a warm way, as though he didn’t mind talking about whatever pain Mosk could hear in his voice. ‘Tis a fine old thing, to feed off unrequited love for thousands of years, and never know its lance in my heart. Imagine then, I learn what it is I feed from, to love someone who cannot love me back. I’m not one to give out about it, but my love still knows, and he gave me a feather of solace to soothe my heart. It only made me love him more.’

The Gancanagh laughed sadly and pressed his lips to Mosk’s chin.

‘Who is it?’ Mosk said.

‘You cannot divine it?’ the Gancanagh said in wonder. ‘Where are we, leaflet? Who is the one who sings with enough songbirds to coax feathers to spare for a pretty charm, now? And how would he ever fall in love with another, now that he’s had his time with fair perfection? And perfection…that’s not me, leaflet, that’s never been me.’

Mosk looked around the room, realising that the Gancanagh loved Oengus. It was true, Oengus would never love him back.

‘Is that why you’re here?’

‘I’d hurt over it either way,’ the Gancanagh said, moving his mouth to Mosk’s neck and scraping his teeth over the sensitive skin. Mosk’s breath caught. He didn’t know the skin there was like that. He didn’t know it could feel like tickling and a good heat and like his spine arching all at the same time. He didn’t know it would make his mouth open, or his breath stop in his throat.

He was alarmed, even afraid. Did he want to be fucked enough for this? He did, didn’t he?

‘So I might as well hurt over it in the quiet glory of his presence and his sad lonely home,’ the
Gancanagh finished. He pressed the tip of his tongue behind Mosk’s ear, and then licked up, and Mosk shuddered. ‘But you are sweet, small perfection, aren’t you now? And your ears, not pointed like, but sensitive. You talk like a whore, but shiver for me like a virgin. I think…I like it.’

‘You do?’ Mosk said, and then bit his lower lip when the Gancanagh’s tongue slid into his ear, making nerve endings sing, making him hear what was happening. His heart was beating harder and harder. He wanted- He… He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to concentrate, even as that sultry lust inside of him, swampy and thick, grew encompassing and began to blot out everything but the Gancanagh’s hands, his mouth, his breath, his scent.

‘What do you want, little leaf?’ the Gancanagh said, as though he hadn’t asked it already.

‘Just fuck me,’ Mosk said, beginning to feel frustrated. ‘Why won’t you just-’

‘This is fucking,’ the Gancanagh said, his voice slightly harder. He didn’t sound like someone who ever raised his voice. Even that faint firmness was enough to make Mosk feel like he’d been chastened.

Mosk grit his teeth together, galvanised with arousal, and he pushed weakly upwards – grunting through the dizzy spell that claimed him – and did what he’d done to Eran. Placed his hand between the Gancanagh’s legs and curled his fingers possessively around the cock he found there. It felt bold and thrilling and even stupid to do something so obvious, and even the Gancanagh tensed against him.

‘I want you to put this in my ass,’ Mosk said. ‘That’s it. That’s it.’

‘And what about what I want?’ the Gancanagh said, even as his hips undulated gently into Mosk’s hand.

‘You want that too.’

‘Do I?’ the Gancanagh said. ‘Maybe that’s true. How do you know what I want, now? Tell an old soul, I’d like to understand.’

‘Everyone wants that.’

The Gancanagh reached down between them, and then chuckled when Mosk tightened his hand, afraid that Gancanagh was going to push him away like Eran had. There was no fabric between him and that hot, hard flesh. He could feel how large the Gancanagh was. It would hurt.

Mosk wouldn’t have to think about a single, stupid thing except the pain.

Instead of pulling Mosk’s hand away, he only nudged Mosk’s fingers, changing the grip. ‘There now,’ he said. ‘Harder here. And softer here. Like- Perfect. Sweet. Oh, very sweet. There we are, my whore, now you’re holding me more like the expert you think you sound like.’

A dirty bloom of humiliation rushed through him. It had been a while since someone had called him that.

‘Say it again,’ Mosk said, his voice shaking.

The Gancanagh looked up at him with those eyes that, this close, Mosk could see were dark brown and not actually black at all. The Gancanagh looked forbidding and friendly all at once. Mosk couldn’t make himself look away. He knew about the Gancanagh. Everyone had heard of the Love Talker, hadn’t they? He made his victims feel good for a day, maybe two, and then he left love
seeded in their hearts, and they would die for him slowly over time. Pining away. He would linger
nearby and feed off them.

There was enough unrequited love to go around that the Gancanagh had been alive longer than
anyone could say.

‘Say it again,’ Mosk said.

‘Whore,’ the Gancanagh said, his lips curving into a cruel smile. ‘Is that it, now? Are you going to
be my virginal slut? Is your hole open at all hours, then? Even when you stare at me with those
eyes?’

It made him angry, the way the Gancanagh talked to him. He hated it. But how could he think
about what Olphix had done, when he was too busy hating this?

‘What eyes?’ Mosk said belligerently.

‘Like an innocent little Prince,’ the Gancanagh said, bucking harder into Mosk’s hand. Hard
enough that he brought real force to bear and it pushed Mosk’s arm back towards the bed. The
Gancanagh shoved the heel of his palm into Mosk’s chest and narrowed his eyes. With his other
hand, he yanked at Mosk’s pants, baring his ass. It wasn’t even enough to fully expose Mosk’s
cock, but even so, the Gancanagh’s dry fingers were delving between to find Mosk’s entrance,
pressing against it. A shock of scraping friction. ‘I suppose I’d best ask how rough you want it. But
you’ll probably just tell me to fuck you again, won’t you now? I hate to feel as though I’m letting a
whore down.’

A finger prodded into him, and Mosk’s breath vanished. He hadn’t had sex in a while, and there
wasn’t even spit to ease the way. His gasp was hoarse, and the Gancanagh made a sound of
satisfaction and pushed deeper, and Mosk’s head tipped back at the burning sting of it, an entirely
different kind of fire, one that pushed his thoughts away and made him fill with hatred and despair
and something hungry and desperate. He wanted it. He hated himself, he hated the Gancanagh, but
he still wanted it.

But the Gancanagh wasn’t doing anything else – he’d stilled – and Mosk’s eyes flew open when he
heard the door creak.

‘Gancanagh,’ Augus said quietly. ‘No.’

The Gancanagh dropped his head towards Mosk’s chest and huffed out a breath of laughter. He
pushed a little deeper into Mosk’s ass, and Mosk’s toes curled. He was going to choke on it. He’d
probably be dead by the time the Gancanagh actually fucked him.

Good.

‘No,’ Augus said, the compulsion stilling the Gancanagh entirely.

‘How’d you know?’ the Gancanagh said, pulling his finger free with no ceremony, tugging at the
rim of Mosk’s ass as he went. A painful twang that felt wrong. ‘You’re going to deprive a
luchorpan from a perfectly good time? This one asked me. Three times now. A whole triad of
consent.’

The Gancanagh slid off the bed and began to dress, but paused and tilted his head at Augus. Instead
of pulling his pants up all the way, he curled his fingers around his cock.

‘I don’t suppose you’d be interested in a good time?’
Augus laughed. ‘Oh, don’t, it’s not even charming. Put your cock away. Mosk, get up. We’re going.’

‘I asked him,’ Mosk said angrily. His cheeks were hot with humiliation. He wanted to claw at Augus’ face. Wanted to slap the Gancanagh. Why did this keep happening?! ‘I asked him.’

‘I don’t doubt that you did,’ Augus said. Then his eyes flicked to the Gancanagh’s. ‘A whole triad of consent, apparently.’ Augus crooked his finger, and a small, smug smile crossed his face. ‘Come here.’

‘Fuck you,’ Mosk spat, even as he jerked off the bed and pulled his pants up automatically. He walked over to Augus like he was at all obedient, and once there, Augus reached up and curled his fingers around Mosk’s forearm in a trapping grip. Claws dug into his skin.

‘How’d you know?’ the Gancanagh said, sitting – dressed again – at the table with the quill and the parchment.

‘He loves Oengus,’ Mosk said, glaring at the Gancanagh. ‘Like an idiot. Who does that? Who feasts on the stupidest emotion ever for thousands of years and then falls for his own trick?’

The Gancanagh stared at Mosk for a long time, and Mosk thought he was shocked, maybe even offended at what Mosk had said. Mosk hoped so. He was so angry to be thwarted again like this. Eventually the Gancanagh’s eyes lazily trailed away and met Augus’ instead.

‘How’d you know?’ the Gancanagh said again.

‘If you think I can’t tell when your powers are ramping up, even in a tower like this, you’re mistaken,’ Augus said. ‘Since I knew it wasn’t Oengus with you, nor the King, it left surprisingly few options. And one, in particular, has been known to beg for sex.’

‘I didn’t beg,’ Mosk breathed. ‘I asked.’

‘He begged,’ the Gancanagh said, his lips twisting up in a smirk. ‘It was beautifully pathetic.’

The sound of frustration was out of his throat before he knew he was going to make it. He lunged forwards, but Augus had an easy grip on his upper arm. When Augus laughed lightly, Mosk felt small. He was livid.

‘I’ll kill you both,’ Mosk breathed.

‘Wonderful,’ Augus said. ‘Looking forward to it. Do you want to try now?’

Mosk’s fingers curled into impotent claws, and the Gancanagh sighed.

‘No one forgets how cruel you can be, Augus, but sometimes I come close.’

‘I want to see him try,’ Augus said, shaking Mosk a little. ‘He likes to run his mouth, this one. Ah, well. Anyway, I should get him back to bed, and leave you to whatever it is you were doing.’

As Augus began to leave, the Gancanagh cleared his throat.

‘That young one’s not okay, Augus.’

Mosk tensed, but Augus only shrugged. ‘I know. But you would have fucked him anyway, wouldn’t you?’
‘I’m not one to pass up a whore who won’t even charge a fee,’ the Gancanagh said, looking past Augus’ shoulder at Mosk pointedly. Mosk’s skin crawled, even as he felt bitter anger twist through him. Was the Gancanagh **mocking** him? They could have fucked in the time it took for Augus to get there! ‘Especially not one that asks so insistently. Free sex is free.’

‘Not tonight. I’m the toll you have to go through, and I’m not worth it.’

‘You’re really not. I don’t want to fight the strongest Each Uisge that ever lived. Not when his voice can lay waste to me when it’s the right tone.’

‘Goodnight then.’

‘And to you.’

Augus closed the door and took a moment, staring at it. Then he spun them both in the direction of Mosk’s room.

‘What were you thinking?’ Augus hissed, practically dragging him away, he was walking so fast.

‘I wanted to get laid,’ Mosk said, trying to jerk out of his grip.

‘The Gancanagh? Very nice,’ Augus said. Calmly, he stopped and slammed Mosk into the stone wall. The breath was shoved out of him. His back jarred. ‘**Idiot.** Even if he wasn’t looking for a feed, he is not the kind of lazy tavern screw you happily used to drown out the real world. The Gancanagh would have turned your whole world inside out and laughed when you cried about it. He is **not** a casual bed partner.’

‘Maybe that’s what I wanted.’

‘I’m getting tired of this,’ Augus said. ‘Very tired. You want to know what it’s like to play in our league? Here, I can **show** you. We’ll have a wonderful time.’

Mosk’s heart first leapt with some disturbing sense of vindication, and then he fell still, paralysed, when claws sank into his flanks on either side. Already, Mosk felt blood welling. Augus watched him with a blank, cold gaze, and then did something with one of his fingernails that felt like pure **agony.** Mosk opened his mouth on a scream and Augus slid his other hand free and slapped his bloodied hand over Mosk’s face.

‘**Be quiet,**’ Augus commanded. ‘This? You have a pressure point here. Ah, it’s a nasty one, as you can tell. It’s good, isn’t it? Pressing directly over the skin will activate them, but like this, I can get a claw right **into** it.’

He moved his claw and Mosk kicked out automatically, one of his hands slapping into the wall as his throat closed around Augus’ order to not make a sound.

‘Isn’t it **wonderful?**’ Augus purred. ‘You’re not thinking at all, aren’t you? But Mosk, I thought that’s what you **wanted.**’

Mosk’s chest heaved frantically. Augus had always been kind to him at the Court. Always polite and kind. And now Mosk felt like he was back in the cabin again, and his eyes pricked with wetness and he tried to jerk his head away from the grip over his mouth and he couldn’t. Augus kept watching him, unblinking, even as he slipped his claws free from Mosk’s skin and blood dripped into his shirt, down his sides.

‘It wasn’t what you were looking for, was it?’ Augus said calmly. ‘You think you understand this
world, but you don’t. The Gancanagh is very like me. The difference being that he would not have stopped. Now, tell me, is that what you wanted?’

‘No,’ Mosk choked out. ‘No.’

His breath was thin in his chest, a mixture of rage and terror. He wanted, so badly, to hit Augus. To hit all of them. The way Augus was looking at him now, not that cruel gaze of before, but something else entirely. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say Augus looked worried.

‘No,’ Augus said calmly. ‘I thought not. Now come along.’

Augus went to pull him away from the wall, but Mosk’s knees buckled – the pain was still radiating through his side in unrelenting waves. Augus hesitated, and then braced Mosk against the wall, one arm across his chest.

‘Breathe,’ Augus said, grimacing. ‘It doesn’t last.’

So Mosk had to be held up by the Each Uisge, trying to concentrate on his breathing, utterly humiliated and still bleeding. Augus saw everything: the tears, Mosk trying not to cry with frustration and pain and something else he didn’t understand.

‘I hate you,’ Mosk managed.

‘By the gods, I don’t care,’ Augus said, rolling his eyes. ‘You hate everything.’

‘I hate you the most,’ Mosk said, his voice uneven. He was afraid Augus would hurt him again for saying as much, even as the pain began to recede properly. He got his legs under him, and Augus let him go only to grasp his upper arm again. Augus laughed as he did it, shaking his head.

‘You remind me of someone,’ Augus said quietly. He walked Mosk back to his and Eran’s room and said eventually: ‘Just a word of advice, don’t become like them. Like Olphix and Davix.’

‘How could I?’ Mosk said. ‘They’re the most powerful Mages in the world, and I’m not anything.’

‘You’d be amazed what a survivor can achieve,’ Augus said, pausing outside of the carved door leading into their room, ‘with only bitterness and hatred to guide him.’

He pushed inside the room and Eran was there, pacing, stopping at the sight of them both. His eyes widening, his mouth opening on words he didn’t speak.

‘Mosk decided it would be wise to fuck the Gancanagh. It was not wise,’ Augus said, pushing Mosk towards his own bed. ‘Please don’t let him leave this room. Trust me when I say we have enough to deal with as it is.’

‘What?’ Eran said, in shock and outrage.

Eran was always outraged. Although…no, not as often lately. Not really much at all.

‘I don’t care if you fuck him,’ Augus said to Eran, ‘or tie him up or chain him to the wall. You fancy yourself his keeper, so keep him. Now, goodnight.’

With that, Augus closed the door behind him and disappeared. Mosk immediately stormed over to his bed and ripped the blankets off, enraged. How dare he? How dare they both be like that!

‘What’s wrong with everyone!’ he said, breathing heavily through the dizziness, the lust still banked inside of him, the anger.
'What happened to you?' Eran said. ‘You’re bleeding. You were going to fuck the Gancanagh? Are you an idiot?’

‘You won’t do it,’ Mosk spat at him, bracing himself on the bed as he turned to glare. ‘You’re all assholes.’

‘Did the Gancanagh take advantage of you?’

‘I asked him like three times! Three times!’ Mosk shouted. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d shouted like this. He looked at the tools by the fireplace and seriously considered striking Eran in the head with a poker, just to get some of the awful rage out of him. ‘If he- Fuck Augus, I’m going back. The Gancanagh would’ve totally done it.’

Mosk got to the door before Eran’s hand hooked into the back of his shirt. He turned, yelling, and Eran had something hard and flinty in his gaze. He didn’t push Mosk towards his own bed, but dragged him into Eran’s room. Mosk slapped and punched what he could reach, even as he was disoriented, and Eran growled at him and then flung him onto the bed. When Mosk pushed up off of it, Eran pushed him back down, then reached for his pack where it lay on the floor. He drew out lengths of rope – more than Mosk knew he had – and then straddled Mosk’s chest and pulled one of his wrists to the bed post. Mosk tried to yank his hand away, he was Court status, they should have been equal in strength, but Eran only jerked Mosk’s wrist back. He only let go once the rope was holding him, and then Eran wrapped the rope around several more times for good measure.

‘Stop it,’ Mosk yelled. ‘Let me go!’

Eran said nothing, but took Mosk’s other wrist. Mosk tried kicking up with his legs, but the most he could do was get his knees into Eran’s lower back. And even then, not very hard. Eran took it all, his face grim and implacable.

‘You’re out of control,’ Eran said. ‘You need to calm down.’

‘Tying me up? That’s how you think-? You’re an idiot. I hate you. I hate you and your stupid dead family, and your-’

Eran – having finished tying Mosk’s wrist to the other bedpost – lowered his hand and placed it over Mosk’s mouth. He didn’t move his hand away when Mosk tried and failed to bite his palm. Mosk growled in the back of his throat. The rope around his wrists… It was already doing something to him, and he hated Eran for it.

‘Someone has obviously tried to silence you already tonight,’ Eran said, staring at him. ‘You have dried blood on your face in the shape of fingers. You’re bleeding. You’re a mess! I’m not the stupid one tonight, Mosk. I didn’t even know I had a breaking point, but fine, if you want to see it, then fine. I give up.’

Eran shifted on the bed, moved until he was straddling Mosk’s legs flat. And then he calmly, quickly opened the fastening of Mosk’s pants. Mosk stared at him in shock.

‘What?’ he said. ‘What?’

‘You need this so badly?’ Eran said, staring at him with displeasure, and then Mosk jerked in shock when he felt fingers wrap around his cock. Mosk wasn’t even mostly hard anymore. ‘You’re so desperate you’d go to the Gancanagh? Is that it?’
Eran’s hand started working on him and Mosk grimaced, tried to twist his wrists out of the rope. But the rope had been looped around them multiple times. He twisted his wrists again just to feel the rope chafing, and then he felt like his mind was beginning to clear, except he still couldn’t puzzle out what was happening.

‘What are you doing?’ Mosk said.

Eran looked down, and Mosk’s eyes followed the direction to Eran’s brown hand on his cock. His thumb coming up and gently massaging down foreskin, and Mosk blinked and then shivered, feeling…something. His breath caught, and he tried to unseat Eran with his legs. It didn’t work.

‘I don’t want this,’ Mosk said. ‘Stop it.’

‘No.’

‘I want to be fucked,’ Mosk said.

‘I don’t care,’ Eran said.

‘I don’t want this! Fuck me!’

‘No.’

‘Just- I’m a whore, my ass is ready for it, just-’

‘I will gag you,’ Eran said, looking up and scowling at him. ‘This is what you’re getting.’

Mosk had never been seeking orgasm. That hadn’t been the point. Yet between the ropes around his wrists and Eran’s hand moving, it was getting harder to think. Eran’s hand wasn’t soft and sweet, though it wasn’t brutal either. He moved quickly, firmly, working towards his goal, and without anything to slick the way, his skin caught and dragged. Mosk was getting hard. He yanked his wrists in the ropes again to feel it, didn’t know how he could like the fact that he couldn’t get free.

What was wrong with him?

‘Fuck me,’ Mosk said insistently, trying to goad anyway. Eran reached out with his other hand and pressed Mosk’s twisting hips down, and didn’t say anything.

Mosk wanted to feel nothing. Wanted to be outside of himself. But instead he could feel the pleasure of it, the tiny moments of discomfort where nothing went entirely smoothly. When the head of his cock was fully exposed, Eran massaged it firmly with the ball of his thumb and Mosk swallowed down a lump of sound that still had to go somewhere. He groaned thickly, behind a closed mouth, fingers splaying. His hands were getting cold from being raised above his head, his shoulders ached.

‘I said stop,’ Mosk breathed.

‘You hate me anyway,’ Eran said. ‘Right? I’ve tried to do the right thing, what I thought was the right thing. I tried to respect… I- By Kabiri, you’d drive anyone to distraction. But you still just went off to get molested by someone else. If you’re going to be like that about it, then maybe the right thing is this.’

‘It’s not about this.’
‘Feeling good?’ Eran said, and then he laughed darkly. ‘Yes, I’d figured that out for myself. Are you punishing yourself? Or is it something else? You’ve probably got really good reasons to hate all of this, but that still doesn’t change the fact that you’re completely out of control, and nothing else is working. Not talking rationally. Not telling you. Not the Each Uisge or Gwyn. Not even those wounds in your side.’

Eran spoke so calmly, and Mosk’s stomach churned at the thought that Eran hated what he was doing. That he found all of this to be a chore he was just discharging. Mosk didn’t know why it mattered so much. When strangers fucked him in taverns and bars, Mosk liked it when they treated him like a piece of dirt, an object to just keep their dicks warm. But when it was Eran, it was different, Mosk stared at him, trying to decipher what Eran felt about it all.

‘You’re going to hate yourself for this,’ Mosk said.

Eran looked up at him, shocked, and then tightened his hand on Mosk’s cock. ‘Yes, I had considered that too.’

‘Let me go. Untie me.’ Mosk felt like he was saying the words just to say them now. The ropes were like hands holding him in place. They were restrictive, but they gave a shape to his body, made him aware that his wrists were slender and faintly sore. That his fingers were exposed to the cold air. He felt more things with Eran than he’d felt since the fire.

Eran’s hand continued to work him, and Mosk realised that Eran knew what was doing. This wasn’t—He wasn’t fumbling about it. When he moved his hand from Mosk’s hip down between his legs, he rubbed at the hairs there – dark green and crinkly – and then moved his fingers lower still and massaged his thumb over Mosk’s balls.

There had never been anything like that, Mosk realised. His eyes closed, he tried to think. Eran was doing everything so quickly. Mosk’s gut hurt. Whatever the Gancanagh had done with that lust, there was a lot of it leftover, coiling inside of him, twisting into something until Mosk felt like he was vibrating. It was a darker pleasure, thicker than simple, gentle touches, but Mosk still wasn’t sure if he should hate it, if he should be terrified, and fear never entirely left him.

He could hear his own breath trembling.

‘Eran,’ he said, his voice thicker than before. Eran looked up at him, his forehead furrowed, his brows drawn together. His face marked with concentration, with something else Mosk didn’t understand.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m scared.’

Eran frowned, but his hands didn’t stop moving, and Mosk pressed his lips together.

‘Why?’ Eran said.

‘It’s all new,’ Mosk said, shaking his head. He didn’t even know. He pressed his face into his arm where it was pulled above him, and felt the hugeness of whatever Eran was doing. He wanted to scream, or...something. He knew he should be screaming, kicking, twisting to get Eran off him, but the rope had done something, Eran was...

‘This is new?’ Eran said, as though he wasn’t sure of what Mosk had said.

‘Yes.’
‘This?’ Eran said, twisting his hand on Mosk’s cock in a way that had Mosk’s eyes rolling back in his head. Yes. That. It was new. ‘Are you serious?’

Mosk thought of the Gancanagh calling him a virginal whore and would have laughed, were it not for some heavy, awful feeling in his chest at the thought of it. He was scared. His hands shifted until he could grasp at the ropes, his fingers tightening, his whole body tightening. Eran’s hands were so warm. They were warmer than even the Gancanagh. Mosk had the image of his flesh suddenly being burned and whimpered.

‘Don’t burn me,’ he said.

‘I wouldn’t,’ Eran said fervently. ‘I won’t.’

_You’ve done it before._

But not like this. But then, there had never been anything like this. Certainly, some of the people that had fucked him in the past had gotten a hand around him, but they didn’t really care about what Mosk felt. They just…went through whatever motions they thought they were supposed to. But Eran wasn’t fucking him. Eran was just doing this. _Only_ this. Mosk heard his own hoarse breathing in his throat, it filled his ears.

‘Don’t burn me,’ he whispered.

Eran looked at him, broad confusion there, and he shook his head, kept moving his hands, and Mosk jerked his arms in the ropes and thought that they were helping, pushing him closer. But not helping, because he wasn’t sure he wanted to fall off that precipice. He wasn’t used to the way his muscles tightened along his spine, starting at the base and creeping upwards. Wasn’t used to the way his cock twitched on occasion in demand, especially if Eran cupped his balls and squeezed lightly. Wasn’t used to being awake to feel this, like an impending implosion. He’d only ever woken up to a sleep-slow outpouring of lust, hips undulating into the bed.

‘Don’t,’ Mosk breathed, panting the word on every other exhale.

He didn’t even know what he meant. _Don’t let me. Don’t do this. Don’t stop. Don’t burn me. Don’t._

He’d been on the receiving side of the orgasms of others so many times. Hundreds of times. It was strange to detachedly realise the signs. The way his hips began to buck up, uneven, needy. The way he couldn’t keep every sound swallowed down. Even his hands tensing in the ropes right up until they went limp. The word _don’t_ caught in his throat and then was eclipsed by the thick moan that followed. Pleasure bursting bright and sharp through him, almost pain.

Eran’s hand kept working him as he came. Mosk’s hands squeezing the ropes with every pulse of release, like what was happening was a whole body experience he couldn’t escape. It drove his thoughts away, but left panic in the core of him. He didn’t _understand_ this. He couldn’t get his breath together, he couldn’t just make it stop. His body wasn’t even a part of him anymore, and it distantly reminded him of the Mages, making it so that his body wasn’t his anymore.

It was too huge, too terrifying to be good. Yet…

Mosk sagged back onto the bed when it was done, not realising how much he’d tensed. He was surprised to feel a thin cloth cleaning him up, cleaning up his spill, and he opened bleary eyes to see Eran using a square of cloth. A handkerchief? Had he traded for a handkerchief at the markets?

‘Now you can fuck me,’ Mosk breathed, his voice hoarse.
‘No,’ Eran said. ‘I can’t.’

Eran leaned down to kiss him, and Mosk instantly knew that would be too much. A bolt of terror paralysed him right until he could feel Eran’s breath against his lips. Then, he jerked forwards and sunk his teeth into Eran’s bottom lip hard enough that Eran yelped.

Eran drew away quickly, his eyes wide, his fingers touching the blood on his lips. They stared at each other, and Mosk expected to be burned, but instead Eran just drew his fingers away and looked at the blood on them in something like amazement.

‘That’s why, by the way,’ Eran said, licking to taste the blood on his lip. His eyes burned brighter for a moment, but then they went back to whatever counted as normal for Eran.

‘What is?’

‘Are you tired? Are you going to go back to the Gancanagh?’

Mosk was tired. It was like the storm inside of him, the dead leaves whirling frantically, had settled. His sides hurt distantly, and he didn’t think he’d want to have Augus deal with him again if he tried to see the Gancanagh.

‘I won’t go back,’ Mosk said. ‘Tonight.’

Eran stared at him for a long moment, then laughed. ‘That’s probably how you survived.’

‘What is?’

Eran only moved on the bed, shifting so that he was kneeling beside Mosk’s chest and reaching up to undo the ropes. He muttered something at what must have been a stubborn knot. Mosk would have tightened everything when he struggled. But eventually his wrist was freed, and Eran held it up, inspecting it.

Mosk didn’t understand why Eran wouldn’t fuck him. Did he really find it so distasteful? He’d had sex before, and he could get it with Mosk – for free, as the Gancanagh had pointed out – literally any time, but he always said no. Maybe he was just above that kind of thing. He was obviously someone who didn’t ever need to go into bars to just…find some random fae to fuck. Eran was hardly looking at him.

‘You hated it,’ Mosk said, even as Eran worked on untying the other wrist.

‘What?’ Eran said, he paused and looked down. ‘Why would you say that?’

‘I can tell.’

‘No, I…’ Eran laughed softly. ‘Hang on.’ He continued to untie the rope, and then slid it away. He took Mosk’s wrist in his hand and massaged over the dents and ridges that had been pressed into his skin. Was it gentle? Too gentle? Mosk yanked his hand away and Eran let him.

‘You didn’t hate it?’ Mosk said.

Eran sat next to him, crossing his legs and looking down at him, lips pursing. ‘I mean, you’re not—You’re not unattractive.’

‘Me?’

Eran reached up and rubbed the back of his neck and then smiled, though the smile was sad, and
Mosk couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

‘You’re- You’re striking,’ Eran said.

‘But I’m not anything.’

Eran looked at him in confusion, and then shook his head. Mosk didn’t understand it at all. Between the two of them… Eran was classically handsome. He was tall and strong, but not strangely oversized like Gwyn. He had those pretty eyes. Mosk could tell that Eran had some kind of sexual experience before this, knew firsthand now that it was true. Surely Eran had never lacked for bed partners.

Mosk was one of the shortest ones in his family. His hair wasn’t some milder brown-green – unless he was starving – but a vivid grass green at the roots, growing out to a dark green that was brighter than most of the foliage in the forest. He didn’t have the golden-silver eyes of a properly matured Aur dryad, but the stupid watery grey of someone who hadn’t yet found their Aur tree. He didn’t even have the pretty leaves growing out of his hair that most of the rest of his family had. He was just a nothing. He was meant to live in a forest and bond with trees and…well, that was it really. Someone else would have continued on the family line. Not him.

‘Before the fire,’ Mosk said, looking away, ‘I didn’t do anything with people. No one was ever interested in me. I’d never done anything. Any time I went somewhere, I was always escorted, and never on my own except in the forest. And hardly any fae live there except for us.’

Eran touched his fingers to his bottom lip again, where Mosk’s teeth had bitten hard. The look he gave Mosk made him uncomfortable. Did he expect Mosk to apologise? He wasn’t going to apologise.

‘So until the fire,’ Eran said slowly, ‘you hadn’t…had sex at all. Or kissed anyone. Or…anything? Not even making out?’

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘But when I saw you- And in the taverns- How did you get from that to this?’

‘I’m a whore,’ Mosk said bitterly, then closed his eyes. He could still hear the way the Gancanagh said it to him. He hated it, and yet it made him feel something else too. He didn’t understand it. He didn’t think he was going to forget it in a hurry.

‘So when you ask to be fucked, you have no idea what else there is, do you? Except for all that empty bullshit that you think you need.’

‘I do need it.’

‘You need something,’ Eran said thoughtfully. ‘But, respectfully, I don’t think you have enough experience to know exactly what it is.’

‘I need to not think,’ Mosk said.

‘You didn’t seem to be thinking all that much when you had the ropes around your wrists,’ Eran said. ‘You like them, don’t you?’

Mosk nodded, unable to say it aloud. He wasn’t supposed to like things like that. He knew he’d been broken during his time with Davix and Olphix, but maybe he’d been broken like that too?
‘It’s not strange,’ Eran said, frowning at whatever he saw on Mosk’s face.

‘I shouldn’t though. After everything.’

‘A lot of people do.’

Eran sat on the corner of his bed and kept watching Mosk, like he contained secrets. Eran looked… concerned? Worried? Mosk couldn’t tell. He was sleepy. He was scared to sleep. He kept his eyes open and flinched when Eran placed a hand on his forehead.

‘You don’t want to sleep, do you?’

‘Stop doing that,’ Mosk said.

‘He won’t come back.’

‘You don’t know anything.’

‘Maybe he’ll come back then, but Oengus sent him away once, he can send him away again. And I’ll be here.’

‘You can’t do anything.’ Mosk jerked his head away from Eran’s soft touch. It was itchy and reminded him of Olphix. Eventually, he rolled away to the opposite side of the bed. He wanted to fold his arms or curl up, but instead he reached down and did up the soft ties of his pants.

He watched in amazement when Eran went to the wooden wardrobe and drew out two blankets. He shook them out, dust flying into the air by firelight, and then came and placed them over Mosk’s body.

‘You need to at least rest,’ Eran said, ‘even if you don’t sleep.’

Mosk wanted to retort at that, but couldn’t think of what to say. The blankets smelled musty, but they were soft. The room was warm, but it wasn’t too warm. He wondered if Eran hated it. But instead, Eran just got under the covers next to him and lay down, facing away. Mosk looked at the back of his hair, the back of his neck, for a long time.

‘You didn’t do your thing,’ Mosk said. ‘Your fire ritual thing.’

‘I don’t like doing it here,’ Eran said. He sounded reluctant, like he didn’t want to say that much. But Mosk sometimes remembered Eran singing with the fire, that one last clear note. He didn’t miss it, because it involved fire, but…there was already a fire burning in the hearth.

‘I don’t mind,’ Mosk said.

‘I do,’ Eran said soberly. ‘Get some rest.’

Mosk scowled at the back of Eran’s head, and then looked back up at the ceiling. His whole body still tingled from what had happened. His wrists hurt. He could still feel where the Gancanagh had gotten a dry finger into him. Could feel the stickiness of sweat between his thighs where the handkerchief hadn’t caught it all. Stubbornly, he refused to sleep. He just…wasn’t going to. Sleeping was stupid.

He could stay awake. He knew Court fae could technically stay awake for months. Mosk could never manage it, but that was because he’d just never tried hard enough. Now, he had a reason to try.
Mosk’s body began to fall towards sleep anyway. Eran began breathing steadily and deeply next to him, and Mosk was amazed that he could just let himself go like that. But it was doing something to him, to hear someone’s breath that close. It was like being back in his home-grove, back with his family. His body became convinced it was safe, even as Mosk clenched his hands into scared, anxious fists. Even as he tried to remind himself of Olphix, just waiting for an opportunity to slip into his mind.

Against his will, with a relentless fear dogging him, Mosk slept.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Twisting and Turning:'

‘What has you so distressed?’

Eran wanted to say that it was nothing, but he couldn’t. That was a lie, and it made his muscles tighten painfully just to contemplate such a bald-faced untruth.

‘I did something and I think it was the wrong thing to do. But I liked doing it.’

Not a lie. No details. Eran couldn’t imagine betraying the reality of it. He didn’t know how to convey that he’d been so determined in the moment. Because he still had his heartsong, and was now apparently using it to molest pretty, broken dryads. Eran closed his eyes.
Several swans had gathered before him where he paced on the damp, squelching grass by the bank of the wide, slow-flowing river. They swam back and forth, looking up at him expectantly, and Eran found it difficult to believe they’d ever been anything other than beasts. He found it hard to care much about them, his thoughts kept trailing back to what he’d done.

Mosk slept, a dead weight on Eran’s bed. Light crept reluctantly into Eran’s room through the dingy, and Eran realised after hours of watching Mosk with something like panic and protection swirling in his chest that Mosk wasn’t going to wake up and hate him any time soon. Not yet.

Eran could still feel the shape of Mosk’s cock in his hand. He could feel the coarseness of the rope against his palm and fingers as he’d looped it around both of Mosk’s wrists. He could hear the catches in Mosk’s breathing, taste the blood in his own mouth from Mosk’s teeth biting sharply into his lower lip. He could smell all of it, blood and come, even the mustiness of the room it had happened in.

What seemed like a good idea at the time – the only option, even – in the grim light of a sticky morning looked like Eran acting monstrously once more. Mosk had protested. Was it Eran’s Unseelie side? No. His father would have never done something like that.

‘It’s just you,’ Eran said, his voice tight. The smoke fizzling through his lungs made his chest ache, he breathed it out with every short exhale. It was just him. The only hybrid that had ever existed amongst his people. Not a mistake, his mother had said, just…

Don’t blame it on that. Take responsibility for your actions.

Eran couldn’t imagine how Mosk would react. He’d either be fine about it and say that he needed it, like he needed to be raped by strangers in taverns, or he’d be furious and Eran would feel that was justified and he’d navigate it as best as he could. He’d figure it out, while knowing that he already wanted to do it again. All that and more. He’d never tied up someone who had said Don’t that many times. Who had stared at him with that desperate fear and need, and been sweet afterwards.

Sweet. Like Augus had said he once was.

Was that truly what Mosk used to be like? Or had he just given up? Had the tantrum run its course? ‘You are distressed.’

Eran turned quickly and saw Oengus there, shirtless but wearing his motley robe, a golden circlet at
his forehead, barely containing his tumbling red hair. A golden torc at his neck. He had a woven basket of grains and snails hooked over his muscular forearm.

‘Good morning,’ Eran said automatically. ‘Did you rest well?’

‘I did not rest,’ Oengus said after a pause, walking past Eran to the edge of the bank where the swans were now clamouring. Perhaps they hadn’t been interested in Eran at all, but just waiting for breakfast. Oengus crouched by the murky brown water and reached into the basket, bringing out a handful of the strange feed and holding it out, palm flat, as the swans delicately snatched bits up from his hand. A writhing snail, a mouthful of wheat or barley.

It was the way they ate that made Eran think they weren’t any normal swans. Birds squabbled, didn’t they? They didn’t wait their turn patiently. One gestured to another with its neck that it should come forward and eat.

‘I have been working on the magic that will allow proper contact between the Unseelie King and his Court.’

‘The Unseelie King…’ Eran said. ‘You said you fought with him. When he was…a liar.’

‘You say it in past tense, but he is Unseelie, and thus always will be,’ Oengus said, reaching into the basket and holding out another handful, eyes looking beyond the swans into the distance.

‘Were you at the Court when it happened?’

‘I rarely leave this place,’ Oengus said. ‘This is my tower, my home, and I have never quite liked the way Lady Crielle influenced the Court proper. There is enough poison in living that I do not need to seek more.’

Eran frowned at him, and Oengus turned to look at Eran over his shoulder, thick auburn eyebrows pulling together, freckles bright in the dim morning light.

‘What has you so distressed?’

Eran wanted to say that it was nothing, but he couldn’t. That was a lie, and it made his muscles tighten painfully just to contemplate such a bald-faced untruth.

‘I did something and I think it was the wrong thing to do. But I liked doing it.’

Not a lie. No details. Eran couldn’t imagine betraying the reality of it. He didn’t know how to convey that he’d been so determined in the moment. Because he still had his heartsong, and was now apparently using it to molest pretty, broken dryads. Eran closed his eyes.

‘You didn’t come of age all that long ago, did you? Twenty years or so? What are you, two hundred and thirty or some such? The heart of the afrit and ambaros in your breast, and called The Caspian Lion by those who had begun to see you hunt. I only met Adali once, but her sister Ambari, I met many times. I know pieces about you. A half-formed poem that is now only words. If you find that your life is giving you an opportunity to form those words into lines, that the song of you is only now coming to bear, you must step back and let the lines form. It is too late to undo the knowledge that you have done something you enjoyed, whether or not you should have done it.’

Eran stared at him, and Oengus stood, dumping the rest of the contents of the basket into the water, turning to face Eran properly.
‘A poem that truthfully shows the measure of a man, makes room for those parts of him which he may not wish to see. The poem of my own life shows where I have murdered rashly, where I have perhaps loved too deeply, where I have lived reclusively. It shows my honour too. My power. My love of romance, imprisoned as I am in such a heartsong. It shows that I have battled alongside Gwyn ap Nudd and loved him as a War General, only to lament for what the Seelie military has lost. It shows those times I discoursed with Davix and Olphix, daring to think we were friends when I was in the School of the Staff.’

Oengus walked up to Eran and clapped a hand on his shoulder, as Eran couldn’t think of what to say.

‘Be easier on yourself,’ Oengus said. ‘You are only now forming into lines and stanzas, and the early measure of your life is already too heartbreaking. A young lad with a life full of laughter in the desert under those bright, bright stars, who lost his fiery family to ice and wanders the world determined to set it to rights. Eran Iliakambar, if there is a line that follows that sounds like this: ‘In all his desperation, he did things he had no cause to be proud of as he learned what it was to be a hero,’ it is only a step on a ladder.’

‘You don’t know what I did.’

A pause. This close, Eran could see a gold-silver line around the warm brown of his eyes that sparkled metallic and bright. It looked like the ring of brightness that sometimes gleamed around the blackness of the swan’s beady eyes. After a while, Oengus tilted his head and smiled a little. Eran thought he could imagine it. A swan in the place of this knight.

‘You are a fool, if you think I do not know what happens in my tower,’ Oengus said finally.

Eran could only nod. He hadn’t known Oengus knew. Did he see it? Did he only get a sense of it? He’d calmly taken up Gwyn’s bruised wrist and talked about how expressions of love were welcome in his tower. But Eran didn’t feel like Oengus was excusing what he’d done either.

_He did things he had no cause to be proud of as he learned what it was to be a hero._

The swans were drifting away, having eaten themselves to satiation. Oengus’ hand slid off Eran’s shoulder and he watched them go, then sighed. His eyes closed briefly, and when he opened them again, it seemed as though some of the light had faded there.

‘I will never stop missing her,’ Oengus said.

He turned and walked away. Eran watched him go, feeling unexpectedly sorry for him in his damp and dingy tower, surrounded by swans that would always remind him of his lover before she died.

Oengus was no stranger to loss either.

At least out here, he couldn’t feel the Gancanagh’s glamour. He was furious at the fae, and didn’t trust himself not to do something rash if he saw him. From the way Mosk talked about it, the way Augus had said it was a stupid decision, Eran knew the Gancanagh would have taken advantage. He was Unseelie, he was a predator, what if he’d made Mosk fall in love with him? Pine after him? Could Mosk die from that? Would the Gancanagh do that in Oengus’ home?

All questions that had his hands clenching, smoke threading in lazy wisps towards the sky as he breathed out.

No, he’d wait a little bit longer before going inside. Before seeing the Gancanagh again, or worse, seeing indifference or judgement on Mosk’s face.
The horses were a wonderful distraction. Augus’ grey mare was friendly and sweet, and she seemed to miss companionable contact, constantly butting her long head against Eran’s chest. Eran placed his cheek against her forehead and he felt her mouth moving against his clothing and smiled. She was nothing like the gazelle they used to ride – they were proud and difficult to bond with, and disliked strangers – but it reminded him of home in a way that felt warm instead of cold.

He wasn’t sure if she had a name. She probably did. Had Augus or Gwyn bothered to learn them?

The underside of her chin was velvety, little sharper chin hairs tickling his palm. She rumbled noises at him, her hooves pawing at the ground, and he laughed at her antics and risked wrapping his arms around her head to feel something of that pure goodness that came from getting to know an animal that wanted the affection. She didn’t reject it either, but settled, her ears only twitching mildly as they came into contact with his curly hair.

‘You’re a good one, aren’t you?’ he said warmly as he stepped back. ‘Very friendly.’

She was the one that had pressed her nose into Gwyn’s hand, back by Gille Dubh’s lake. Eran hoped he’d get to ride her one day. Maybe he’d even get his own horse. Though…

No, Mosk needed someone to ride with him. At least for now.

Eran drew away, walking back towards the main entrance into the tower. He paused when he felt a strange energy in the air. A cold spiral of dread inside of him, could it be Olphix again? As he turned to run back into the tower and warn someone, a shimmer of bright colours coalesced out of nowhere several metres beside him, hovering above the grass.

In amazement, Eran watched as the colours – reds and blues, oranges and ochres – swirled around each other until they finally pulled apart to show a shimmering portal. Eran had seen them before, and he stared in amazement as Gulvi Dubna Vajat – Queen-in-Waiting to the Unseelie Court – stepped through it regally, her wings flexing as she came. She had her knives out, but when she saw only Eran, she put them away again.

Behind her came the Glashtyn, Augus’ brother, running hands through his hair and laughing.

‘That’s a way to fucking travel! Jesus.’

Julvia was next, the swan maiden who had shown Eran empathy at a time when few other members of the Unseelie Court were doing the same. She stepped through with an aristocratic primness, lifting the skirt of her white dress so that it didn’t touch the ground, her sandalled feet crossing the grass to her sister’s side.

Behind the three of them came Fenwrel, the portal closing behind her in a wisp of bright colours leaving the lake and its tower even dimmer than before. Fenwrel tucked her staff back into the strip of embroidered fabric beneath her choli and looked first at the tower, then at Eran.

‘Greetings,’ Fenwrel said. ‘The others are inside?’

‘Yes,’ Eran said, nodding. He felt himself go cold. She could take his fire away with a motion and maybe she’d know that he’d broken his curse. He didn’t ever want to feel that way again. It was far easier to bear even his guilt towards Mosk, when he had that heat inside of himself reminding him that he was precious, that he belonged to the flame.

Gulvi was standing with her hands on her hips, staring out at the swans. ‘Fucking Oengus,’ she
‘Leave them alone,’ Julvia said, placing her hand on Gulvi’s heavily tattooed arm. ‘They’re happy that way.’

‘Of course Gwyn comes to the gloomiest tower around. There’s about fifty others nearby! Some with Unseelie allies! I swear, if he wants to be Seelie again so badly they can have him. La! Let us go in.’

‘It’s been some time since I’ve seen my teacher,’ Fenwrel said lightly, and Gulvi looked at her, rolled her eyes and began walking purposefully towards the tower.

Eran lagged behind as Julvia beamed at him and skipped up ahead, alongside the Queen-in-Waiting. She seemed happy just to be there. The Glashtyn – Ash – fell in step beside Eran. He wore jeans, a brown button up shirt that suited him. Eran thought it was strange that even though the Glashtyn and the Each Uisge weren’t related, they looked similar about the face anyway. Was that a waterhorse thing?

‘We haven’t known where you’ve been,’ Ash said. ‘Like, all this time. As soon as you went to the Aur forest, you were basically gone from radar.’

‘Radar?’ Eran said, confused.

Ash looked at him, then shrugged as they entered through the heavy stone door, the carved swans with their curled necks fading into shadow. ‘Human thing. We couldn’t sense them out. I knew Augus wasn’t dead because of the Soulbond, but beyond that like… It’s been bad.’

Circles beneath Ash’s eyes attested to it, and Eran realised he hadn’t considered what the inability to teleport might mean for families separated from each other. What it might be doing to the realm, that fae couldn’t feel each other out with charms or magic.

‘He’s fine,’ Eran said quickly. ‘He and Gwyn are both good. They found us. We got separated and they came with horses and food.’

Ash flashed a grin at him. At first Eran couldn’t read the intention in it, startling at an Unseelie fae flashing that many teeth at him. But then Ash clapped him on the back and sighed in relief as they entered the huge vaulted dining hall.

Oengus was already there, but Eran stared first at the Gancanagh, hating that stir of false arousal in his gut. He wanted to place his hands around the Gancanagh’s neck and burn. He’d never considered himself a jealous person. He didn’t know if it was jealousy now. He’d never cared if his lovers had other lovers. But the idea of Mosk and the Gancanagh together, remembering Augus’ rage about it – Augus, interrogator and torturer, being angry about it – it left a sour taste in Eran’s mouth.

The Gancanagh turned as though Eran’s gaze was a bell and stared at him steadily, before winking once and looking away again.

‘I see my magic worked,’ Oengus said, walking towards them all. He smiled mildly, and took Gulvi’s hand in his own. ‘Swan maidens are always welcome here. Especially those that are Queens-in-Waiting. Gulvi Dubna Vajat, welcome again to my tower.’

‘Whatever, stop with the formalities,’ Gulvi said. ‘Where’s Gwyn?’

‘On his way now,’ Oengus said, though Eran had no idea how he knew that. He was turning and
embracing Fenwrel, bending down to wrap his arms around her as she pressed his face against his chest. It was unusually intimate, and as they withdrew, they stared at each other for a long time. ‘Hello, student.’

‘Greetings, teacher.’

‘Fenwrel, Mouse-Maiden, granddaughter of Fluri, you are always welcome here. Now, we have…’ He turned to Julvia and tilted his head at her.

‘I am Julvia Dubna Vajat, my Lord,’ Julvia said, lifting her skirt in a curtsey. ‘Older sister to Gulvi, and here because I thought I’d like to see something that wasn’t the Unseelie Court for once.’

Gulvi made a sound of disgust.

‘And this last,’ Oengus said. ‘Ash, you’re always welcome. Such warmth you bring with you. It’s good to see you.’

They embraced each other too, a swift, close thing that made the both of them smile. Then everyone looked to the sound of footsteps on stairs, and Eran realised it was Gwyn and likely Augus. But not Mosk. Eran could only count two pairs of footsteps.

Gwyn emerged, his sword sheathed to his side, Augus behind him.

Ash stepped out of the group and ran quickly towards Augus. They embraced, and Ash was laughing, then Augus laughed too, the sound unexpectedly gentle and sweet. Gwyn cast a look over them that Eran would have called tender if it belonged to anyone else, but it lasted only a few seconds before Gwyn was by Oengus’ side, facing them all.

Though the King turned and looked sharply when they heard Ash say quietly: ‘When was the last time you fed? Properly?’

Augus looked up, as though aware of all the gazes on them both. His uneasy expression trailed first to Gwyn, and then flickered about the room. He pressed his lips together, shook his head and didn’t answer.

‘Teleportation is down everywhere,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I’m sure Oengus has informed you, but we are certain now. It doesn’t matter what status, species or alignment you are. If you’re not a Mage capable of making portals, you can’t travel.’

‘Some of us can still fly,’ Gulvi said.

‘What have you found?’ Fenwrel said, after smiling briefly at Gulvi. Her attention was back on Gwyn, her voice sober. Eran was surprised it was Fenwrel asking the questions, not the Queen-in-Waiting.

‘Let us sit, first,’ Gwyn said. ‘It will be more comfortable.’

‘I want to get back,’ Gulvi said abruptly. ‘We have had magical incursion on the Court since you’ve been gone. We cannot pinpoint which Mages, though we have our suspicions. They are trying to break through the barrier that keeps out Seelie fae and unwanted visitors.’

Gwyn’s intake of breath was audible. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Fenwrel has been working to keep them out, though right now, the integrity of the Unseelie Court does the bulk of the work. But she makes sure they know she’s there to kick their asses if they get
any closer to being successful. I don’t want to be away for long.’

‘If it was safe enough for you to visit together, then it’s safe enough for you to sit,’ Gwyn said firmly. ‘I won’t detain you long.’

But he looked unhappy as he led them all to one of the long tables. Gulvi looked the same, even though Fenwrel looked far less bothered by it all. Julvia followed alongside Eran and sat next to him. Ash and Augus were holding hands, but then Ash drew away and with a small nod to his brother, walked to the Gancanagh instead. The Gancanagh pushed his stone chair back and tilted his head.

‘Lover, it’s been so long,’ the Gancanagh said smoothly.

‘So fucking long. You’d think being back in the fae realm like, for good, would mean I’d have more time to see you but it’s not worked out that way at all.’

‘A crying shame,’ the Gancanagh said.

Ash leaned up – though he wasn’t that much shorter than the Gancanagh – and pressed their lips together, groaning happily. He wound an arm around the Gancanagh’s neck, fingers threading into his hair, and aside from the cheerful tweeting of many birds, the room fell silent. Eran exhaled smoke as the glamour in the room built, and the arousal lancing through his body grew stronger. He didn’t look at anyone else to see how they were reacting, but instead thought about what it might feel like to burn a scar into the Gancanagh’s chest.

After a couple of minutes, Augus cleared his throat. Ash drew away slowly after pecking the Gancanagh on the lips. The Gancanagh looked charmed, his black eyes glittering.

‘Are we done?’ Gwyn said crisply.

‘Yeah,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘Sort of.’

Ash and Augus were exchanging something meaningful in their glances, and then Ash’s eyes abruptly widened and he looked between Augus and the Gancanagh.

‘Wait, you two?’

Augus pressed the tips of his fingers to his mouth and then shook his head a little, dropping his hand. ‘I had no idea, Ash.’

‘But of course I’ve sampled from both the Each Uisge and the Glashtyn,’ the Gancanagh said coyly.

‘This like, never happens,’ Ash breathed. ‘So who’s better? Him or me?’

‘Ash,’ Augus said in reproach.

‘Ash!’ Gulvi said enthusiastically. ‘It would have to be Ash!’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ Oengus said, tilting his head at her, and then sitting down and adjusting the swords at his side. ‘But don’t we have more important things to discuss?’

‘This one doesn’t,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘Ah, me, I can’t quite remember who was better. Glashtyn, that one of bright cheer, do you think you might wish to…refresh my memory?’

‘Mmhm,’ Ash said, taking the Gancanagh’s hand and drawing him towards one of the sets of stairs.
leading deeper into the tower. ‘You have a room, right?’

‘And a bed.’

‘And I don’t have to be here, right?’ Ash said. ‘I can be back later. I mean I’m not going back with Gulvi and Fenwrel. I’m staying with you guys.’

‘You mean you’re not returning with Gulvi, Fenwrel and Julvia?’ Augus said sharply.

‘I’m staying,’ Julvia said brightly. ‘I’m calling in my life debt. You said you owed me a life debt and so I want you to protect me to your best ability while you’re on whatever this journey is. Maybe you’ll need a swan-maiden. I can repair clothing.’

Augus muttered something exasperated under his breath in no language Eran had ever heard before, and a second later Gulvi was doing the same thing.

‘Also why aren’t you returning?’ Augus called after him as Ash was already disappearing, his sneakers ascending the stairs.

‘Chat later, bro!’ Ash called.

‘There is a life debt between you and a swan-maiden?’ Oengus said to Augus, as everyone else sat. Eran was somewhat relieved that the Gancanagh had disappeared, his glamour with him. He wasn’t nearly as afraid for Ash, who seemed like he could handle himself, both by reputation and by the fact that he’d survived him before.

‘I can answer this,’ Gulvi said, shooting a quelling look at Augus, who had affected a look of indifference, which Eran was coming to realise meant that he was sometimes uncomfortable with the situation. ‘The King’s Consort, as you know, killed almost all of my family. Gwyn ap Nudd found my sister locked into her swan form, too weak to transform. Eventually, she was healed and could transform, and the donkey rightfully acknowledged that he owed her a life debt. And so here we are. Now if only she wouldn’t exchange it for something so foolish.’

‘I don’t get to see anything!’ Julvia exclaimed. ‘They keep me cooped up because I still tire easily when shifting. But I need to get stronger, I want to see more of the world! Augus has to protect me if those are the terms of the life debt. I can help. I promise.’

‘Then Augus should accede to the debt, shouldn’t he?’ Oengus said, smiling fondly at her.

‘Listen, asshole,’ Gulvi said, splaying her fingers impatiently, ‘she’s not one of your great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandchildren. She’s a member of my family, and she’s barely healed. You don’t get to pull rank on me, just because—’

‘But she’s laid down her terms for the life debt?’ Oengus said mildly, in the tone of someone who knew he was right and felt very smug about it. ‘So your anger is simply words thrown uselessly in the wind, less meaningful than the birdsong in the rafters.’

‘Meet me on a battlefield, Oengus, I swear—’ Gulvi said, leaning forwards, and then she bared her teeth when Fenwrel lifted her palm.

‘Teacher, I see you have not lost your sharpness,’ Fenwrel said.

‘I have not,’ Oengus said, and then as though he’d been called to task, he bowed his head towards Gulvi. ‘I apologise.’
Gulvi stared at him, and then smiled and shook her head, directing a glare at her sister. ‘It’s not you I’m angry at anyway, dear Oengus. Let us discuss what we are here to discuss, no? What have you learned about this plague of ice?’

Eran listened as Gwyn summarised everything that had happened so far in a clinical report. From Mosk being unable to break his curse even in the charred Aur forest, to the attack of the ice, to the separation and beyond. Eran was surprised that Gwyn even discussed Eran’s theory about Mosk’s heartsong and Davix’s magic coming together to form the ice plague.

Fenwrel looked towards Eran, her gaze shrewd.

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said. ‘It must be that.’

‘Must it?’ Eran said, feeling stupid. ‘I was just guessing. It could be anything.’

‘Fire makes great leaps, at times,’ Fenwrel said. ‘A spark flying up a chimney, a flame searching for something more. It’s of no surprise to me that this insight has come from you. Of course it cannot be easily confirmed, but…’ She leaned back in her chair. ‘Davix, dead. It would account for much, and yet breaks with everything I’ve known about them. Closer to immortality than even some gods are rumoured to be.’

‘If you seek to unmake the fundamental blocks of life,’ Oengus said, ‘then you can, in that moment, also be unmade.’

‘Mosk unmade him,’ Fenwrel said. ‘And Olphix said it wasn’t a true death?’

Eran nodded, feeling like Mosk should be here, yet glad they weren’t demanding he be here for this. He couldn’t imagine Mosk would respond to it in any other way than shutting down completely. He’d been through enough. Eran had put him through enough.

‘Then Olphix is vulnerable,’ Fenwrel said, her eyes glittering. ‘Very vulnerable. To say nothing of the fact that this must have deeply destabilised his mind. His only lover, as far as I’m aware, was Davix. They were Yin and Yang, two poles, the fulcrum and the lever.’

‘But someone with his power,’ Oengus said, ‘he could take the fae realm down with him. It seems he may seek to. Stopping teleportation. Making it difficult – if not impossible – for other Mages to communicate with each other.’

‘Attempting to break into the Unseelie Court,’ Gulvi said, ‘and already having a position of immense power in the Seelie Court.’

‘I have defeated unstable villains before,’ Gwyn said calmly. ‘If he is vulnerable and destabilised, it will only be easier.’

Eran looked at Augus’ impassive face and wondered how it felt when everyone knew that he was the unstable villain Gwyn referred to. The once-poisonous and now deposed Unseelie King that had somehow reformed or changed, even though some still doubted it. But hadn’t Augus put his life in danger to heal the land he’d destroyed? Hadn’t he taken on the Soulbond, promising to never work against any Kingdom again, on pain of his and his brother’s death?

In that moment, Eran believed Gwyn really could do it. That he could somehow defeat Olphix and turn it into something good.

Eran listened to them talk, feeling once more like a child allowed at the adult’s table. Even though it chafed, he felt somewhat honoured that they weren’t sending him away. They didn’t really
involve him, but they had clearly taken his thoughts on Olphix and the plague of ice seriously and that was good enough.

‘We can visit the Seelie Court,’ Gwyn said, ‘a confrontation with Olphix must occur.’

‘And what will you do?’ Fenwrel said. ‘Untrained in magic as you are, but with a well of it that he can exploit in an instant? What will you do, when he steals your voice and your magic with whatever leftover power he has? Consider that he is not actually changing the world with Mosk’s heartsong, which has been turned loose upon the world! Consider then that he is doing all of this with his own raw power, and Mosk’s magic. We have no idea what he is trying to do because he has likely changed his plans. But also consider that this is not some War General you go up against, who will fight you with a sword. Remember what his brother did to you on the battlefield, with barely more than a splinter of magic.’

Gwyn’s hand raised to his chest, he frowned.

‘Think how you would recover, if Olphix forces fire into your lungs,’ Fenwrel said calmly. ‘If you go to the Seelie Court-‘

‘I could at least speak to Albion, and-‘

‘He may not be alive,’ Fenwrel said.

‘My student is right,’ Oengus said heavily. ‘I have considered this myself. He took on a permanent injury during the battle at the Unseelie Court ten years ago, and has hardly been seen since, leaving everything to his now-King-in-Waiting, Davix, who is now apparently Olphix. Given Olphix has always been assumed to be Unseelie, this means he can somehow fool the defences around the Seelie Court and assume Inner Court status. Or perhaps he was detected, and did away with the monarch.’

Eran stared. He’d not even thought…

‘Oolphix is Seelie,’ Gwyn said abruptly.

‘I trained with them, I think I’d know-‘

‘When Ash traded with Olphix for the Soulbond, the book – all the research that led me to him – stated in no uncertain terms that he was Seelie.’

Fenwrel blinked at him, and frowned. ‘He is Unseelie.’

‘Can it simply be that no one can truly sense it?’ Gwyn said, frowning.

‘Oolphix is Unseelie,’ Oengus said. ‘It can be sensed. What books…? And yet they led you to Olphix and the Soulbond old lore?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. ‘A Mage of fire – Firebeard – who ended up being Olphix. Would it be possible that he’s pretended to different alignments in the past?’

Fenwrel looked uncomfortable and didn’t answer, looking to Oengus instead. Oengus cleared his throat and also looked uncomfortable.

‘It’s possible,’ Oengus said, ‘but I do not recall reading anything about it at the School of the Staff. It is entirely likely that the Unseelie Court has tomes that the School of the Staff does not, but why they’d speak of Olphix as though he was Seelie… I don’t recall any legends…’
‘Perhaps he wanted no one to remember, and cast a spell,’ Fenwrel said slowly. ‘All that is left is now in books protected in the Unseelie Court?’

‘I love how much we don’t know,’ Gwyn said acerbically. ‘Oolphix pretended to be Seelie in the past but no one knows for certain. Albion might be dead, but no one knows for certain. My favourite kind of game.’

‘If the King was truly dead, then the King-in-Waiting would have assumed the throne,’ Augus said calmly, ‘and we would be aware of it.’

‘Perhaps,’ Fenwrel acknowledged, ‘if Oolphix didn’t currently have the magic to make it seem as though everything was fine. I hate this. He could be doing anything. We need more information. Unfortunately I cannot waste my magic on making portals all day to get you to where you need to go, Gwyn.’

‘You must protect the Unseelie Court,’ Gwyn agreed. ‘I do not mind travelling on foot. We have horses.’

They continued to talk. Eran and Mosk were to come with Gwyn and Augus, and apparently Ash and Julvia were coming along too. Gwyn expressed reservation at this, but admitted that Ash’s glamour would come in handy. They continued to talk strategy, and Eran listened intently, until Julvia’s fingers bumped into the side of his arm where it rested on the table. He turned to her, and she smiled at him.

Eran, helplessly, smiled back.

She leaned towards him, and Eran leaned towards her. Then she whispered: ‘Did you know, I am older than the Unseelie King?’

Gwyn’s gaze flickered to Julvia’s and then away again as he continued talking without missing a beat. Of course, they could all hear the whispering if they wanted to. Gwyn obviously didn’t care.

‘I did not,’ Eran said. Julvia seemed younger so far. He wondered if that was a part of her malady, or if that was just her personality.

‘A swan-maiden is good luck to have on any journey,’ she whispered. ‘And I can fly and carry messages and scout ahead. I’d be good to have with you, would I not?’

Eran was trying to think of what to say, when a hooting animal noise from nearby made them all turn mid-conversation to the main entrance.

A game of swans had entered – somehow opening the stone door – and were waddling inside, beaks pointing upwards. They made small little noises, and Julvia stood immediately, walking over to them and holding her hands out. They clustered around her and she smiled at them all, her eyes warm, her face filled with love.

Then it seemed she dissolved and became a smaller, whiter swan than those around her. They huddled together, touching the tips of their beaks to one another’s.

‘La! She’ll be wonderful on your fucking journey, won’t she?’ Gulvi said in disgust. ‘I hear swan meat can be very palatable when roasted.’

At that, Julvia in her true-form honked rudely and walked back towards the main entrance with the rest of the swans.
‘We do not talk about swan meat in this place,’ Oengus said, and Gulvi stared at him, and then sighed.

‘Gwyn, if you say no, I will take her home.’

‘She has called in her debt,’ Gwyn said, looking over to Augus. ‘As long as Augus feels he can reasonably meet it, she must come with us.’

‘I know it’s hard for you to understand this, darling,’ Gulvi said sweetly, ‘but you’re actually Unseelie. Had you forgotten so quickly, being in this dreary place?’

‘Interesting,’ Oengus said, looking at Gwyn. ‘Do you need to be reminded often, what alignment you truly are?’

Gwyn’s expression was stony, and Eran stared, wanting to know what was going on. Why would Gwyn find it hard, if he’d spent his life delighting in lying to the Seelie Court and its Kingdom?

‘Do you trust him?’ Fenwrel said to Gwyn, looking over to Oengus.

‘I came here, did I not?’ Gwyn said. ‘Why?’

‘Teacher, Oengus, what do you know of Lady Crielle’s influence on the Seelie Court?’

Gwyn stiffened, and Eran was sure he’d never seen the King so uncomfortable before. Lady Crielle, his mother. Only earlier that day, Oengus had brought up Gwyn’s mother. Eran didn’t understand, but he couldn’t look away.

‘Only that she manipulated with her dra’ocht,’ Oengus said mildly, ‘and spun webs on everyone she met. Even I, with my experience and my training at the School of the Staff, was not immune. So I frequented the Court less.’ Then Oengus looked at Gwyn and narrowed his eyes. ‘I see.’

*What* did Oengus see?

‘I’m sure you do,’ Gwyn said, and even Eran could hear the disdain in his voice.

‘Do not think to insult me in my home, within my own walls,’ Oengus said with a gentleness that belied the flint in his gaze. ‘I didn’t invite you into my home because I was a fool, I invited you in because I’d always had questions as to the true nature of your betrayal of the Seelie Court. I take it,’ he said, turning his attention back to Fenwrel, ‘that Crielle’s role in all of this was no small thing? She claimed she was scared of him before a crowd of two thousand.’

Gwyn pushed his stone chair back and stood, walking away without another word. Eran watched him go, shocked, but Augus didn’t seem particularly surprised. Nor did any of the others.

‘I don’t understand,’ Eran said, to the sound of Gwyn’s footsteps receding up the stairs.

‘It is convenient for the realm to believe that Gwyn was clever enough to gull the Seelie Court for thousands of years with malicious intent,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Convenient, because it made the Unseelie friendlier to our new King.’

‘But still a lie, my student,’ Oengus said. ‘A lie with enough of the truth in it that people were deceived. You’re all fools if you think that some of us in the upper echelons of the Seelie haven’t realised this for ourselves, especially now that some time has passed. Especially for those of us who never spent all that long in Crielle’s Court.’
‘Don’t you mean Gwyn’s Court?’ Eran interjected.

Gulvi laughed. ‘I think we know what we mean. It’s been Crielle’s Court since the Oak King took her in as his advisor. It was never Gwyn’s Court. Well, *oui*, in name only. It was Gwyn’s military. He never wanted the Court, nor to be King.’

‘This is what has given those of us who toured with him pause, though some still cannot abide the lie, we are but Seelie,’ Oengus said. ‘A fae who clearly had no interest in ruling, who expressed not-so-subtle dismay when elected, who then made himself absent from the Court whenever possible. Were he truly the kind of creature to delight in the suffering of collectively deceived Seelie fae, would he not have spent all his time at the Court? Albion hand-waved a great deal of it away, but Albion wanted the feather in his cap of Kingship, and he had been deeply influenced by Crielle.’

‘I’d kill her again,’ Augus said idly, ‘if anyone thought it might help.’

‘You’d kill her again even if we all thought it wouldn’t,’ Fenwrel said, with real warmth in her eyes.

‘So…’ Eran stared at them all. ‘He was made to be King?’

‘Who’s going to take this?’ Gulvi said archly. ‘I can’t be assed. My sister’s outside larking about with swans, one of my advisors is fucking the Gancanagh, and the King just threw a tantrum. Someone else take this, for fuck’s sake.’

‘I shall,’ Oengus said, ‘so that my student may correct me if I’m wrong. Eran Iliakambar, it seems that Crielle ferch Fnwy forced Gwyn ap Nudd to pretend to be Seelie to preserve her reputation and standing in the Seelie Court – something for which she was renowned, *some* even felt that *she* might be made Queen one day. She forced him to be a soldier, since fae soldiers die earlier than most, and made him kill his own kin repeatedly. When it was no longer in her best interests for Gwyn to be King, she revealed the deceit in a way that made us all think she was a victim of his instead of the other way around and – being so hurt by such a deceit in the first place, many of us believed her. Gwy used that to build the Unseelie Court’s reputation, because it would surely chafe for the realm to know that instead, he was her victim.’

‘Close enough,’ Augus said. ‘You’re forgetting all the torture that family inflicted on him, but a lot of people don’t know about that.’

Oengus looked at him sharply and Augus only shrugged, then looked up at the birds flying about amongst the roof beams.

Eran stared at Augus, hardly able to understand it. He wanted to reject it out of hand, but these were some of the most powerful fae he’d ever met and Oengus was Seelie and a Mage and didn’t seem like the kind of person who could be easily deceived. Not only that, but the Seelie Court had fallen apart without Gwyn ruling it. It seemed like they thought it had been influenced – corrupted? – before then?

‘You get used to it,’ Gulvi said, and Eran jerked when he realised she was talking to him. He blinked at her, and she shrugged her great wings. ‘Honestly, you get used to it. Everything’s a fucking disaster at the moment. It’s about time you understood why.’

‘I’m not sure any of us truly understand why,’ Oengus said.

Eran thought of Mosk upstairs and warmed his own hands beneath the table, feeling chilled by the
turns and twists in the conversation. He had a horrible feeling that he only knew the surface of the situation, like seeing a single glimpse of lava when a massive arterial wall existed beneath the earth, waiting to erupt. Had his father known? Had his father gone along with it all?

Desperately, he wished his father was there so he could ask him. More than that, he wanted to lean into his mother’s side and feel her arm around him. Listen to her tell him that the world was always full of different vastnesses that were hard to understand, but like the night sky full of blazing stars, it didn’t always have to mean something terrible.

Chapter End Notes

There was some great fanart of the last chapter by intheendlessbluewine which you can check out here!

And there is a general Fae Tales fanart tag here! :D

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In our next chapter, 'The Arrow's Path':

‘Mosk?’ Eran said, his voice a little softer than before. ‘I didn’t mean to hurt you last night. If I did. It…’

‘You’re a coward,’ Mosk said, the sneer crossed his face before he could really help it. He hated seeing Eran be gentle and nice, as though Mosk deserved that. It’s what he’d done the night before, as though Mosk even deserved that! At once, where he expected Eran to feel guilty, he felt his own crushing guilt surge back to life inside of him. All the things he’d done, all the things he’d caused. ‘You don’t even have the courage to stand by your decisions. How is your heartsong determination? Are you only determined to fail?’

Eran flinched, and Mosk glared at him before standing up. He took a moment to adjust to the room spinning. But he held onto his anger, his need to not feel anything else.

‘You can’t do anything right,’ Mosk said, walking past him once he’d swallowed down the bout of nausea. ‘You’re just a shitty orphan.’
Mosk

Mosk pressed fingers to the scabbed wounds in his side. He hadn’t fully healed from Augus clawing him the night before and his sides ached. Where Augus had found what he’d called a pressure point, Mosk felt like he’d been stabbed deeper, like a long needle had slid along his nerves.

He sat on Eran’s bed, occasionally he rubbed the wrist of his other hand against his knee. He could feel…a ghost of rope around it. The night before felt like a dream. He’d gone to the Gancanagh and been thwarted, and Augus had tossed him back to Eran who had…who had…

Mosk didn’t know how to feel about it. But he remembered Eran’s surprise at Mosk’s lack of experience and felt shamed.

This is new? Like…of all the things Mosk should have experienced by now, a handjob on its own was one of them.

His clients wanted to fuck him and get off, not stand there and give him a handjob.

Eran hadn’t even burned him. And then he’d lied and said that he’d liked it, and he’d lied and called Mosk striking. Mosk knew what beautiful Aur dryads looked like. His mamatree in particular, she’d been pretty. Im and Chert had been so handsome they’d had fae of all kinds on the doorstep asking for them. Chert in particular, with his golden eyes and spruce needles and cones in his hair so dark green it was nearly black…Mosk could understand it. Not that he was attracted to any of his family, but he certainly understood why everyone saw him as just…Mosk. The youngest. He didn’t even have the eyes of a proper Aur dryad.

Mallem used to tell him that someone might fall for his winning personality one day, but then added that Mosk would have to go win one first.

Eran hadn’t even done his fire ritual afterwards. Like what they’d done together had ruined it. Then again, Mosk wasn’t sure he’d done it at all since they’d met back up with Augus and Gwyn.

A knock on the door, Mosk tensed. Eran didn’t knock to come into his own room. Mosk waited and eventually the door creaked open and he was shocked to see that swan-maiden from the Unseelie Court. Why was she here? Had Oengus’ magic worked? He couldn’t remember her name. It hadn’t seemed important at the time.
'Hi,' she said.

‘You’re here,’ Mosk said stupidly.

‘Yes,’ she said, coming in and closing the door behind her. ‘Gulvi – my sister – and Fenwrel are downstairs with the King and Augus and Eran and Ash and the Gancanagh and Oengus too. They’re all eating. Are you hungry? It’s dinner time.’

The idea of having to sit down in front of all of those people made him nauseous, and he shook his head. He was tired. He was dizzy. If he was hungry, he could eat some sap. Eran had a lot of it in his bag, Mosk had sneaked a look inside.

‘How are you?’ she said.

‘I don’t know your name,’ Mosk said.

‘Julvia,’ she said. ‘Julvia Dubna Vajat, to be exact, but you can call me Julvia if you like. I remember yours. Mosk Manytrees, yes? Can you turn into a tree?’

She walked over and sat on the bed with him, careful of her huge white swan wings, and Mosk stared at her. Julvia’s hair clouded around her, white and fluffy and long – down to her waist. Her lips and eyebrows and lashes seemed too dark for her face. She wore a white dress. The ends of the sleeves and the hem were embroidered in oranges, greens and reds. Her black claws were long and pointed and lacquered. Her fingers were webbed. She seemed wilder somehow than her sister, which made no sense. Gulvi was the one whose heartsong was chaos, she was the one who always walked about with knives and tied her hair back and was covered in those black tattoos.

‘No,’ Mosk said. ‘I’m… We don’t turn into trees until the end of our lives, usually. Since we often never turn back again. But I don’t think I can anyway.’

Julvia reached out and grasped one of the pinion feathers of her wings, running her hands over it and looking at him with a smile on her face. It made him uneasy.

‘What do you want?’ he said.

The smile vanished, and she frowned. ‘Am I upsetting you?’

‘I don’t know why you’re here, aren’t you hungry? Shouldn’t you be downstairs with everyone?’

‘I’ve fed,’ Julvia said simply. ‘Gulvi gave me my medicine and I fed as a swan before. And then I thought you must be hungry. I haven’t seen you once since we arrived. And then I thought I’d come up here. No one told me no, you see. But maybe you are alone for a reason, and I am bothering you? I’m sorry.’

‘No- It’s not… I didn’t even know Oengus’ spell had worked. But you’re all- What happened while I was sleeping?’

Julvia launched into a lengthy, detailed explanation. Mosk lost himself through tracts of it, coming back to hear that the Gancanagh and Ash had fucked, which made him bitterly angry. So the Gancanagh would fuck Ash? And no one would stop him? Then he drifted away again and came back with a start to hear that Fenwrel knew that Davix was dead.

Which meant Fenwrel knew Mosk had broken the magic placed in him. He felt an urge to escape, but he had nowhere to go.
‘You’re still sick,’ Julvia said, tilting her head at him. ‘So am I, actually. Not as bad as before, but it’s still there. It takes time, doesn’t it? And I wasn’t tortured by Mages. Do you ever want to talk about it? I am one of the eldest of my sisters, though they’re all gone now, except for Gulvi. Which seems...something that fate would do to me. I was very used to listening to all of them. The younger ones would climb into my lap and hold my hair and say things. But you don’t know me very well and you wouldn’t do that. You’re too big to climb into my lap anyway.’

Julvia looked off, and then smiled crookedly when she looked at Mosk again.

‘And I hear myself speak and know that sometimes it’s too simplistic for what I’m trying to convey. I suppose I am here to tell you that even if you don’t want to be downstairs with them, you can still have company if you wish it. But do you?’

Mosk looked at her for a long time. He didn’t even know if he liked her. He felt a bit awed to be in her presence. She was the older sister of the Queen-in-Waiting, and Gulvi had once actually been Queen. Swan-maidens all had a hierarchy of royalty anyway. The rare males were called princes, the females all princesses, and the matriarchs were Queens. As far as he knew, there had never been a Swan King. But he didn’t understand it all. It was very complex.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘You lost your family? Is that-? Was that the thing I heard where Augus…?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘You must hate him.’

‘No,’ she said, and then shrugged her wings. ‘You would think, wouldn’t you? But no. I quite like him, actually. Besides, he helped save me from being trapped in my swan-form forever. I wouldn’t have minded, I think, but he gave me a choice. He wouldn’t admit it, but he’s very protective. It drives Gulvi mad. But she’s worse.’

Mosk smiled a little, helplessly, and she grinned back at him to see the expression. Mosk’s chest was pained though. She reminded him of Chaley. He didn’t want to talk about his family. He didn’t want to talk about what he’d been through. He didn’t want to hear that someone else who had lost their family, at least had family left. Someone to be protective over them.

‘I don’t want company,’ Mosk said abruptly.

Julvia nodded once and stood, curtseying a little. She didn’t look upset at all. ‘If you ever do, you’re more than welcome to it.’

Then she was gone, Mosk was alone in the room once more. He touched his fingers to his side where Augus had cut him and felt angry that Eran was downstairs. So much for caring or wanting to be protective, Eran was probably happy now that everyone else was here. Mosk bet he was doing great.

He drew his knees up to his chest, heels resting on the edge of the mattress, and glared at the closed door.

*

Eran returned later. He looked guilty as soon as he saw Mosk, and Mosk wondered if he felt bad for leaving him alone for so long.

‘Have you eaten?’
'No,’ Mosk said. ‘You have.’

‘Yes,’ Eran said, looking at the way Mosk was sitting on his bed. ‘Are you…okay?’

‘After last night?’

Eran went to fold his arms before dropping them. He nodded.

‘Do you hate yourself?’ Mosk asked, remembering what he’d said the night before.

‘Do you hate me?’

Mosk was surprised at how uncertain Eran sounded. The night before, everything he’d done had been certain and determined. Like he didn’t care if Mosk hated him. He’d burned Mosk in the past and hardly seemed to feel bad about it. Now, Mosk could tell he was upset by it all. In between the dull nausea and dizziness that always took some of his concentration, he wondered what he was missing. He wondered why.

‘No,’ Mosk said. ‘About as much as I hate everyone, anyway.’

A faint, half-smile at that, and Eran walked over to the fireplace and placed his hands in it. Mosk jerked back and turned away, refusing to look as the hearth crackled to life. That, he hated. He could almost hear Eran telling him that it wasn’t going to hurt him, but just hearing it hurt. The smell of it hurt. All of it…

‘It’d be like if you were an ice fae, wouldn’t it?’ Eran said from where he was crouching. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Everyone is here,’ Mosk said, trying to distract himself. ‘Julvia came up and told me.’

‘Yeah, they’re here. I think Fenwrel wants to talk to you later.’

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘I know.’ It was surprising hearing that empathy, and Mosk turned reluctantly to see Eran looking at him from where one of his hands was still resting in the fire. His hand just glowed. Bizarrely, that was something he could look at, could appreciate. He’d only ever known fire to shrivel and desiccate and destroy, but Eran couldn’t be touched by it. Maybe there was a fire that could burn him to death, but it wasn’t this one. ‘She’s finding it hard to believe that Davix is gone. I get the sense that he was like a god.’

‘They were,’ Mosk whispered. ‘There’s nothing else like them. When you took me to the Seelie Court, I thought I was wrong. Why would I think he was really dead? He could do anything.’

After a few minutes Eran stood up. There wasn’t even any soot on his hands. He stood at the foot of the bed and pursed his lips, Mosk looked up at him and felt his legs relax a little. He let them drop back so that his feet were touching the floor. Mosk didn’t know what to say. Eran had once made him furious, and then made him hate more strongly than he realised he could, and then Mosk had just disdained him, and now he felt a weird sort of…awe, almost.

Eran was Mosk’s age, but he had done so much. He’d lived so much more than Mosk ever had. He had experience with…people and customs and trading and even sex. He’d taken charge of Mosk’s body in a way that wasn’t pain, like so many of his clients, and he’d been so sure of himself. If they’d ever met at a formal event, Mosk would have found him as scary as he’d once found Ifir, but for different reasons. Even with no horns, no mace and shield as his weapons, his parents had
obviously expected him to be something. To become someone.

No one ever had any expectations of Mosk. Well, they had one expectation, and it was something Mosk had spent his whole life fighting back against. It wasn’t like what Eran seemed to have.

‘Mosk?’ Eran said, his voice a little softer than before. ‘I didn’t mean to hurt you last night. If I did. It…’

‘You’re a coward,’ Mosk said, the sneer crossed his face before he could really help it. He hated seeing Eran be gentle and nice, as though Mosk deserved that. It’s what he’d done the night before, as though Mosk even deserved that! At once, where he expected Eran to feel guilty, he felt his own crushing guilt surge back to life inside of him. All the things he’d done, all the things he’d caused. ‘You don’t even have the courage to stand by your decisions. How is your heartsong determination? Are you only determined to fail?’

Eran flinched, and Mosk glared at him before standing up. He took a moment to adjust to the room spinning. But he held onto his anger, his need to not feel anything else.

‘You can’t do anything right,’ Mosk said, walking past him once he’d swallowed down the bout of nausea. ‘You’re just a shitty orphan.’

Mosk walked through the archway to his own room when he heard Eran’s shocked exhale. Mosk’s chest tightened in response, and he squeezed his eyes shut when he reached his own bed. He wished he had a door to close. He wished he had some privacy.

Absently, he curled his hand around his wrist and gripped hard enough that the bones creaked. He hurt other people because he didn’t want to deal with himself.

It made him laugh to think of who was the real coward.

*

The next morning, after a night spent tossing and turning, certain that Eran was awake in the other room, he drank some sap that Eran left out for him. Eran had woken at dawn, and Mosk had eaten and pressed his index finger into his mouth and carefully touched the canines that had grown where they’d ruined his feeding teeth. His teeth had grown back eventually, but they no longer had any bone canals to siphon the sap into his stomach. They had no drawing power. They were just teeth.

It hurt to touch them. As long as he didn’t bump them, he could forget about it. The pain now oozed all the way to the back of his throat. He remembered metal sliding down. First one bone canal, then the other. He shivered and dressed. He had three different outfits now that Augus and Gwyn were there with supplies, it seemed luxurious, he hadn’t had a selection of clothing for over a year. A shirt of green leaves. Dark grey pants. He didn’t bother with shoes, not that he could feel the roots beneath his feet anymore.

He wanted to hide up in this room until someone made a decision and told him where to go, but boredom began to scrape all the way up through him. A restless, nigging thing in the tension of his calves. His legs couldn’t stay still when he lay down. His arms felt nery. He wanted…to do something.

The stairs were less dusty as he descended them. Far more people had been using them lately.

In the huge dining hall, he saw no one at all. Birds flew overhead, Mosk accidentally stepped in
their waste and didn’t really care. He’d stepped in far worse things and never bothered to clean up.

Warily, he ended up going outside. He looked around first, scared that by going outside of the tower, he’d somehow attract Olphix’s attention just by being away from the wards in his room. But instead he saw Eran, Oengus, Gwyn and Fenwrel by a shed of some kind near the stables. Gwyn and Oengus were holding weapons, and as Mosk came closer, it sounded like they were talking about them.

He halted when they turned and looked at him. Eran with confusion on his face. Fenwrel with something like empathy, which he didn’t trust at all. Oengus seemed the same as he always did, and Gwyn…seemed that way too.

Maybe he was interrupting.

‘Actually,’ Gwyn said, ‘we were just talking about getting you a bow now that you’re doing better.’

‘No,’ Mosk said, feeling like he’d walked straight into a trap.

‘You were practiced with it,’ Gwyn said, and then looked over Mosk critically. ‘Until very recently, you were even more practiced with it. It’s clear that you’ve become more than simply adept at the recurve.’

‘No,’ Mosk whispered. He backed up a step.

‘It’s irresponsible for you to go about unarmed,’ Gwyn said abruptly, his voice hardening.

‘I’m an Aur dryad,’ Mosk said, his voice reedy.

‘You have killed one Mage, attacked Eran, and used to train with the bow,’ Gwyn said, and Mosk felt his breath desert him. ‘Exactly what does one thing have to do with the other now? Yes, you are an Aur dryad, but you are no pacifist. You are rather more like Gulvi, I expect.’

No.

A swooping wave of nausea that was too big, too strong, and he turned automatically and felt his eyes sting with tears as he threw up strings of sap. He could hear Eran yelling something in the distance, but only heard the hollow noise in his own head. He wiped away the residual sap from his mouth with his fingers, unable to stop himself from retching at the touch. From his own stupid touch on his own stupid skin.

‘Any idea why he is like this?’ That was Gwyn. ‘If his curse is broken… You still don’t know?’

‘He could have been cursed to not use the bow,’ Fenwrel said. ‘But I suspect something different.’

‘I’ll fetch Augus, then,’ Gwyn said coldly.

Mosk placed his hands on his knees and didn’t straighten, blinking his eyes clear. He was frightened. He should have just stayed in his room!

‘I beg your pardon?’ Oengus said, walking over. Mosk jerked hard when he felt the hand resting on his shoulder. It wasn’t a cruel touch, but Mosk stepped away from it – and the puddle of his own vomit – and resisted the urge to rub it away. Olphix had touched him like that. ‘You want to interrogate him? On my land?’
‘I can as easily take him elsewhere,’ Gwyn said. ‘I grow tired of-’

‘You may be used to interrogating prisoners as a matter of course,’ Oengus said reprovingly, ‘but
he is not a prisoner. He is a guest of your Unseelie Court. He is an orphan who has been tortured
by Olphix and Davix. He has already managed to rid the world of one of the worst magical
scourges ever seen. You treat him like this? Why? Because he is young? Because it is convenient?
Because it is how you have been treated yourself by those you trusted?’

Gwyn said nothing, but everyone fell silent then.

‘Teacher,’ Fenwrel said, her voice soft, careful.

‘Tell me I am being too soft in a time of crisis,’ Oengus said.

‘If anything, I was about to say you were being the opposite,’ Fenwrel said.

‘Take Mosk upstairs and ask him why he can no longer use a bow and arrows. He is not simply
resisting for the merry pleasure of it, is he? Gwyn ap Nudd, you say it is irresponsible to not wield
a weapon in a time of war, but it is just as irresponsible to wield a weapon inexpertly. You yourself
are as much a weapon as your sword. Do not simply cut a boy down because you can. He is not
Cyledr.’

‘Oengus,’ Fenwrel said. ‘That’s enough.’

‘You forget, student, I was there that day,’ Oengus said grimly. ‘None other here was except Gwyn
and I. But we know, don’t we?’

‘I suppose we do,’ Gwyn said after a moment, sounding tired. Mosk had expected yelling, or…
something awful. He’d felt the way the atmosphere had changed abruptly as soon as Oengus had
lectured Gwyn. It was like the King’s glamour had turned to an awful, predatory stillness.
Everyone had felt it. But now it was gone, and Mosk only felt the ache in his chest and throat from
vomiting so violently. ‘Fine, I see the wisdom in what you say. Fenwrel, Eran, take him upstairs
and see if he will talk to you about it. I need to talk to Oengus for a moment.’

Mosk straightened reluctantly, and saw Fenwrel and Eran walking towards him. Oengus and Gwyn
were staring each other down. Mosk couldn’t wait to get away from the charged atmosphere of it,
rubbing absently at his mouth again.

‘Come on,’ Eran said. ‘We should get you some water for the taste in your mouth anyway.’

Mosk followed Fenwrel and Eran and looked over his shoulder, surprised to see Oengus looking at
him instead, something sombre in his expression.

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Upstairs, Mosk held a wooden cup of water and stared at it. Eran leaned against the wall, and
Fenwrel stood by the bed. He thought back to what had just happened. Who was Cyledr? And why
did the King let himself be reprimanded like that?

‘Why don’t you use the bow anymore, Mosk?’ Fenwrel said. She sounded gentle, but she was a
Mage, and she had taken Eran’s voice away once when they’d been a cell together. Just because
Eran had been rude.

‘I’m not talking to you,’ Mosk said, thinking that now she would take his voice away too.
Fenwrel sighed.

‘If you want,’ Eran said, ‘you could leave and I might make more progress with just…the two of us. If he reports anything of note, I could let you know.’

‘I’d prefer to be here,’ Fenwrel said.

‘I know that. But he doesn’t want to talk about any of it. It’s a miracle he’s talked about anything at all, and I mostly think that’s because Olphix scared him half to death by visiting.’

‘You broke your curse saving his life,’ Fenwrel said, and Mosk was confused by the apparent change in subject. Fenwrel faced Eran now, looking up at him. ‘You are a good, if foolish man.’

‘Does that mean you’ll give me a chance to talk to him on my own?’

Fenwrel inclined her head once, and Mosk watched in wonder as she walked out, closing the door behind her. Of course, now that meant he was alone in a room with Eran, and he didn’t want to talk about anything. Eran stood against the wall for a little longer, and then walked into his own room and brought his pack back with him.

He opened it and drew out some sap, and then he drew out a length of rope, and Mosk watched him, feeling nauseous, nervous.

‘If you want,’ Eran said, ‘I can bind your wrists. Would that make it easier? You could tell them I forced you to talk about it.’

A pause. Mosk didn’t know what to say, and Eran stared down at the rope he held in his hand and laughed.

‘A good, foolish man,’ she said. Like she knows anything about me.’

‘Just one,’ Mosk said. ‘Just one wrist.’

He held it out, palm up, and Eran looked at him as though he hadn’t expected Mosk to want anything to do with it. Mosk wasn’t sure what he wanted, but if Eran wasn’t there, he’d probably be grasping onto his own wrist to reassure himself. Maybe the rope would help. It was tempting to ignore it, to tell himself he wasn’t that broken, but he knew he was. He knew in the wreckage of person they’d left behind, he hardly understood anything about himself anymore.

‘Are you sure?’ Eran said.

‘It was your idea,’ Mosk said, annoyed. ‘It doesn’t mean I’m going to talk about anything.’

‘Okay,’ Eran said, frowning. He walked over and sat next to Mosk, and then drew his wrist forwards and began looping the rope around it. He didn’t just loop it once and tie a knot, but looped it over and over, starting at the narrowest point where his wrist joined his hand, and working backwards over his forearm. First one, then three loops, then six, until it touched the bark there. Mosk stared, and Eran touched his fingers to it, staring.

‘What does it feel like?’ Eran said, looking up suddenly. ‘Is there wood beneath it, or blood?’

‘Both, I think,’ Mosk said, staring down. The Mages had talked about removing it from him, but they never did. They’d cut into the bark once, and he’d bled red through the pale wood they’d exposed. ‘It’s not as…sensitive.’
But he could still feel Eran’s touch. It was muted, didn’t irritate him as much as it normally did when Eran touched him like that. Then, Eran went back to looping the rope, and Mosk found it hypnotic.

‘You could just tie a knot. This is…why are you doing it like this?’

‘Because I like doing it like this. I think it’s less pressure here, too.’ Eran lightly brushed his fingers across the rope at the joint. Mosk could hardly feel it. He could only feel the pressure through the rope.

‘I don’t want to talk about anything.’

‘I know,’ Eran said. ‘But I don’t want Gwyn to turn up with Augus and have him just compel it out of you either. And I think Gwyn would do that.’

‘He would,’ Mosk said without hesitation.

‘Doesn’t that bother you? He should be more honourable than that.’

The old Mosk would have laughed at that. Now he just shook his head as Eran tied off the rope so carefully that it didn’t bite into his skin at all. Yet it wasn’t loose, none of it was loose. His arm felt compressed.

‘He’s Unseelie,’ Mosk said. ‘He’s…very honourable for an Unseelie King. And this isn’t about honour.’

Eran’s hand rested around the roped wrist, a point of warmth soaking through the cool rope. Mosk stared at it. They were quiet for several minutes, and Mosk was deliberately not thinking about all the things he was supposed to be talking about. So instead he tried to understand why Eran was so helpful now, and couldn’t. What did Eran want from him? What did Mosk have that he could give?

Nothing. He was nothing at all.

‘I can’t believe you’re talking like this to me,’ Eran said. ‘You’ve changed so much.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Maybe it will help you to talk about it.’

‘It won’t,’ Mosk said. He laughed, covering his eyes with his other hand. How could it help? ‘It’s a long story. It started before I was born.’

‘Why you can’t use the bow anymore?’

‘Yes,’ Mosk said, dropping his hand into his lap. ‘Long before.’

The rope around his wrist captured enough of his attention that he didn’t feel as distressed as before. Even the confirmation of his brokenness, even that didn’t upset him as much.

It really did help.

‘Will you tell me?’ Eran asked.

‘None of it’s important, but…okay.’

Mosk cast about back to what he remembered growing up with. His mamatree’s story. It started with her telling him something while holding both of his hands in her larger ones. Her eyes shone
bright and golden, the leaves and acorns of the great white oak in her hair. Wherever she went, she could plant a sacred tree if she wished. He loved her as his mamatree, but he also loved her as a person who made him feel so many large feelings. She was a forest, not a single tree.

He closed his eyes, and began.

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‘The Aur forest has always been,’ his mamatree said, turning his hands palm up and resting her thumbs in the middle of them, ‘we remember no time before it. There was the Aur forest, and there were the Aur dryads, and we came together, and we have always been. For as long as there have been enough trees to make a forest.’

‘Yes, Mamatree,’ Mosk said, old enough to know that this would be an important story. He was the youngest sapling, and his brothertrees and sistertrees were good to him. He heard so many stories told to the hearth-tree. But this story was different. It was just him and his mamatree, and she was telling him in the cavernous hollow of a great, white oak that still gamely clung to life despite having been eaten out in the middle.

‘It is the healthiest forest. It had never known illness or sickness. It was always robust and strong. But then one day, many hundreds of years ago now, it became sickened. This sickness didn’t start from the fringes of the forest and work its way in. It didn’t start with only some trees, and not others. It started in the heartwood, in the heart of the forest, and worked its way out. It was very fast, and very frightening. All the trees began to drop their leaves, even the ones that don’t, and it was not Fall.’

Mosk nodded, not wanting to imagine it. She smiled sadly at him and closed her eyes, as though she couldn’t help but see it.

‘We tried everything,’ she said. ‘We tried everything we could think of. We burned off sections of the forest, thinking it might be some strange fungus. We tried isolating the worst trees. We tried our own magic, and we tried the magic of healers. We sought potions to pour into the soil by the gallon. We worked tirelessly for years, but nothing helped. We put word in to the School of the Staff to ask if they knew of anyone. And eventually, they sent a Mage.’

She was squeezing his hands so tightly they hurt. Mosk didn’t say anything to complain, afraid of what he was about to hear, of the intent look on her face. He felt like he was in trouble somehow, even though he never wanted to get into trouble.

‘His name was Olphix. A Mage of fire and flame. And he told us that he could save the forest, but at a great price. Because nothing comes for free, Mosk. Nothing is free. And our Aur forest, it could not die. It could not be allowed to die. We are nothing without it. We would go extinct, surely.’

Mosk nodded. He believed that too.

‘What did he ask for, Mamatree?’

‘He asked us for something that did not even exist. And so to us, it seemed as though he was asking for something we could not give him.’ She swallowed and pulled Mosk closer to herself, and Mosk went, tumbling into her lap and wishing he could reach up and touch the leaves in her hair. He couldn’t though, she was still holding his hands.

‘What did he ask for?’
‘A seventh son of a seventh son,’ she said, looking down at him. ‘Your papatree and I had only had two children then. Im and Shiel. We’d fought for both of them, and we laughed to think that we might have so many children one day that would have a seventh son. Then, after Olphix asked for it, we talked amongst ourselves in the way that trees do and decided that we would never have one. Then we could agree to his price. He would save our forest, and we would give him a seventh son of a seventh son, who would never come to be.’

‘That’s me,’ Mosk whispered. ‘That’s me, Mamatree.’

‘You see, time passes,’ she said, letting go of one of his hands to wipe at the corner of her eyes. ‘Hundreds of years pass. A Mage heals your forest and it never sickens again, and life goes on. We had more children, we used spells to make sure we had girls, though they never worked as surely as we hoped. And then after Chaley, we decided we would have no more. But time passes, Mosk. Your papatree and I… We went to a great party together, and there was much magic in the air, and we became a part of that, and we made you.’

Mosk nodded seriously. He didn’t quite understand what was happening. What she meant. It was just a story, wasn’t it? The Aur forest couldn’t get sick, and it certainly didn’t need a Mage to save it. It wasn’t real.

‘We used magic to make sure you wouldn’t be a son, but you were too strong for that magic. You see, the seventh son of a seventh son is a great source of power and magic. More than you could ever imagine now, because you haven’t grown into it yet. There is nothing in the world like them. They change the world, my darling, they change the world. My little world-changer, you cannot know what lies ahead of you. But we have done you a great injustice, and now… Now when Olphix comes, whenever he comes, we must give you to him.’

Mosk stared at her for a long time.

It was real?

It wasn’t just a story?

‘But…’ Mosk looked around the great hollow of the white oak tree as though the answers were around him. He could hear the trees telling him that it was true. This oak only had its great hollow in the first place because of the sickness that had eaten out its middle. It had only survived because a Mage called Olphix saved them all. ‘No, Mamatree.’

‘Well…there is…a choice,’ she said slowly, looking afraid now. ‘We- We want to fight back. But it isn’t like us. At all. But if you would be willing to be trained in a weapon…you could save yourself.’

‘How?’

She closed her eyes then and drew Mosk so close that it hurt, and he struggled against her because it was the kind of hug that didn’t feel good. But she didn’t let him go, and he went quiet when he realised she was crying into his hair.

He clung to her clothing, and tried to understand it, but-

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‘I didn’t understand for the longest time,’ Mosk said, staring down at the rope. ‘But they gave me a bow and my first arrows. They told me to train for a confrontation. They told me if I was faster than him, I could live. They told me because I wasn’t the one who made the debt, I wasn’t breaking it. They told me they supported me. And they all did, sort of. I mean some of my siblings
didn’t. Chaley did. Mallem said I was supposed to go. He told me I should seek the Mage out myself. They were all kind of waiting for me to choose my Aur tree and go…”

Mosk shook his head, swallowing.

‘I got really good at the recurve bow. I couldn’t kill anything alive, I couldn’t stand it, but leaves blown free in strong gales make tricky targets, so that’s what I aimed for. I could run along the branches and shoot anything at all. I became so sure of myself. I was a seventh son of a seventh son who was very good with a bow, and if anyone came for me, I’d deal with it.’

He looked up, surprised to see how much blood had leeched from Eran’s brown skin. How wide his pupils were. He stared at Mosk so intently, that Mosk had to look away.

‘They changed their minds,’ Mosk said, clearing his throat. ‘I don’t know what did it. Maybe they saw some Magecraft that made them realise they’d been foolish. I don’t know. They made me promise to just go with Olphix. They made me promise on my life to go with him. They told me to get rid of my bow. They- And after like, almost two hundred years of expecting that I would be successful, my whole heartsong shaped around this…this mission…to turn tail on a debt that huge because I was selfish, I couldn’t handle it. I had a falling out with half of them. And then I kept practicing in secret. Chaley was the only one who knew.’

He looked to the small bedside table, where the curve of skull rested.

‘Gwyn too,’ Mosk said. ‘I mean he didn’t know about the debt, but he knew I was using the bow. He could see it in the way I was built. I guess he can still see that. Even though it’s been more than a year.

‘I didn’t really understand how fae debt worked. And it was for this thing I wasn’t even alive for when the promise was made, so I didn’t think it was real. Like I knew it was real, but I didn’t think it was legitimate or valid. That you could promise a child who wasn’t even born and didn’t get a choice. And I was- I couldn’t talk to my parents, and I stopped living at home for half of each year. I loved them but I couldn’t be around them. They all treated me as a sacrifice. They didn’t expect me to be anything except the price they’d promised for their forest.’

Eran gripped Mosk’s roped wrist hard enough that it ached. Mosk closed his eyes, feeling strangely calm to be talking about all of it now. Why was he so scared of it? The worst had already happened.

‘Oolphix came,’ Mosk said, his throat going dry. ‘My brothertree, Mallem, he realised what I’d been doing in secret and he got to Olphix before I did to warn him of what I was going to do. I think he really thought he could save the whole family by doing that. I hated him so much, but he really thought he was doing the right thing. But so did I. It’s what she’d taught me to do, told me to do, and when she changed her mind and wanted me to stop, I couldn’t. Even when she made me promise it. It wasn’t like she made me blood-oath or anything.’

Mosk shrugged, and then laughed.

‘So, I shot at Olphix, and the arrow disintegrated before it even hit him. The path of the arrow was true. I probably would have killed any underfae with one shot. But a Mage like that? At his status? With his power? I didn’t realise. I was so stupid. He knocked me down from the tree with his magic and grabbed me and dragged me to my home. And then he set everyone on fire in front of me, one by one. I was so angry at Mallem, but I begged for all of their lives, one by one. And then he burned down the whole forest, for- as punishment for me daring to go back on a debt that was rightfully his to claim. The only reason I didn’t die from the fire was because I was next to him,
and fire doesn’t touch him.

‘But he still let it burn me. We stayed for hours. I think he just liked…watching it go. And then he

got his seventh son of a seventh son after all.’

‘No light on that,’ Eran breathed, snapping his fingers loudly down towards the floor. ‘Mosk…I…’

‘So you were right,’ Mosk said, refusing to look up. ‘I am punishing myself for something.’

‘Mosk…’

‘And I don’t care what happens to me.’

‘By Kabiri, you can’t seriously-’

‘What?’ Mosk snapped, jerking backwards. He tried to remove his wrist from Eran’s hand, but

Eran wouldn’t let go. ‘I can’t seriously what? What are you going to tell me? That I didn’t break

with a debt with one of the most powerful Mages in the land? Are you going to tell me that the Aur

forest isn’t worth as much as my life? Because let me tell you, that forest is worth more than a

thousand of us. I was selfish. And everyone else paid for it.’

He made the mistake of meeting Eran’s eyes, surprised by the tears he saw there. A rush of fury

moved through him, bright and galvanising. This time when he yanked his wrist from Eran’s hand,

Eran let go.

Mosk made himself stand, stepped back and pointed at Eran, disgust seething through him.

‘Don’t cry like some fucking toddler,’ he said. ‘Don’t be pathetic. How are you a warrior’s son?

You’re as soft as a daisy. We’re not children. This isn’t- That’s not the reaction you’re supposed to

have! You’re disgusting!’

‘Mosk, just calm down and-’

‘It’s really simple,’ Mosk said. ‘I’ll dumb it down for you, shall I? Something bad happened to our

forest, there was a price for fixing it, and then I refused to be that price. Look at where it got us!’

Mosk started laughing, his breath turning short and shallow, his vision spinning as he staggered

back against the wall. ‘Look at what it’s done! The Aur forest is gone. The Aur dryads are gone.

I’m not even one of them anymore! I’m nothing! That ice out there, killing your family, killing

everyone, and Davix dead, and Olphix just wanted some more power and instead I just…fucked it

all up!’

He couldn’t stop laughing, covering his face with his hands. Then he covered his mouth, because

he felt like he couldn’t breathe, the air was too cold and sharp, the room was too close, the roof

looming and moving towards him.

When Eran touched him, when Eran dared to pull him into an embrace, Mosk fought, wilder than

ever. He scratched and bit and swore until Eran scooted back across the ground, holding up his

hands looking shocked and hurt.

‘Don’t touch me!’ Mosk snarled. ‘Don’t ever touch me!’

‘Okay,’ Eran said, staring at him.

‘I’m going to get you killed just by existing,’ Mosk said, now on the floor, his breathing rough and

rasping, his fingernails clogged with blood. ‘Tell me I’m not.’
‘Okay,’ Eran said.

It wasn’t…the response he was expecting. It wasn’t the response Eran was supposed to have. Mosk felt like it shorted something inside of him.

‘…What?’

‘Okay,’ Eran said. ‘Okay. I won’t touch you. Okay, you’re going to get me killed by existing. No wonder you’re upset. What do you want?’

‘Leave me alone,’ Mosk said automatically. ‘Just leave me alone.’

‘Okay,’ Eran said, pushing himself upright. ‘I have to go…find Fenwrel anyway.’

Mosk said nothing to that. Didn’t even want to know what parts of it were worth relating. He curled up closer to the wall, his hands in his lap, his knees close to his chest, and closed his eyes.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ Eran said.

The door opened and closed, and Mosk slammed his forehead into his knees as hard as he could. Then, when that wasn’t enough, he squeezed at the rope around his wrist and made a caught, fractious sound when that didn’t work either. It needed to be more. He had to do something to stop the whirlwind in his head. He just had to do something, he just had to do something, he just-

Unthinking, he moved his head away from the wall and then slammed it back as hard as he could. A dull thud into stone, another, and a switch went off inside of him. He cut off some noisy, relentless thing in his mind and put it behind a wall. He felt empty and hollow, the same as getting fucked by meaningless people made him feel.

His mind went dull and quiet, his head ached, his body went limp and he cradled his hands in his lap. He felt his mamatree squeezing his palms, heard the crackle of fire around him, smelled burning flesh and wood, but he didn’t feel the tears trickling down his face.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Blessings in Disguise':

‘Oh now,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Go away,’ Eran snarled, not even looking at him, flooded with embarrassment. Flames curled out of his mouth, he turned his face away. It was hard enough wanting to destroy him anyway, but to have him see this?

A pause, and then the Gancanagh took a few steps back. ‘Flamelet, let me make you some tea.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you,’ Eran said roughly, his voice strained, betraying his tears. ‘You’re a monster.’

‘Yeah,’ the Gancanagh said softly. ‘That is a true thing, to be sure. But I also make tea. Have friends. Talk with them. I cannot help this dra’ocht of mine, flamelet. I swear now, I don’t want to hurt you. But you cannot stay here in the dark like this.’
Eran

* 

Eran waited by the bed as Fenwrel knelt beside Mosk. His heart still pounded. He’d practically run to find her, spilling his words – Mosk’s story – in a confusing mess and Fenwrel decided to see Mosk for herself. He felt bitter smoke in the back of his throat, a sluggish fire in his gut. Fenwrel spoke to Mosk gently, quietly, then lifted his wrist where it was tied with rope and looked to Eran. Shame slunk through Eran. He wanted to shrug, he wanted to lie or hide.

‘It seems to help,’ Eran said.

Fenwrel turned to Mosk and touched her fingers to his hairline, gently smoothing her thumb over the clammy skin. Mosk stared off into space again. He’d completely withdrawn. Eran didn’t blame him.

‘I wish we had done more,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I think we never wanted to confront that they had become so powerful we could do nothing against them. For most of my life, I have explained away evil actions by saying that we can do nothing. But I’m not sure we tried.’

Fenwrel took Mosk’s rope-wrapped wrist and placed her fingers gently onto his palm. She looked off into the distance and sighed.

‘It’s still better than it was.’

‘What is?’ Eran said.

‘His meridians. The way his energy flows. The Mages as good as ripped them from him, like taking a rope and yanking until it gives. At any rate, Mosk…’ She turned back to him. ‘None of this is your fault. I am almost certain that Olphix made the Aur forest sick in the first place, to secure himself a seventh son of a seventh son.’

‘What?’ Eran whispered. Mosk hadn’t reacted. ‘What?’

‘Mages are-’

‘He forced them into a debt?’ Eran said, wide-eyed. ‘Can he do that? Is that even allowed?’

Fenwrel stood. Mosk turned to look at them both with exhausted eyes, but said nothing. Eran wanted to get him into bed. He wanted to leave, scream into his hands. There was a firestorm inside of him, hurting his chest, his stomach, his guts. He felt the shadows of huge teeth in his mouth, imagined huge claws sprouting from his paws and he railed that side of himself away.

‘It’s…no it’s not ethical,’ Fenwrel said. ‘You can’t manufacture debts like that, but Olphix played a tremendously long game, and… These are things Mages can do. They think of what they wish to achieve with magic, think of how to get that magic, and then lay traps in the world to make sure they get it.’
‘So it’s not his fault.’

‘I think,’ Mosk said, his voice croaking, ‘you’re both wrong.’

‘Mosk—’ Fenwrel said.

‘I think that if I had just gone with him, he wouldn’t have burnt down the forest. He wouldn’t have burnt my family to death. You know that’s true.’

‘I don’t believe that to be true,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Olpix made his choices.’

‘Then…tell me you think that they’d still be dead now if I’d just gone quietly with him. Like Mamatree wanted me to.’

Fenwrel said nothing and Mosk’s lips turned up in a kind of vindicated satisfaction, then he closed his eyes and shut the world out.

‘But he did that,’ Eran said insistently. ‘He chose it! He made the debt out of nothing, he just wanted to steal you! Why didn’t he just do that? Why didn’t he do that first and leave your family alone? He’s a Mage, so he could have just taken you when you were born, or later, and left your parents and the forest alone! Right?’ Eran looked to Fenwrel for confirmation.

‘Yes,’ Fenwrel said, looking up at Eran. ‘That is true.’

‘But that’s not what he chose to do,’ Mosk said, not opening his eyes. ‘He chose to create a debt and I chose to break it. It was within his rights to seek revenge. Wasn’t it?’

Fenwrel touched fingers to her chin, slowly shook her head. Not because she disagreed, but because – Eran could tell – she could see the logic in what Mosk was saying. But Eran didn’t want to see it at all. Olphix was a villain! And Mosk was the one carrying all of that horror like it was his.

Feeling the truth of it like a brand across his soul, Eran determined that he would not only avenge his parents, but Mosk’s family, and Mosk. If only that decision helped the swirling, conflicting fires inside of him. He felt roped down. Yoked to inaction. He wanted to do something.

‘I’ll kill him,’ Eran said determinedly. ‘I will. There has to be way. He’s not immortal. Gwyn knows he can do it.’

‘Gwyn doesn’t,’ Fenwrel said grimly. ‘Gwyn has found miracles before, he may find them again, but if Gwyn faced Olphix across a battlefield today, he would die. Do you know what happened at the battle at the Unseelie Court, when Albion brought his Seelie army? I was there. Gwyn faced Albion, and Davix – playfully and sweetly – came and quenched Gwyn’s powers with nothing more than a wave of his hand. Then Albion set his salt water into Gwyn’s lungs, and Gwyn – incapacitated and drowning – would have died if I had not been there to return Gwyn’s powers to him. And I could only return them for minutes. I am no weak Mage. That was easy magic for Davix. That was nothing. The first thing Olphix would do to you is take all of your powers, all of your fire, worse than what I did to you, and then he would nudge you out of existence like a person squashes a bug with their thumb.’

Eran hated how huge it felt. Hated that it towered over him. Walls and walls of reasons why this was stupid. Why his mission was stupid. He didn’t care.

‘I will find a way,’ Eran said, his voice shaking. ‘For my family, for all of them. Gwyn does this because he thinks…I don’t know what he thinks. I don’t care. But I will find a way.’
Fenwrel’s gaze turned sad, Eran knew she was pitying him. He hated it. These people that didn’t believe in him. Eran didn’t know if he believed in himself. But what worth did he have if he turned away from this? What honour would he have?

‘I know you think I’m just a child,’ Eran said.

‘I don’t think that,’ Fenwrel said, pursing her lips.

‘But you said—’

‘You broke the magic I placed on you,’ Fenwrel said, her eyes warming. She looked over at Mosk, who was watching them again. Eran felt bad for not including him, but Mosk seemed happier observing. Fenwrel turned back to Eran. ‘I don’t think you’re a child in the way you mean. You are so young, so earnest. You run towards your death. I don’t want you to.’

‘What would you have us do?’

‘I don’t know,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I think you’re on this path now. Kabiri wants you on it, bonding you to Gwyn as he has. But I think you are young to have all of this upon your shoulders.’

Eran nodded towards Mosk. ‘I don’t carry anything like what he does.’

‘What you carry is not nothing,’ Fenwrel said. ‘Now, I must talk to Gwyn of this manufactured debt, that none of us knew of. Those Aur dryads do like to keep their secrets, they have always been a fairly closed society. I still try and think of ways that Davix might not really be dead. Perhaps this, perhaps that, and so on. But I believe Mosk’s story.’ She turned to Mosk. ‘I believe you. I believe it is your heartsong in that plague of ice, and I believe you may be one of the only people alive to stop it because of that.’

‘What?’ Eran said.

Mosk only laughed. ‘We’re all fucked.’

‘How do you even know?’ Eran said to Fenwrel.

‘I’m making it up as I go,’ Fenwrel said. ‘I don’t know. I feed when the world goes awry. When people are on the wrong path. But you, young man, are not on the wrong path. And nor is he, or Gwyn, or Augus. This is…how it is supposed to be. Anyway, I must find Gwyn. Hopefully he isn’t still arguing with Oengus. Thank you for telling me this.’

Eran nodded, watched as she left, then stared at Mosk. Mechanically, he bent down and reached out to undo the rope and was surprised when Mosk tugged his wrist out of Eran’s hand.

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘It’s too tight to leave it,’ Eran said. ‘I can…make it looser?’

Mosk hesitated, then nodded and gave his wrist back, and Eran re-roped his wrist so that it was a gentler tie. Mosk’s skin had the imprint of the rope upon it, and Eran wondered if he was helping, or if he was just making it worse. He cast away the temptation to trail fingers along the skin and its changed texture, put the image of Mosk responding to that pleasurably in a box that he sunk in his mind. Mosk would hate it.

To have lost so much. It wasn’t just that Mosk’s family had been killed, it was everything leading up to it. Eran was angry at Mosk’s family, angry at Olphix, unable to think straight. The fire in him
w asn’t muting at all. It burned him from the inside. His mother would tell him to let it out, set it loose, make it into something good.

How could he make any of this into something good?

‘You need some rest,’ Eran said roughly. ‘Can you stand?’

‘I can rest here.’

Eran risked Mosk’s anger in picking him up, but Mosk went limp and didn’t say a word. Eran could feel the bones of his spine, the warmth of the undersides of his knees. He carried him back to Mosk’s bed and lay him down. The canisters of sap were still there from before. He couldn’t stop hearing all the scathing things Mosk had said about Eran shedding tears over Mosk’s story before. Calling him soft as a daisy, pathetic, a toddler.

Eran had made himself stop, but he could still feel it inside of him. His eyes were scratchy, his throat felt thick. His whole body seized with something too big for him to understand.

Mosk rolled onto his side and closed his eyes, one hand over the rope on his other wrist. Eran stared at him. What could he do? He couldn’t make Mosk eat. He couldn’t touch him and make it better. He couldn’t even embrace him. Because Mosk had somehow learned along the way to hate being touched gently by anyone. He couldn’t even be comforted.

‘I’m just…’ Eran said, clenching his fingers into fists. ‘I’m just going to…’

What? Did it even matter how he finished that sentence?

He walked quickly from the room, closing the stone doors behind him. The swans with their necks entwined, like Mosk and Eran were celebrating something loving and joyful. Eran walked briskly away from it. Down a flight of stone stairs. Down a dark corridor – the torches too far apart. The stone reflected his shaky, rough breathing back to him. Made him hear his own breaking. The tower’s corridor was curved, eventually he’d just end up where he started.

A recess in the wall, shadowed and hidden away, a water fountain set within the dark space, and Eran tucked himself into the darkness and cobwebs. His hands glowed and trembled, he tried to release the heat building inside. Each breath came faster and faster, he was bewildered, distantly listening to the way his exhales sounded like airy sobs. Smoke shuddered from his lungs in uneven bursts.

A sharpness coming over him so quickly it was like being stabbed in the chest. He wanted his mother there, he wanted her warm arms and her warm smile and her loving fire. He wanted it so badly that he ground his back into the cold stone and gripped the edge of the fountain and squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed repeatedly, even as steam rose from his amber-gold glowing hands. He was burning off the water in the fountain.

The storm of emotion didn’t burn itself out in only a few minutes like he thought. It wasn’t going. He couldn’t go back to Mosk like this. He had to be strong for him, and Mosk would…tell him that he was all the things that Eran was being. Wasn’t this pathetic? Mosk didn’t even want his sympathy.

That was a wound of its own. Eran wasn’t used to having his feelings rejected, repudiated, knocked back so repeatedly.

His face was wet, his lungs filled with smoke, and he waited for the storm of it to pass, but it wouldn’t.
The emotions were so strong that he didn’t notice the lust amongst everything else until he heard the footsteps scraping beside him.

‘Oh now,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Go away,’ Eran snarled, not even looking at him, flooded with embarrassment. Flames curled out of his mouth, he turned his face away. It was hard enough wanting to destroy him anyway, but to have him see this?

A pause, and then the Gancanagh took a few steps back. ‘Flamelet, let me make you some tea.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you,’ Eran said roughly, his voice strained, betraying his tears. ‘You’re a monster.’

‘Yeah,’ the Gancanagh said softly. ‘That is a true thing, to be sure. But I also make tea. Have friends. Talk with them. I cannot help this dra’ocht of mine, flamelet. I swear now, I don’t want to hurt you. But you cannot stay here in the dark like this.’

‘I can if I want.’

‘Yeah, that’s true too,’ the Gancanagh said. He stepped forwards again. His voice hadn’t turned mocking once. But Eran remembered that wink, that self-satisfied smugness on his face, like he knew that Eran wanted to burn him to death and was amused by it. ‘Come with me then, flamelet. Just some tea. Nothing more. Breaks the Love Talker’s heart, to see you like this.’

‘No one’s making you stay,’ Eran said, feeling himself waver beneath the offer of care, the supposed empathy he could hear in the Gancanagh’s soft voice.

‘Let me make you some tea,’ the Gancanagh said.

Eran sniffed, rubbed his hand over his face, then nodded weakly. He followed the Gancanagh down the corridor. It was only a handful of steps from the fountain to the Gancanagh’s door.

‘Sit down there,’ the Gancanagh said, pointing to a seat by a table. Eran walked over it and sat down automatically. His hands were no longer glowing, but he couldn’t stop breathing smoke. His lungs were hot. His eyes wouldn’t stop making tears, no matter what he tried, no matter what he did. He felt weak-spirited, doing this while Mosk was the one who had been truly wronged. What right did Eran have to this response?

The sounds of tea being made. The measuring out of leaves into a pot, the clinking of it being hung over an open fire, the eventual whistling as the minutes ticked on and the pouring of water. It was all so familiar that it hurt freshly all over again. He bent over himself and stared down at the stone floor.

‘Wee flamelet,’ the Gancanagh said, ‘do you want to talk about it? Tell me your story?’

Eran shook his head. The Gancanagh made a sound of acknowledgement, then came back minutes later with a hot cup of tea. He passed it to Eran without touching him, and Eran took it and held it in his hands and thought of his family, thought of sharing the cup of tea with Amhar at Many Meadows, before Gwyn had come and changed everything. Eran’s fingers curled tightly around the cup and he thought it was probably humiliating that he was basically crying into it.

‘This isn’t like me,’ he said, his voice wrecked.

‘To be sure,’ the Gancanagh said.
‘I hate you. I’d kill you.’

‘I’m sure you would,’ the Gancanagh said calmly. ‘The line of those that dislike me is long. I’m not a man easily bothered by that. I’m one of the oldest in this tower, and I’m not sore over it. I stirred some trouble, it’s what I do. But here now, I see a wee flame crying in the dark, and anyone would shelter a candle flickering so hard.’

Eran hated the way he talked, like he understood how to talk to fire fae. But it was true. It was how Eran felt. He wanted his mother to shelter him. He wanted his father to build him up, to give him tinder in his words and let him flourish. He wanted his sisters and brother to be by his side, to make him stronger.

Was he weakening on this journey? How much would it strip from him?

‘I have to be stronger,’ Eran said eventually. He forced himself to sip at the tea, surprised to find it was good, richly flavoured, well-brewed. His mother would have loved it. He clutched it close to his chest.

‘Stronger than what?’

‘Than all of this,’ Eran said. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You’re not weak for having a feeling about things,’ the Gancanagh said quietly. Eran hadn’t met his eyes once. He didn’t meet his eyes now. ‘Tisn’t weak to hurt, now, even though it feels weak. I’ve hurt for so long I’ve learned it’s no weakness. Carry a wound without dying for long enough, you realise you’re strong.’

Eran frowned in confusion. He met those black eyes, and the Gancanagh shrugged and looked towards the fire. He seemed pensive. The lust he created was muted. The rest of Eran’s emotions were so strong that it was all tangled up in the background, one more thing he didn’t want to feel that he couldn’t help but feel.

‘Augus doesn’t trust you at all,’ Eran said.

‘And so,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘Would anyone? He likes me though. That’s the thing about me. I’m passing fair and very sweet really. A monster and then a man who makes tea. A devourer of love, but love’s little snack too. I recognise it in you, because I know it in myself. You’re broken-hearted, my golden-eyed candle. It’s not fair, now. Tisn’t fair at all.’

Eran’s shoulders heaved, and he swallowed down a strangled noise, making himself look at the floor again. He didn’t know what to say or think. Surely it was foolish to be this vulnerable in front of someone like the Gancanagh? Surely he should expect to be hurt now? Or taken advantage of? And yet the words were like a balm. He held the cup so close to his chest that it felt like a second heart, and he tried breathing through his nose, only to hear himself sniff loudly.

‘I’m not broken-hearted,’ Eran said. ‘Not…’

‘Maybe not like me, now, true,’ the Gancanagh said, ‘but your heart’s still sore like, isn’t it?’

Eran forced himself to drink the tea. It was very strong, like what his mother used to make. It had no sugar or honey in it, but it still reminded him of home. He hated it. He wanted to be back there so badly. Wanted his sisters teasing him until he lost his temper at them, and they fled giggling from him. Wanted his mother to reprimand him for not being nicer to them, and then she’d turn halfway through her sentence and reprimand his sisters for being so niggling. He wanted his father carefully polishing his mace, bloodlust in his eyes until Ada and Adalia ran up and kissed him on
either cheek.

He even wanted Vhadi, his older brother returning home from some battle, and not quite knowing how to treat his Seelie brother, mother and sisters after killing Seelie fae on the battlefield. Sometimes, Eran would stay up late at night and listen to Vhadi and Ifir talking about it by one of their fires, and Vhadi’s voice would be low and hesitant, and Ifir’s voice would be oddly soothing.

Was it hard for them? To kill Seelie fae and delight in it, and come home to Seelie family and delight in that too?

‘They’re all gone,’ Eran said. ‘Everyone.’

‘Yeah,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘It’s a terrible thing.’

Everyone was gone, Eran had feelings for someone who was being crushed by circumstance and likely wouldn’t be interested in anyone for the rest of his life, let alone now. He was quite certain that in his more lucid moments, Mosk hated him, or at least, thought he was nothing worthwhile. The people who saw the world in him were dead.

‘I thought I was going to be someone,’ Eran said, laughing. Then he made himself stand, because he was being pathetic, like Mosk had said. This was ridiculous. ‘Anyway. Thank you for the tea.’

‘Hey now,’ the Gancanagh said, not getting up. ‘Are you not someone, then?’

‘No, it’s… this is absurd. I don’t know what came over me. And you- to be here with you, I-’

‘I know you don’t like me, nor my dra’ocht, it’s well and good. I know you are protective over your little leaf, and know I made mischief. But you’re being sore at yourself now, and you’re sore enough, aren’t you? Like, why do that to yourself? Just…sit. Don’t say anything, if you don’t want. Or you can leave. But if you go back and swallow all that fire and water back down again, you’ll put yourself out in the process.’

‘How do you talk like we talk?’ Eran said, reluctantly sitting again. ‘Do you know fire fae?’

The Gancanagh tilted his head and rolled his black eyes. ‘Do I know fire fae? Yeah, I’ve been all over. I know mer-fae and more too. I’m a wanderer. They don’t mind nomads in the desert. Many of the deserts, anyway.’

‘They don’t,’ Eran agreed, wiping at his eyes with the heel of his palm.

‘Meanwhile, I wonder why you’re not sharing your pains with that sad little leaflet you travel with.’

‘Ha, well,’ Eran said. ‘He’s too sad. He’s been through too much. He hates me.’

‘Does he then?’

‘Mm,’ Eran said. ‘I mean he hates everyone and everything. But- And he just wouldn’t care, if I… reacted like this around him. Or he’d…’ Insult me. Put me down. ‘I have to be strong for him.’

‘He has a knack for finding the sore spot and hurting it, doesn’t he?’ the Gancanagh said.

Eran looked up in surprise, but the Gancanagh sipped his tea and stared into the fireplace. After a moment, he scratched at the tiny black snake earring – or maybe he stroked it – and then he put down the cup of tea and took his dudeen out of his shirt pocket, then tobacco from his pants. He
began packing the end of the pipe with a languid rhythm.

‘I told him I loved Oengus,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘I do, you see. Wildly. Passionately. Loyally. In that ‘forever and ever’ way he loves his lost love. It’s unrequited and bittersweet for being so, given what I feed upon. That leaflet, he was sweet about it, right up until he didn’t get his own way, and then he was cruel. The words didn’t hurt me, not anymore, but still, he has a knack doesn’t he? Don’t you think? Perhaps made sharper and crueler by the fact that he seems so sweet the rest of the time.’

‘Well, he’s hurting,’ Eran said. He didn’t know that the Gancanagh loved Oengus, but now that he thought about it…  ‘Do you think Oengus will ever return your feelings?’

‘He returns feelings. Just not the ones I wish for the most. It is something special to be regarded as his friend, anyway, and I am grateful for that. But I am bitter and sad too.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Why not?’ the Gancanagh said. ‘I thought the leaflet had already told you. It’s not a secret, everyone who knows me, they know. Oengus knows. Now, will you help a luchorpan with his pipe?’

Eran lifted his index finger and touched it directly to the tobacco, and a moment later it started smoking. The Gancanagh leaned back in his chair and drew on his pipe, then blew smoke rings towards the ceiling. A moment later he was piercing them with little smoke arrows. A kind of magic maybe.

‘A boy has poison in him,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘He can’t let it out with fire, he can’t get it out with words, and he can’t rid himself of it with empty fucking. Or maybe he can, who knows? He finds ways to let that poison out, and he tries to hurt others with it. He’s only a boy. It’s a sad thing to learn so young.’

It was why Eran didn’t really mind, for the most part. Why a lot of Mosk’s insults didn’t touch him. But some of them did. The Gancanagh was right, Mosk did have a knack of finding the sore spots. Sometimes Mosk’s words were the meanest things he’d ever heard. Then seconds later he would feel terrible, knowing that they were coming from all the awful things Mosk had experienced.

‘You care about him,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘A candle caring for a sapling, that’s new for me. He won’t stop unless you teach him other ways to get the poison out. He’ll get older, and stronger, and he’ll get meaner.’

‘He’s right to hate me. I treated him terribly when I first met him.’

‘I know you’re Seelie, but that’s not how justice works, little candle,’ the Gancanagh said, lifting an eyebrow. ‘If you do something wrong and you wish you hadn’t, you take responsibility for your actions and you apologise. There. Simple. You do not let yourself be treated cruelly by someone who isn’t seeking justice, but exorcism.’

‘You’re just trying to…drive a wedge between us.’

‘I’d say that’s already there,’ the Gancanagh said, drawing on his pipe again. After a while he sighed out a plume of smoke, and Eran wondered how it felt, to breathe in smoke and breathe it out when his lungs weren’t made to carry it naturally like Eran’s were.

‘So why are you helping me then?’
‘I don’t want the world to end,’ the Gancanagh said mildly. ‘And I think that’s where we’re headed, and that’s what the intrepid team you’re part of might try to halt. I make mischief, to be sure, but I don’t want the world to end. I want to visit Oengus’ tower for many years yet, look upon his divine countenance, listen to him speak, wish to soothe him with my lips and words and body. Instead to share this tower silently with him. I want to wander the world still. Sometimes even an Unseelie fae must help instead of hinder. Have you not learned that yet, with the company you keep?’

Eran closed his eyes, wiping at them again, feeling the way his skin was drying strangely, salt water forming a tiny crust that no one could see, but he could feel. He then stroked at his stubble. It was staying the same length now that he could will his energy towards it. His father had said a long time ago that if he wanted a long beard, his energy would grow that, but if he wanted to be clean shaven, he could make that happen too.

It was strange to contemplate, but he was old enough now that he really could keep his hair at a certain length, if he wanted to. He was developing the powers properly now, and he wished he could tell his father that he had become a mature fae, able to will his body to do as he wished, within reason.

A loud knock at the door. Eran jolted. The door opened and Gwyn walked in as if he owned the tower and the room, and then seemed surprised to see the Gancanagh and Eran sitting and having tea.

Then he took a closer look at Eran’s face and frowned. Eran hoped it wasn’t obvious he’d been crying for far too long.

‘Why are you here?’ Gwyn said.

‘Mosk needed to rest and I…needed…air,’ Eran said.

‘In the Gancanagh’s room?’ Gwyn said sceptically. Then he narrowed his eyes at the Gancanagh, who only shrugged.

‘As you can see, Your Majesty, I am not fucking him, nor am I making him fall in love with me. I’m being very polite now.’

Gwyn stared at the Gancanagh for a while longer, and then he reached up and pressed his fingers to his forehead. At first Eran thought he was exasperated, but as the time passed, it became obvious he was in discomfort. The Gancanagh straightened, his eyes widening, but after another few seconds Gwyn dropped his hand and just sighed.

Maybe it was just Eran being paranoid, but it seemed Gwyn had darker circles under his eyes than usual, that he looked paler.

‘Are you okay?’ Eran said.

‘It’s only a headache,’ Gwyn said, shrugging one shoulder. ‘It will go.’

‘Did you want me for something?’

‘Not exactly,’ Gwyn said, smiling wryly. ‘You weren’t in your room, so I looked for you, then realised where you were. Augus did relay to me what happened only the night previously.’

‘He offered, Your Majesty,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘He offered many times.’
‘In lieu of being able to feed on the humans you normally hunt, I’d thank you not to feed upon my team.’

‘I wouldn’t have done that anyway, Your Majesty,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘A luchorpan’s got a poor reputation indeed. What a disservice now.’

Gwyn looked at him for a long time, with eyes narrowed, and then his lips quirked up in a half-smile.

‘You earned that reputation,’ he said. ‘But I’ll leave you both to it.’

‘And Mosk? Did Fenwrel speak to you?’ Eran said quickly.

‘She did,’ Gwyn said heavily. ‘I only wish I could say that I was surprised. It explains why Mosk was always so desperate to hide his bow skills from his mother at the Court. I never completely understood why it was a secret. I thought he felt shame for using a weapon when he felt himself a pacifist.’

With that, Gwyn walked out of the room without even saying farewell. He closed the door behind him. Eran shifted, feeling like he was still trying to understand what had just happened. It was unsettling to be in Gwyn’s presence. The whole energy of the room became alive and uncomfortable, when he was gone everything felt strange and empty.

‘He shouldn’t have a headache like that,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘He’s the King.’

‘What?’

‘Tension headaches, perhaps,’ the Gancanagh said, finishing the rest of his tea at once. ‘Not like that, now. I wonder if my friend knows. I’m going to speak to him about it.’

The Gancanagh stood and carefully took Eran’s cup from his hand. Only a mouthful of tea remained. The Gancanagh set the cups down and pulled on a leather coat, looking concerned. He paused, then turned back to Eran, holding his pipe in one hand.

‘Listen to me, little candle,’ the Gancanagh said seriously. ‘Afrit and ambaros, vanishingly rare, a real hybrid… Don’t forget the things that make you who you are. Whether it’s tea with friends, making flames, running across the sands under galaxies.’

‘You’ll say that to me,’ Eran said, standing, ‘after taking advantage of Mosk? Give me this well-meaning advice, after Augus told us how much of a bad idea it was for Mosk to even visit you?’

‘There now,’ the Gancanagh said, his voice turning almost sharp, ‘listen to me about him too. He needs something that will make him forget and stop thinking. That was what I divined within seconds of seeing him, and that is what you will learn too. I wasn’t going to be nice about it, but I was still going to give him what he needed. You- Seelie and all filled with honour and shame, maybe you can give it to him and make it nice. But he still needs it. Or he’ll find it for himself. And trust me, that one will get himself killed in the process and think he needs that too.’

The Gancanagh walked up to Eran, and before Eran could even protest, the Gancanagh leaned in and brushed his lips against Eran’s. The kiss was warm, smelled of smoke, gone even as Eran went to shove the Gancanagh away with his arms. The Gancanagh was already out of reach.

‘Hey!’

‘A Gancanagh’s blessing be upon you,’ the Gancanagh said, walking to the door. ‘It’s no small
thing, to have the kiss of the Love Talker upon your lips. See yourself out, then, I’m going to go see my only love.’

With that, he opened the door and closed it behind him, and Eran pressed splayed fingers to his gut, his breath shaking as the lust that had sharpened all at once began to recede.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Circling Back Around':

‘I like that too,’ Eran said, clearing his throat. ‘I don’t know much about it. I mean I’ve done things with lovers in the past, but I think I’d like to go further with you, and—But I don’t know, Mosk, you’re not really my type.’

A single, defeated exhale from Mosk, some bitter, self-deprecating laugh that made Eran realise that he’d spoken clumsily, without tact.

‘I don’t mean that,’ Eran said.

‘You do,’ Mosk said. ‘Don’t worry. You haven’t surprised me or anything.’

That was the problem.
The next day, Fenwrel and Gulvi returned to the Unseelie Court to continue defending it. Eran wasn’t there to watch them go, but Gwyn curtly briefed him on what was happening which was helpful and strange. They’d all been so quick to put him in his place back in the Unseelie Court – whatever that place was – and now everything had shifted. Was it just because he was trying to help them? Or did it just take them longer to trust people? Eran supposed he had basically vowed to kill Mosk if no one else did, that wouldn’t have helped.

He still thought of himself as young, he’d expected to need another few hundred years to really prove himself in the eyes of his father. Perhaps this wasn’t about proving himself, but about having transformed from vengeful warrior into Mosk’s caretaker.

It was their mistake if they forgot he was a warrior first.

Mosk had regressed after revealing what had happened with Olphix, the debt with his family, the betrayals, and he was non-responsive. He would eat if Eran put sap in front of him, but he did it with a numbed stare and a weak grip. Eran worried, but he thought that with enough time, Mosk would return to himself. It was better than considering the alternative.

Interactions with Mosk were reduced to making sure he was eating and sleeping opposite him in their stone rooms, Eran spent more time wandering Oengus’ tower and the grounds, getting to know the damp place.

Gwyn, Ash and Augus frequently rode off together on three horses, leaving Eran, Mosk and Julvia – who often spent time with the swans – behind. On the second of these excursions, they returned with two more horses and what looked like more equipment.

‘The glamour helps,’ Ash said, as Augus and Gwyn walked back to the tower and Ash and Eran stayed with the horses. ‘I’m good at persuading people. It’s amazing how much more generous most folks become if they’re feeling great.’

‘That’s what your dra’ocht has always been like?’ Eran said.

‘Uh huh.’ Ash carefully measured some grain into feed buckets, and then pointed to a jar of black ooze, which Eran handed to him. It turned out to be molasses. ‘Waterhorses, it’s always a little different. Augus’ tends to make people freeze up a bit, y’know, for hunting. Mine is about calming people down. I’ve met others that just create like, allure, or make humans feel like they’re trapped. I imagine being so young you’re still feeling yours out, yeah?’

‘I suppose,’ Eran said. ‘Are you…? Is the bloodlust hard to manage? With being unable to
teleport?"

‘Oh, it’s fine,’ Ash said, but too quickly, too warmly. A few seconds later, after measuring out molasses, Ash sighed and shook his head. ‘It’s not fine. It’s fucking hard. Augus is doing it tough, but he’s had more experience with going without, which is weird really, because when I was younger, it was me that refused to eat all the time? But not- Not like this.’

‘You refused to eat?’

‘Well, I wasn’t born a meat eater. I ate just plants and shit until I matured, and then you know, your instincts kick in and you feed. But until that moment, it’s a pretty happy life not hurting things? Most waterhorses settle into chowing down on humans pretty naturally, but I’d spent so much time in human form that I fucked up my system and I dunno, I’ve probably got too much of a conscience to be a good waterhorse!’ Ash laughed. ‘But I’m too much of a waterhorse to be a very good person! So that’s… Anyway, the upshot is I didn’t like eating humans and I still don’t. I just, y’know, dude’s gotta eat.’

‘You spend a lot of time in the human world, don’t you? Like, before all of this?’ Eran walked over and helped carry the buckets over to each of the horses in their stable.

‘Not for the last ten years,’ Ash said. ‘But before then, like I lived there, and visited here.’

‘What’s it like?’

‘Different,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘Faster. No one lives as long but everyone feels things really intensely. There’s these bursts of creativity. A lot of history repeating and no one sort of living long enough to get that. You know over there like, in a lot of parts of the world, their leaders are only in power for like a few years before they’re voted out? Compared to say the stock two hundred and fifty years a monarch has to see out in the Courts here, before they can even consider leaving? It’s crazy.’

Eran wondered if it was true. He didn’t know much about the human world. Afrit fed on burned things, not humans, so they didn’t need to go there. His father had only been a handful of times and hadn’t liked it. The human world was bad for afrit. Humans could make them grant wishes, but afrit had to use their life force to do it, and it burned them out and made them sleep for a very long time. Stories of djinn being trapped in lamps for centuries existed, it was horrifying to contemplate.

‘It’s not dangerous for you?’

‘My glamour makes them feel fine,’ Ash said. ‘So they trust me when I say the waterweed in my hair is like, a theatre prop, or a prosthetic or whatever. They believe me when I tell them I’ve just had a shower, or the product I’m using makes my hair look wetter than it is.’

In the stall of the last horse, one of the new ones – a grey dapple with a teal mane and tail – Ash stood with his boot against the bucket to make sure she didn’t tip it out as she enthusiastically fed. He smiled at Eran.

‘It must be hard for you, all of this? I never got a chance to say, but I’m really sorry about your family. It’s fucking awful.’

Eran nodded, then smiled a little. He didn’t know exactly what to say, but he liked that Ash was talking to him. He knew maybe it was all Ash’s glamour, but Ash still chose to talk to him, to open up and he didn’t have to do that.

‘Is it weird being around horses, and riding them when like…?’ Eran waved his hand towards Ash.
'I mean no offence! I know you’re not a horse! But…is it still weird?'

'It’s a bit weird,’ Ash said. ‘It’s a bit uncanny valley.’

‘What?’

‘Human thing,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘They feel different, honestly. Riding them is weird, but what can you do? It’s not like we can transform and go somewhere the same way, because waterhorse instincts take us to lakes in the human world and don’t really care about quests and shit. There’s always a part of us that’s a little checked out from what’s happening.’

‘Augus too?’

Ash nodded as he used his shoe to move away the bucket the horse was now playing with. She gave them both an impressive glare and walked to the other end of the stable, and Ash rolled his eyes and took up the bucket, collecting the others as he went.

‘You ever find your thoughts circling around back to times you were around fire, when you aren’t around fire?’ Ash said. ‘I mean maybe you don’t get that, but when I’m not around a lake, or Augus’ lake, there’s a part of me just like, quietly nudging me back there. Obviously the politics of everything happening feels super real, but it’s like…fae aren’t really meant for all of this shit, are we? I mean some. Afrit have been warrior fae for like…ever. But waterhorses? Where’s the stories of a bunch of waterhorses donning warrior garb and going to war as part of the identity of a waterhorse?’

‘It doesn’t exist,’ Eran said.

‘Doesn’t fucking exist,’ Ash said, winking.

Eran laughed, Ash joined in, and then they both walked over to the water pump, and Eran watched as Ash washed his hands free of bits of grain and molasses. Eran just burned his off so it fell away as soot.

‘You slept with the Gancanagh?’ Eran said, and Ash nodded without even looking like it was a strange subject to bring up.

‘He’s…’ Ash shrugged. ‘I mean partly I needed to redirect my bloodlust and he knew that. The Gancanagh is sort of an expert at seeing what people need, he just always wants to fuck his way through that. Which is like, me, basically, like I’m the same. So we let off some steam.’

He just always wants to fuck his way through that.

Eran thought back to the kiss that the Gancanagh had stolen before disappearing. He smiled ruefully and Ash tilted his head at Eran’s expression.

‘I just…seem to have this habit of hating certain Unseelie fae when I first meet them, and then coming around when I have more information.’

‘That you get used to,’ Ash said matter-of-factly, ‘but word to the wise, the Gancanagh is too dangerous for anyone under the age of like a thousand. He’s…got a trickster-chaos vibe thing. Don’t scrap your instincts yet, Eran! God, we’re only like five days into this thing, we can’t have you getting all sweet on us Unseelie now, can we?’

As they walked back to the tower, Ash asked him what it was like encountering so many Unseelie fae, and said it must feel nice to be around Oengus. Eran realised that it no longer really held true.
He liked Oengus, but he liked Mosk, and even the Gancanagh in his own way, and Ash too. He liked it, and wondered if his father would be proud.

* 

Eran helped Oengus carry food out to the main table. Oengus really did have no servants.

‘Don’t you have magic for this kind of thing?’ Eran said. ‘I mean I don’t mind, we did this all the time back home, but…’

Oengus set down a small alchemical burner and placed a large pot of stew over it. Eran would have helped him make that too, but he hadn’t known Oengus was cooking. Oengus didn’t seem accustomed to asking for help. Eran set down several large bowls of bread rolls. They smelled delicious. There were even some that had been left in the oven just slightly too long. The tops had the tiniest soot marks on their golden crust, and Eran knew that Oengus had let them scorch just for Eran.

They walked to fetch crockery and cutlery, which was kept in a different room in glass cabinets away from all the flying, twittering birds. The sun was setting and they were finding places to roost in Oengus’ tower.

Eran resigned himself to not getting an answer.

‘I could use magic,’ Oengus said, ‘but it is meaningful to me to do it this way. Sometimes the Gancanagh helps me.’

It was tempting to ask what it was like to live with someone who had a terrible case of unrequited love. Eran didn’t get the sense that the Gancanagh was pushy or rude with it, but was it a burden?

‘You don’t…feel his dra’ocht?’ Eran said hesitantly.

Oengus shot him a piercing look as though he knew exactly what Eran wanted to know. Eran didn’t look away as Oengus stacked plates on Eran’s outstretched hands.

‘No,’ Oengus said finally. ‘I use my magic.’

‘I know it’s presumptuous, but-’

‘It is presumptuous,’ Oengus said, now stacking bowls upon the plates, ‘but I will talk about this anyway. I cannot ever love him the way he wishes and he has accepted this. He is a steadfast, true friend, Eran Iliakambar. By some twist of fate, he manages to be here when I am at my lowest. When I have forgotten to eat for months and my magic dwindles, he turns up and he feeds my swans and he soothes with selfless love. It is selfless.’

Oengus paused, looked down at the bowl he was holding, his auburn eyebrows pulling together. When he looked up again, there was a faint smile on his face, which turned the constant sober cast to his face startlingly bittersweet.

‘It has been so long since I talked of it with someone,’ Oengus said. ‘No one asks. Everyone simply accepts that here I am, and I love Caer. There he is, and he loves me. It is a continuation of a tale. I once told him I could make it go away, if he so wished. I could scoop the love from his chest and free him from the yoke of it. He was aghast. Afraid I would do it against his will. He said it made him feel worthy, and then I was saddened, for every fae should feel worthy simply for walking this earth.’
Eran’s fingers clutched the plates, the words wrapping around him. He could almost see it somehow, Oengus offering to take his love, the Gancanagh’s expression that followed. It wasn’t possible that Oengus could paint a story with only a handful of words, but Eran somehow felt like he’d been there.

‘He says it’s enough to just be here in the tower sometimes,’ Eran said.

‘I believe when you know there is nothing better, it becomes possible to accept something less. That doesn’t mean it’s enough. But anyone can tell themselves that it is.’

Oengus took all the cutlery and lay it in the bowl at the top of Eran’s stack. Eran almost laughed when he realised that Oengus had managed it so that he didn’t need to carry anything. Eran’s stack stretched up from his chest to his nose. It made him cross-eyed to stare at the forks in front of him. He slowly walked it back to the table, wondering if Oengus was subtly showing that he didn’t like to talk about personal things, or if Oengus somehow – miraculously – had a mischievous streak.

But then…he had sent that rush of harmless golden birds over Gwyn when they’d first arrived, hadn’t he?

‘It’s been very generous of you to host us like this,’ Eran said, as he carefully lowered the plates down onto the table and then began to set it properly, a plate and bowl for everyone.

‘Generous to myself, you mean,’ Oengus said, smiling wryly. ‘After all this time, and the sheer betrayal of it, I am fond of our Fallen Star. Likewise, it is pleasing to have a swan-maiden within these walls. It is something to witness history and play part in it, to be the one to have sent Olphix away or fight back. I have ever loved being a part of a story, Eran Iliakambar. Perhaps too much. That way lies danger. You should be wary of it yourself.’

‘Everyone likes giving me warnings about things, I’ve noticed,’ Eran said. He laughed to himself, but a moment later, Oengus joined him and simply nodded in agreement.

‘We all like to think of ourselves as being wiser than we are. Now, go fetch the others for dinner please, I should think it is time to feast.’

*

At the near-top of the highest of the turrets, two days later, Eran walked through a circular room of fine instruments he didn’t know the names of. There was a huge contraption of hollow wooden cylinders that blew constant music, often quiet, sometimes louder. The room was frigid, because every few paces was a huge arched window – some twenty in total – from floor to ceiling. One could simply walk straight out of the tower and fall if they wanted to. Eran wondered if there was a kind of magic there, stopping people from doing that, but he wasn’t going to take the risk.

He wandered around, not touching anything in case there was magic on it. He saw filigreed metal animals in what looked like a giant ship, and they floated on balls of light. There was a scroll of paper in a glass case, and the words and languages constantly changed. Eran spotted Pahlavi, Aramaic and Zend, all of which he could read, but as soon as he started to get the flow of the poetry – which arrested his spirit and transfixed him – the words and alphabet would change again. Pinned to the top of the scroll was a single black feather with a glossy sheen to it.

The lust came before the sound of footsteps. Incredible how not that long ago, Eran had hated it. Now he was able to cast it into the background of his mind, though it often made him think of Mosk and that was a confusing mire that he didn’t like to get sucked into. Eran continued to stare at the scroll, and he only looked away when he felt the Gancanagh standing next to him, his leather
coat flapping in the breeze.

‘A gift from the Raven Prince,’ the Gancanagh said.

‘Really?’ Eran said, his voice hushed. Up here, he didn’t feel like he should talk loudly for some reason.

‘Yeah. No knowing what it does. I suppose *Mages* know. I can never remember what I read there. Can you?’

Eran turned back to it, then realised that even though he knew he could read it, understand it, that it has absorbed him, he *still* couldn’t remember the subject, the content. He turned back to the Gancanagh, who smiled and swung away, walking towards one of the archways.

After a while, Eran joined him. From this high up, he could see the lake become a river once more, winding silvery into the distance. There were towers and castles around them, between thick forest and farmed fields. The air carried with it the smell of water and green, and Eran missed his homeland, wishing he could feel heat in the breezes, or smell spices in the air. Even the sounds of the animals were different.

‘What’s your home like?’ Eran said abruptly. ‘Is it like here?’

‘There’s a bit more clover, to be sure,’ the Gancanagh said, laughing. ‘It’s wilder. More rocky mountainsides, and serpentine lakes a-crossing one another. Lonely and grey-green, cold and damp. You’d hate it, little flame. You’d be the brightest thing there. And yours now? What was your home like?’

The past tense hurt a little, but he knew the Gancanagh meant nothing by it. Or if he did, nothing truly malicious.

‘I was not the brightest thing there,’ Eran said, looking up towards the sun that was covered by clouds. ‘We lived at the base of a volcano where the basalt became sand, there we had a sprawling home of carved clay foundations and bricks of sand made in the ambaros way. There were lava flows and trees that could grow amongst the molten rock and would fruit in amber and gold. The volcano always had that noise, you know, this drone, as though it was always humming at us.’

‘And how were they, you being a hybrid? That’s… In all my time walking the world, I’ve never met another. Only heard tales.’

Eran nodded, suddenly uncomfortable. ‘My family loved me,’ he said stiffly.

The Gancanagh frowned at him, and then swung away from the archway. ‘I meant nothing by it. *Tis* it a rude thing then, to ask? Or *tis* it complicated? Your family loved you, but not all?*

‘It was strange,’ Eran said finally, also turning away from the view. ‘I thought it was normal. It wasn’t until I was older that I learned it was not only rare but that I would probably never meet anyone else like me. There’s no other marid-djinn and ambaros hybrid. I’ve never even met *any* other hybrid, though…I haven’t travelled that much. But I don’t know if I will?’

‘Live long enough, and you might yet. I met you now, didn’t I? So that’s something.’

Eran nodded, pensive. He didn’t really give it too much thought. He didn’t like his true-form. That was when everyone could tell he was a hybrid. In human-form, he looked ambaros, and many had no idea he was anything different if he travelled. Ambaros were Seelie, after all, so it worked out.
‘I think it was harder being Seelie, having Unseelie and Seelie siblings, and Unseelie and Seelie parents,’ Eran said finally, shrugging. ‘Because you’re not both. You know it in your heart.’

‘To be sure,’ the Gancanagh said, scratching at his ear. Eran could have sworn he saw the snake earring move, the flashing of a tiny snake tongue, but he blinked and it was in the exact same position as before. The Gancanagh noticed the expression, and turned away, smiling. ‘Tis only a wee Bimble.’

‘A what?’

‘A wee Bimble,’ the Gancanagh said.

‘A…Bimble? Like, that’s what the ornament is called?’

‘That’s just its name,’ the Gancanagh said, then shivered, shaking his head. ‘I’m after some warmth now, aren’t you cold?’ A laugh. ‘Never mind. Never mind.’

Eran laughed. He was aware it was cold, but he had enough inner flame that it didn’t matter. Damp and gloom felt like it seeped into his bones, but the airy freshness up here – even laden with a lake water – felt invigorating.

‘How does Oengus even stand it?’ the Gancanagh said walking towards the archway that led to stairs. ‘Magic, must be. The man never wears a shirt. Though a blessing that is too, now, don’t you think?’

The Gancanagh turned and winked at Eran, then disappeared, and he wondered if the Gancanagh had just climbed all those stairs to check if Eran was doing okay. After a while he cast it out of his mind and stared at the scroll again, convincing himself that he would remember some of what it was said. He read passage after passage and remembered nothing.

*

The following morning and it was a melancholy, cold dawn. Eran looked out of the window and saw steam rising from the lake. The clouds looked heavier than normal, soon unleashing fat droplets that fell straight down. He turned the canister of sap in his hand and then walked into Mosk’s room.

Mosk was already awake, dressed, sitting on the edge of his bed. He took the canister of sap from Eran, looking at him, more alert than usual.

Eran turned to leave, then hesitated. When he turned back, Mosk was glaring at him. Eran wondered if it was because he hadn’t left yet.

‘Are you avoiding me?’ Mosk said.

Was he? Eran blinked. Mosk hadn’t been capable of conversation after everything that had happened. But in the last few days Eran had left as soon as he handed Mosk the canister of sap. He didn’t like to be in the room. He wanted to do things, learn things, train, talk to people. He wanted to feel…like he mattered. He could do things that were helpful.

‘I don’t think so,’ Eran said truthfully.

‘You’re not here!’

Eran turned fully back to Mosk, then walked over and sat on the bed, leaving a decent amount of
space between them. They were side by side, and Eran looked over at Mosk, who was staring down at the canister of sap. His cheeks seemed a little flushed.

‘I didn’t think you wanted me here,’ Eran said. ‘You…don’t like me, remember?’

‘You’re better than nothing at all,’ Mosk muttered and his hands tightened around the canister of sap. He started unscrewing the wooden lid. ‘Go away.’

‘Hang on,’ Eran said, ‘I’m here now. You have to…tell me things, if you want- I can’t read your mind, I- You know I want to help you, right?’

‘Because you feel like you should,’ Mosk said, sipping at the sap and not meeting his eyes. ‘I’m your project and you feel sorry for me. Just go away.’

Eran turned that over, even as the flash of indignation rose within. He wanted to help Mosk, that was true. He did feel sorry for Mosk, he couldn’t pretend that away. Did that mean he was only there out of duty? It was something that Seelie fae had too much of sometimes, it could be a problem.

‘I’ll go away soon,’ Eran said, ‘but what do you want me to do instead? Because I think you’re an interesting person. I know hardly anything about you, but the parts of you I get to see, I think…it’s good to see them.’

He waited, tense, for Mosk to insult him.

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk finally said. ‘You can’t think those things.’

‘You don’t get to decide that for me,’ Eran said. ‘So, you don’t know what you want me to do instead? Maybe we could spend some more time together?’

‘You never do your fire thing!’ Mosk said, looking at Eran, eyes brighter than they’d been for about a week. ‘You never sing like you did at that market. You close up and stop it all. You just give me things and then leave. You’re never going to touch me again. Not unless I do something stupid. And that’s because you’re stupid!’

From zero communication to this, Eran felt like he wasn’t prepared. Mosk’s words were sharp, but the desperation in them were real.

‘This isn’t my home,’ Eran said slowly, trying to explain, ‘and I haven’t wanted to do the fire rituals here. I feel disconnected from it in homes that aren’t mine. It’s easier to do…out in the open. But out in the open here is lake and…wetness. It just doesn’t feel right. I’m not doing it to spite you, or because of you.’ Eran paused. ‘Maybe a little, because I don’t want to do things that upset you. Fire upsets you.’

Mosk screwed the lid back on the canister – even though he’d had hardly any sap – and dropped it on the bed. Eventually he turned and drew his legs up, crossing them so he was sitting on his bed properly. He dug his fingers into the stone grey quilt, he stared at what could have been Eran’s knee.

‘It’s different,’ Mosk said. ‘Fuck, I don’t fucking know. You didn’t care about upsetting me after the Gancanagh.’

‘You were completely out of control,’ Eran said. ‘I shouldn’t have done it at all.’

‘Why are you like this?’ Mosk said. ‘I’ve said what I want, over and over, and I say I’m okay with
it, and you—

‘You don’t really care about what I want,’ Eran said calmly, because this was something he knew. ‘I don’t think you really have… the capacity to do that right now. So you just assume anyone who looks at you would want to fuck you, because presumably after everything that happened, that’s what you learned. But you told me back in the Aur forest, that we’re both sheltered. It’s how age works, remember?’

The mutinous look that Mosk gave him was appreciated, if only because it meant eye contact. Eran used to think Mosk’s eyes looked like rain, but today they looked as stony as the tower that housed them. Eran knew he was saying things Mosk didn’t want to hear. The miracle was that Mosk seemed to be hearing him.

‘I said you didn’t like doing things with me and you said you did,’ Mosk said, ‘so I don’t understand the problem.’

‘The problem is you don’t care about what I want,’ Eran said.

‘What the fuck do you want then?’ Mosk said, looking away.

‘I’m still figuring out what I want with you,’ Eran said, feeling his cheeks and ears warm. He’d walked straight into that one. He didn’t want to obfuscate, he couldn’t lie, so he was stuck with the truth. He felt raw, blistered on the inside. ‘I mean— I want to teach you how to be touched, properly and sometimes gently. It’s obvious you have reasons for hating it, but you seem to think that’s permanent, and I don’t think it has to be. And I want us… I don’t want to be a disposable cock when you’d be just as well served with a dildo. I’m not really into that.’

Mosk tensed, he was silent for a long time. Eran thought his breathing was shallower than before.

‘What about the other thing?’ Mosk said. ‘With the ropes?’

‘I like that too,’ Eran said, clearing his throat. ‘I don’t know much about it. I mean I’ve done things with lovers in the past, but I think I’d like to go further with you, and— But I don’t know, Mosk, you’re not really my type.’

A single, defeated exhale from Mosk, some bitter, self-deprecating laugh that made Eran realise that he’d spoken clumsily, without tact.

‘I don’t mean that,’ Eran said.

‘You do,’ Mosk said. ‘Don’t worry. You haven’t surprised me or anything.’

*That was the problem.* Eran stroked at his stubble. He couldn’t exactly say it wasn’t Mosk’s appearance, but his *personality.* That wasn’t going to look anything like reassurance. He had to look deeper than that, for a truth that wouldn’t hurt.

‘Back home,’ Eran said, ‘I had sex for fun. Because it’s meant to be fun, right? That’s—I didn’t have it because someone kept badgering me about it and I didn’t have it because I felt obligated. I had it because it felt good, and I could make someone else feel good. That’s all. But you can’t look at me and tell me that you find it fun, you do it to forget. And you can’t look at me and tell me that you’re okay with me making you feel good, because you don’t want to do it for that reason. Those are things you’ve told me.’

‘Oh,’ Mosk said.
When Mosk met his gaze again, his eyes weren’t stony anymore, they looked like rain again, like they’d cleared. Eran had learned that Aur dryads that had an Aur tree were supposed to have golden eyes, but Eran preferred the silvery-grey-green. It seemed to suit Mosk better. The vivid green of his hair brought out the faint shadings of green in his eyes and made him seem like the forest being that he said he wasn’t, because he could no longer hear the trees, no longer had his forest.

Eran hurt for him.

‘I don’t know how to feel good,’ Mosk said finally. ‘About anything.’

It was maybe one of the more honest things Mosk had said, and Eran couldn’t think of anything to say for a moment.

‘I know,’ Eran said, clearing his throat. ‘I don’t know what you want from me, exactly, except what I’ve been able to pick up from how you act and what you say. But if you want more from me, I’d…want to see if it was possible for you to feel good.’

Just saying it aloud made it more certain and Eran was frightened by it. Because that didn’t sound like a fun, commitment-free romp over a weekend. It didn’t sound like playful flirting at a market place. It sounded like work. Eran dragged his fingers through his hair and then called heat to his chest, feeling like he’d chilled himself. He’d gotten colder throughout the conversation.

‘Could you tell me what you want from me? Do you even have an idea, beyond just finding people to fuck you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mosk said.

‘Do you…?’ Eran pressed his lips together. ‘Do you want me to help you?’

‘I’ll fight you though,’ Mosk said. ‘I don’t know how not to. You’ll have to tie me up.’

Eran pushed himself off the bed and walked a few paces away, the stone floor feeling colder than normal beneath his feet.

‘That sounds like you want me to force you,’ Eran said. ‘Do you…like that?’

Some people did, but Mosk probably liked it because it was all he knew, or because-

‘It helps me not think,’ Mosk said. ‘I don’t want to think. I don’t want to talk about this! You should just know.’ A pause, and then Mosk looked away from Eran entirely. His voice turned small. ‘You’re so much smarter than I am.’

‘I’m really not,’ Eran said. ‘By Kabiri, I’m really not, I have no idea what I’m doing. Weren’t you the one who taught me about miskatins in the first place? And weren’t you the one who helped me understand the Unseelie better? Maybe we should…call a truce. Or something. Are you really not mad at me for what I did after you saw the Gancanagh? I… You said ‘don’t’ a lot.’

‘I suppose,’ Mosk said. ‘A truce?’

‘We have a lot to talk about,’ Eran said.

‘I hate talking,’ Mosk said vehemently. Then, after about a minute, as Eran was wondering if Mosk needed a break, Mosk said: ‘This isn’t so bad.’
'No? You just hate it a little less than everything else?'

Mosk’s laughter, when it came, was quiet, muted, but Eran felt it like a victory.

‘I’m not mad at you,’ Mosk said. ‘I mean, not for that. I get mad because you’re naïve and…you care so much. It’s stupid. You don’t realise how futile this is.’

‘That may be true, but the way you think isn’t the law. No one thought the Nightingale could be defeated, but Gwyn did it. You didn’t think we’d survive the miskatin, but you came back and made sure the both of us did. And you–’

A splitting, shrieking siren – like nothing Eran had ever heard – sliced through him and brought him to his knees. He clapped his hands over his ears and stared at Mosk, who was staring blankly ahead, paralysed by it. Within seconds the sound stopped, it was followed by Oengus’ amplified voice:

‘Make haste. The ice approaches. Pack what you can pack in ten seconds. I am holding it back. Make haste to the base of the tower.’

Eran’s ears rung even as he pushed himself to his feet and ran into the other room, grabbing everything he’d left on his bed, on the side table. He felt his throat working around a retching motion, but he didn’t let it free. If he opened his mouth, he’d vomit. He slung the pack over his shoulder, heavy with equipment but manageable and ran back and grabbed Mosk by the arm, who still looked stunned by what had happened.

He was already running to the door when the Gancanagh flung it open, a pack on his shoulders. He looked truly panicked, his skin pale, eyebrows pulled together.

‘Hurry,’ he said.

They ran down the corridor, Julvia joining them. Down the flight of the stairs, where Gwyn already had his sword out and was pushing Augus ahead of him, Ash behind them.

‘This is not normal,’ Augus said as they ran. ‘It doesn’t normally range this far south, like this. It’s found us.’

Eran was thinking something muddled and terrified along the same lines. His forearm hurt where the ice had touched him, the cold in his body expanded, they pounded across stone, spilling out of the entrance, then halted quickly to see Oengus with his flute-wand at his lips on the muddy grass and the ice everywhere. It wasn’t just approaching, it was already here. All around them. The lake frozen, the bodies of swans taken up into the ice, and behind them, the shadows of akimbo and disoriented dark forms, the bodies of other fae dead and suspended in the distance.

Eran bent over and retched, unable to help himself. Bodies of fae in the ice, it was too familiar. They couldn’t go anywhere. He turned a full circle.

‘How are you holding it back?’ Gwyn demanded.

But it was clear that Oengus was struggling. His eyes were feverish, he was covered in sweat, and the ice reached slow tendrils towards them, crawling up the tower.

‘Take from me,’ Gwyn said, holding out his hand. ‘What magic I have, take it.’

He ran forwards, extending his arm. Oengus lashed out and grasped Gwyn’s forearm. Gwyn swayed, Augus hovered, looking worried. Eran heard the others breathing like they were scared,
even the Gancanagh stood by Oengus’ side, concerned.

Oengus took several deep breaths and blew clear notes through his flute. They rang strident and true, and a portal opened. But then he went down to one knee, shuddering, and shook his head, letting go of Gwyn’s arm. He stared at the ice, at the swans in the ice. The progeny he patiently fed every morning, the remnants of his love for Caer Ibormeith.

‘Go,’ he said. ‘Go, and I will follow.’

‘Come with us now,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘Please, come with us now.’

‘I will follow,’ Oengus said, looking to the Gancanagh and managing a weak smile. ‘Each Uisge, use your compulsions and make sure the Love Talker leaves too. I cannot hold the ice back.’

‘He’s not going to follow!’ the Gancanagh said to Gwyn, even as Ash grabbed him by the arm and the Gancanagh shook him off. ‘King Oengus Og, get up and come with us!’

‘If you do not leave now, we will all die,’ Oengus said, turning to Gwyn. ‘Let me do this.’

The ice creaked and groaned, crept closer, and then began to circle Oengus’ feet. Eran was already as close to the portal as he could get, Mosk was staring at the ice, mesmerised, and Gwyn looked all around them with an expression on his face like fear.

Eran felt like he’d seen that expression before, on his father’s face before the ice took him properly. He felt small then. Maybe it was all futile.

‘Everyone,’ Ash said, using his compulsion. Eran’s attention was instantly captured. ‘Through the portal.’

They all ran through the portal then, all except the Gancanagh, Ash and Oengus. Eran turned back and looked through the swirling spring-like colours of the portal to see Ash dragging the Gancanagh back, the ice plunging towards them. The Gancanagh was fighting him, shouting at Oengus. One last burst of flute music, and Ash and the Gancanagh were flung through the portal.

The ice stabbed towards Oengus, skewering him through the haze of magic and Eran thought Oengus might be smiling, but it was hard to tell.

The ice struck. The portal closed.

‘No!’ the Gancanagh shouted. ‘No! My love! No! My only love! My only love!’

He ran to where the portal had vanished, staring like he could will it back, then bowed over himself, his face in his hands. He kept saying the same words over and over again, and it was Ash who went to him and placed a careful hand on his shoulder. Eran half-expected the Gancanagh to fight him, but instead the Gancanagh turned into him, a litany of denial muffled in his hands. Ash’s other hand came around his shoulders, and he looked – of all things – lost.

When Eran dragged his eyes away, shock and fear tamping down any other emotion he might have felt, he realised he had no idea where they were. An open woodland, the sun shining down on them, and in the distance the sound of heavy drums, strangely familiar, almost like…

‘Is that war drums?’ Julvia said calmly.

‘Damn it,’ Gwyn said, staring at something through the forest that only he could see. ‘Damn it. Arm yourselves. We are not yet safe.’
Eran drew his kh’anzar from his sheath, shivering from the ice that was no longer there, a chill in his chest no matter how much fire he tried to stoke within himself.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'A Familiar Blue’:

Shaky, loud breaths, and then Gwyn laughed again and gripped Augus by his shoulders, getting blood and gore all over his clothing.

‘It’s gone!’

Augus stared up at him for a long time. Mosk expected him to say: *What’s gone?*

Instead, he said: ‘Your eyes, they’re bluer.’
The Gancanagh was crying into his hands. Eran stood nearby, his curved sword in his hand. Gwyn had his giant sword, it looked brutal, wicked, and Mosk could hear drumming in the distance. He could still hear the echo of the siren that had split the air back in Oengus’ tower. Was the tower still standing? Was Oengus preserved in the ice now, like his swans?

He and Eran had been talking, and then…

Mosk couldn’t understand it. The sun was shining, but a few minutes ago, it had been overcast. Here they were surrounded by trees that didn’t talk to him, widely spaced on grassy grounds, not in a tower in the middle of a lake. He couldn’t hear a hundred tiny birds twittering at any one time, the swans were silenced. Only drums, the Gancanagh crying, and Augus talking urgently to Gwyn.

Mosk wasn’t like the others. He couldn’t fight. He didn’t have compulsions. He turned automatically to Julvia, who smiled at him. She walked closer, even as Eran joined Gwyn by his side. They were staring fixedly ahead at something.

‘This is an adventure, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘Are you scared?’

‘Are you?’ Mosk said.

‘I think so,’ Julvia said.

Nearby, the Gancanagh pulled away from Ash, shaking his head. ‘I have to go, I have to make sure.’

‘What’s there to make sure of?’ Ash said incredulous. ‘He was stabbed with the ice. Come the fuck on, you know—’

‘I have to make sure,’ the Gancanagh said. ‘I cannot stay. I cannot stay, Glashtyn, I know you mean well. Too well. I’ll see you again soon.’

‘You’d fucking better,’ Ash said, frowning.

Mosk watched in astonishment as the Gancanagh shrunk down to about a foot in height, tipping a dark green hat with a black leather trim he’d not been wearing a moment ago. He scarpered away, Mosk staring after him.

‘Leprechauns,’ Ash said, walking over to Mosk and Julvia. ‘God, I hope he’s okay.’

‘He’s been alive for a very long time,’ Julvia said quietly. ‘He’s a very lucky luchorpan, it seems.’

Mosk kept imagining the ice. He’d wanted to touch it so badly. It didn’t talk to him, not like the trees, but there was something… It was familiar, like a distant melody he couldn’t recall until he got closer. But maybe that was what it did. Maybe it hypnotised all of them, so none of them knew what had happened until it was nearly too late. He’d only felt himself getting colder, thought it was
because of what he and Eran had been talking about. He didn’t realise the ice could be stealthy.

In the distance, fae were appearing through the trees, thundering towards them. Mosk squinted and realised they were probably Unseelie fae in their true-forms, beasts and humanoids, the war drums following behind them. He knew he should feel more alarmed, watching them gallop forth right at them, but he could only watch, detached.

‘It’s the bloodlust,’ Augus said, shaking his head. ‘ Likely underfae and driven mad with it, if they eat humans, or…who knows?’

‘Use your compulsions to stop them. I can change their status so they’ll survive it,’ Gwyn said urgently.

‘No,’ Augus said, placing a hand on Gwyn’s upper arm. ‘Remember what happened when you went from underfae to Inner Court? All you’ll do is make them hungrier with no recourse, the bloodlust has already made them mad, an extended life now is no mercy.’

Gwyn stared at Augus in disbelief, then at the thirty or so fae being flushed towards them.

‘I’ll compel them away,’ Augus said. ‘You’d prefer not to kill them?’

‘ Will they just return?’

‘Possibly,’ Augus said. ‘I don’t think my compulsions are as strong as before.’

Mosk hadn’t considered how not being able to properly feed his true appetite was impacting him or Ash. When Mosk looked at Ash though, he was just staring at Augus in concern.

‘They’re still strong,’ Gwyn said. ‘All right, we’ll do this.’

Gwyn and Augus stepped forwards, Ash leaving the group and joining them, talking under his breath to Augus, who shook his head at whatever Ash had said. Mosk felt useless. He was surprised when Eran came back – had Gwyn sent him back? Mosk looked at that curved sword – kh’anzar? – blinking at it. He’d never seen Eran properly use it. Had he killed many people before he’d wanted to kill Mosk?

Augus’ compulsion, when it came, rang out clear and true: ‘ You do not see us, and you will continue to run away from this place for as long as you can.’

They all got out of the way as the drums came closer and the Unseelie fae fled past them. Mosk didn’t know if they’d heard Augus at all. Though they definitely didn’t look at any of them as they passed. With the whites around their eyes, the bloodstained muzzles that some had, their monstrous maws pulled back to expose a rictus of fangs and spit, maybe they were just crazed and running.

Mosk felt bad for them. It wasn’t their fault that they couldn’t eat. Maybe the Mages were trying to destabilise the Unseelie fae. Mosk didn’t know, but he hoped his magic wasn’t being used for this.

He wished he didn’t care about it.

‘I don’t like this,’ Eran said, his voice hard, knotted. ‘ It’s not fair.’

‘I thought you didn’t like the Unseelie,’ Mosk said. His words were hollow, he knew it wasn’t really true, he was just jibing for the sake of it.

‘No one should starve to death,’ Eran said. ‘Every fae is worthy just for walking upon this earth.’
Mosk looked at Eran in confusion, and Eran stared ahead.

‘Oengus said that,’ Eran said.

And now he’s dead.

Mosk knew that he was. He’d seen the ice rip him apart, he knew that no one survived it. A Mage had sacrificed himself to save them. Mosk didn’t even know how he’d held the ice back like that. But he’d held it back long enough to get them all free, to die for them. Mosk wrapped his arms around his torso and looked in the direction of the second band of fae coming towards them. They were mostly in human-form, and Mosk guessed they might be Seelie. Or maybe a mix, unhappy with the ravening, starving Unseelie in their midst.

He stepped closer to Eran, but the proximity only lasted seconds, Eran stepped away to join Gwyn again, standing by his and Augus’ side.

Mosk stood there, feeling like they didn’t need him, like he didn’t matter. Eran still carried their pack of belongings on his shoulder, and…

Fingers splaying, then his hands clenched into fists. The piece of skull, he’d forgotten it. He’d left it in the tower.

His breath turned shallow, he heard Julvia saying something but couldn’t understand her. That curve of skull, all he had left of the people he’d loved, and he’d left it in the tower. First they were all consumed by fire, and now all he had left was consumed in ice.

‘Chaley,’ he whispered.

A glimmer of what the Gancanagh had felt. A need to get back to the tower. He hardly noticed the Seelie approaching. Heard Gwyn, Augus and Ash talking about compulsions, and then something about the light and Gwyn’s own bloodlust. He turned to look at where the portal had been, then he looked in the sunny blue sky around them. He didn’t know which way was north, there were no trees that would share that with him.

He didn’t know how to get back, he didn’t know if the ice would have absorbed it, one more casualty of its strange hunting form.

‘Who’s Chaley?’ Julvia asked, penetrating through the fog of fractiousness in his head.

‘My sister,’ he whispered. ‘I forgot her.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said, but her question was compassionate, and she was so close to him now that their arms were touching. ‘Can I help?’

‘No,’ he said.

‘Can I stand here next to you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Okay. I’ll just stand here until you send me away then.’

He stood there, his breathing loud enough, shallow enough, that she must have heard it. He felt her warmth and she could have been his sister, except he couldn’t smell the eucalyptus leaves Chaley had in her hair. Sometimes bees would fly to the blossoms that sprouted above her ears and she’d
let them crawl on her fingers and coo to them. She’d helped him right up until the end, when he’d choked on bile and soot and ash, watching her burn, breathing her in until he vomited the char of his family out of his mouth with Olphix standing mercilessly over him.

A wave of dizziness so strong that he fell to his hands and knees. His vision tilted. He felt Julvia crouching beside him, a hand on his shoulder, but he could only breathe shakily. It must have been from running so much, from the portal, he hadn’t had dizziness this bad for a few days. Small animal noises in the back of his throat. He couldn’t look up, there were footsteps pounding towards them, wasn’t he supposed to be afraid for his life?

Wasn’t he anyway?

Then footsteps far too close, and he was backing away on his hands and knees and it was Eran’s voice coming through the fog of his thoughts and he couldn’t look up, couldn’t move his head, the grass and twigs beneath his vision swirling, whirling together.

A high pitched ringing in his ears, and he threw up the little sap he’d had that morning.

‘He said something about his sister,’ Julvia said above him, over the curve of his spine.

‘Shit.’ Mosk didn’t know why Eran was swearing, and he didn’t know why Eran wasn’t out there with his kh’anzar, when the footsteps, the drums, it was all coming closer. But then Eran was running off again, and Mosk supposed he had more important things to do.

Really, they all did. Everyone but him. He’d told everyone his secrets and now they could dispose of him if they wanted.

It’s what he would’ve done.

The smell of carbon in the air – like lightning – the sound of screaming, and Mosk looked up dazed to see Gwyn stepping forwards, sword in one hand, light arcing from the other. Everyone else was standing back, and Mosk blinked his blurred vision clear enough to see the people who were running towards them dropping, one after the other.

When some of the soldiers started running away, and only a dozen or so were left, Gwyn’s light seemed to short out. It flashed brightly and then Gwyn shoved his hand forward like he was calling more of his light, but nothing happened. A roar and Gwyn moved to using his sword, both hands on the hilt, and Mosk must have misunderstood what was happening, because Gwyn obviously didn’t need that light to decimate everyone remaining.

Violent sprays of blood, Gwyn’s instrument better suited to hacking, slicing and splitting instead of stabbing. Mosk couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw Gwyn’s blunt fingers slam directly into someone’s neck, hooking in deep. One moment a soldier standing, the next, gouts of blood and a spine wrenched out from the inside, Gwyn’s hand covered in muck.

In less than five minutes, everyone was dead. Gwyn was saturated.

‘Holy fuck,’ Ash whispered. ‘Thanks for all the dead bodies, Gwyn.’

Gwyn didn’t seem to have heard. He dropped his sword and stared at his hands in bewilderment.

He looked to Augus.

Mosk’s ears were ringing, but he managed to push himself upright, the worst of the wave passing. As he locked his knees beneath himself he was surprised to see Gwyn stagger forwards, both hands pressing into his chest. His eyes were very wide now, and his mouth had gone slack.
'Gwyn?' Augus said. 'What is it? Gwyn?'

Gwyn wandered away from them, pushing his hands out, and then Mosk couldn't see the expression on his face. Could only see the way his shoulders tensed, his fingers splayed, and then after a minute, Gwyn dropped his arms and turned back. His fingers were half-curled at his sides, he stared at nothing for a long time, and Mosk took an absent step towards that, because it was so familiar.

Then he was by Eran's side, Julvia flanking him, and Augus and Ash were there too. It was Augus who walked to Gwyn, staring up at him.

'Gwyn?'

'It's gone,' Gwyn said in wonderment. Then, amazingly, he laughed. The sound was louder than Mosk expected, freer, and Augus directed a look at Ash that was made of pure alarm. 'It's gone.'

'What's gone?'

'I can't make it anymore,' Gwyn said, looking down at his hands. 'I can't even feel it there. There's nothing to feel. Do you think Oengus took it? No, he couldn't have. This can't be good, but I can't…'

Shaky, loud breaths, and then Gwyn laughed again and gripped Augus by his shoulders, getting blood and gore all over his clothing.

'It's gone!'

Augus stared up at him for a long time. Mosk expected him to say: What's gone?

Instead, he said: 'Your eyes, they're bluer.'

'What's going on?' Eran said, his voice demanding. Everyone ignored him. Gwyn jerked at Augus' pronouncement and raised fingers to the undersides of his eyes, painting little dots of red beneath the spackles and splatters already there.

'This is bad,' Augus said. 'Gwyn, I-

'I've never felt like this before,' Gwyn said, breathless, giddy. 'I've never- Is this what it's like all the time?'

'What?' Augus said carefully, like the whole situation was fragile. Even Mosk could feel it. Something was wrong. The King wasn't acting like himself. Mosk didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

'To live without so much pain?' Gwyn shook Augus by the shoulders, hard enough that Augus hissed and brought his fingers up, digging his claws into Gwyn's forearms. They stared at each other.

'By the gods,' Augus said slowly, 'how...how much pain were you in?'

'I didn't know!' Gwyn said, stepping back, looking at his hands, looking to his sword on the ground. 'And it's gone! Do you think it's gone for good?'

'Gwyn, we need your light,' Augus said. 'It can't just be gone.'

'It's gone!' Gwyn said stridently. 'And we don't need it. I didn't use it for a long time. We don't
need it now.’
‘If you would just listen to yourself, and–’
‘We never needed it,’ Gwyn said firmly. ‘I never needed it.’
‘It’s your core power, Gwyn, it can’t just go. This is magic at work, to weaken you! To–’
‘Then they’ve failed, haven’t they?’ Gwyn said, his voice abruptly hard. ‘They’ve failed! I’m stronger than before, I’m in less pain, I have never ever felt anything like this. It’s good that it’s gone. I’ll be able to concentrate better, work harder, and–’
‘Your eyes are very like your mother’s,’ Augus said sharply. ‘A familiar blue.’
An abrupt silence, and the air tensed and stilled around them. Gwyn stared at Augus like what he’d said was a betrayal. It was Ash who walked up to them both.
‘Hey guys, this is obviously something we need to talk about? But how about we get the fuck out of here on account of all the fucking murder and running for our lives and shit that might happen if we stay? Yeah? Especially since we kind of have to do everything on foot right now? Mosk’s looking kind of peaky.’
Everyone dragged their eyes away from Gwyn and looked at Mosk instead. Except for Gwyn, who stared down at his bloodied hands.
‘What just happened?’ Eran whispered, less of a demand this time, and more outright confusion.
‘I’ll tell you later,’ Mosk said automatically. He thought he understood it, based on rumour and hearsay, based on the way Gwyn stared at his hands as though he’d been given a gift when anyone else would have felt cursed.
Mosk’s powers were taken from him and he was unmade by it. Gwyn’s were taken from him and he laughed as though he’d never truly laughed before. But some powers didn’t feel good to carry, and he’d heard bits and pieces about a celestial light that in its Unseelie manifestation, turned a King’s hair paler than it should be, his eyes watery-blue instead of bright, burned the hairs from his skin and rendered him a pale ghost, as though the light was trying to eat him from the inside out.
Gwyn’s eyes were bluer. The azure was striking, handsome, and lent him a razor focus that was even more frightening and somehow less warm than before.
Mosk swallowed and decided that Augus might be right to be worried. For Augus hadn’t lost his concerned expression at all, his eyebrows knitted together, his mouth pressed into a thin, disapproving line to see the King so full of wonder and hope.
*
Gwyn knew where they were, which Ash, Eran and Mosk found amazing. He immediately started striking out into the landscape, pointing ahead of them.
‘The sea is that way,’ he said. He looked to Augus grimly. ‘Not a good place for you.’
‘Generally not, no.’
‘Julvia, if you fly up ahead, north-east, you’ll find several chains of lakes with waterfalls. Usually one of them is maintained as neutral territory. Can you find which one it is?’
'Yes, Your Majesty,' Julvia said, and without another word she transformed – clothing turning into feathers – and launched herself into the air in a way that no real swan could without water to assist them.

Gwyn kept his sword out, occasionally batted at flies and gnats that came to sup on the blood that coated him, and he kept to a pace that Mosk struggled with. Mosk kept his head down and focused on the back of Eran’s shoes, panting, and no one slowed down for him. His fingers kept straying down and touching his empty pocket. He’d left the piece of bone right there next to his bed so he could look at it every night. Maybe it was morbid, but it was all he had left.

He felt ill. He stared down at the ground, following, and wished he had one of the shackles around his wrist and a chain connecting him to Eran. That way he could half-close his eyes and not to think about anything at all.

The whole world was too sharp, too much. He’d only just started feeling settled down in the tower and now it was gone.

Endless walking he could do, even when he felt like he couldn’t. He let his eyes half-close anyway, his breathing ragged, and no one slowed down. He wondered why they even kept him around anymore.

*

He heard the waterfall before he saw the pool it spilled into. Moss-covered trees surrounded them, reaching dark, leafy heads up to the sky. Their thick glossy leaves trembled in the cool breeze as the sun began to set. They’d been walking for hours. Mosk knew they probably hadn’t covered that much ground. What if the Unseelie fae came back? What if they were ambushed?

Why does it matter?

He fell to his knees, placing a hand out, then decided it wasn’t worth kneeling and lay face down on the cool pebbles and grass. Someone knelt next to him and placed a hand on the back of his neck, he jerked away. That hand came back and touched his forehead. It wasn’t Eran’s hand, their skin was too cool.

‘Without horses to ride, he’s not gonna fare well. Though he doesn’t have a fever or anything.’

‘Fae world, Ash,’ Augus said from nearby. ‘He doesn’t get fevers.’

‘Ah, cool, I forgot.’

It was Ash checking on him. Mosk wondered where Eran was. It was tempting to roll onto his side to look for him but he didn’t want to see the trees, he didn’t want to see the waterfall. He didn’t want to see Eran hardly paying him any attention. He closed his eyes and shivered, then couldn’t stop shaking. His hand opened and closed, then went down to his pants pocket where he’d had the curve of bone for so long before he’d dared to set it on his bedside table in King Oengus’ tower, which had stood for millennia upon millennia. He felt nothing in his pocket except a loose thread and squeezed his eyes shut.

It didn’t matter. She’d died over a year ago. She was dead. He didn’t even know if the piece of skull belonged to her, he’d just had a feeling. That was all. A stupid feeling.

The shaking didn’t stop, and eventually the dizziness dove for him, hungry and relentless. He felt his eyes roll back in his head. A gasp so strong it hurt his throat, and then nothing.
When he came to, it was dark. There were blankets over him but he was lying on the ground. He could feel a hand resting on his arm, fingers curled, warming him. A fire crackled nearby and Mosk needed a minute to just listen and see if it was a large fire, but it wasn’t. The hand on his arm squeezed gently, and behind that, noise separated into distinct voices. He opened his eyes and saw the fire in the corner of his vision. On the other side of it, Gwyn leaned against some rocks – cleaned from the gore he’d been covered in before – and Augus was eating deep green plants that looked like waterweed of some kind. Ash was snacking too. He couldn’t see Julvia, and he knew it was Eran beside him now.

He stayed silent and didn’t shrug the hand off his arm. It was gentle, but not too gentle.

‘There’s more food,’ Augus said, pointing at something and then nodding towards someone – maybe Julvia? ‘Eat while you can. The fae that lived here cultivated a great deal to eat.’

‘I wish it was neutral ground,’ Julvia said sadly, ‘I can’t tell the difference anymore. Do you think the fae will come back?’

‘Maybe,’ Augus said. He shook his head and sighed. ‘We’ll deal with it, if it happens.’

‘I don’t understand how Oengus couldn’t tell us the ice was coming sooner,’ Eran said from next to Mosk. ‘A Mage like that… Surely he should be able to tell?’

A long silence between them, only the sounds of the waterfall, the fire, the glossy leaves above.

‘I don’t know what happened,’ Gwyn said eventually. Augus and Ash turned to look at him. ‘I can’t believe…’

‘It found us,’ Eran said, his voice softer than before. ‘It found us.’

‘It did,’ Augus said. ‘I think it may be wise to assume we’re being hunted. Or that one of us is being hunted.’

Augus’ eyes met Mosk’s open ones. He didn’t say anything, even though he must have known Mosk was awake. He handed a pile of something green to Ash, who went to refuse it, but Augus just picked it up and placed it squarely on Ash’s lap where it squelched into his jeans. Ash sighed, took it up and began eating it. More wet plants.

Mosk’s stomach growled softly.

‘Maybe it’s not even hunting us,’ Eran said softly. ‘If it’s Mosk’s heartsong, maybe it’s trying to get back to him. Is that possible?’

Could it be possible? Was Mosk putting them all in danger, just for existing? He smiled bitterly into the blankets that hid the bottom half of his face and closed his eyes. That seemed like something he’d be capable of. A killer without knowing he was a killer, a conductor of the ice plague without being able to feel it or know it was there.

‘Everyone keeps dying,’ Eran added a few minutes later, his voice weaker than before.

‘It was a great sacrifice,’ Gwyn said heavily. ‘He even put us closer to our destination. I did say I wanted to visit the Seelie Court. Though we still have some way to go, and we’re too close to the sea here. There is spill-over conflict all along the coastline with the tensions between the sea fae and the land fae, since Albion became King.’
‘What?’ Eran said. ‘Why?’

‘They want the land,’ Gwyn said. ‘The sea fae believe it’s their right to have more access to the land near the Seelie Court, and Albion let them believe they have that right. Unfortunately, many mer-fae are more practiced at war than land-fae, and the battles and skirmishes have gotten ugly.’

‘Battle is always ugly,’ Julvia said. ‘It must be very bad for you to find it so, Your Majesty.’

‘It is,’ Gwyn said.

‘I liked him,’ Eran said, his voice small. ‘Should we have a moment of silence for him? Or a ritual? Do you not…do anything for your dead? Can we not do something? We shouldn’t just go on our way and never speak of it again, should we? You and he fought together in battle, Gwyn. And he gave us all hospitality and food and his home. He gave his life for us.’

A long silence. Mosk was surprised that Eran wasn’t shot down, but at the same time he felt a strange tightness in his chest on Eran’s behalf. What would they even do? Mosk hadn’t done anything for his family. When dryads died, they tended to transform into trees and give their life-force to the tree they became and never turned back again. It was common to visit the tree, to speak to it, to hang flower garlands around it and press loving palms against the warm bark and think fond thoughts towards the heartwood. When the tree died, the wood dried by the elements, some of it would be harvested to make something in the house. A chest, chairs, a cabinet. The entire home Mosk had once lived in, filled with the wooden bones of his ancestors.

‘What would you suggest, Eran?’ Augus said.

‘If no one else has any ideas…’ No one said anything. ‘Does anyone have anything from him? Some food? Or something they could give to a fire?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, immediately. ‘He- There was an altercation, and he apologised by giving me some fruit and grain he’d grown in his orchard. Will something from that suffice?’

‘Yes!’ Eran said. The sound of bodies shifting, and Mosk opened his eyes to see Eran leaning across the fire. He looked at what Gwyn offered up in his hands, and plucked up six stalks of wheat with his fingers. He then looked at the others and looked to Mosk, stilling when he saw that Mosk’s eyes were open.

Eventually he took a deep breath, turning to the flames and placing his other hand directly into the fire. Mosk watched in amazement as the flames turned blue, but the fire seemed to burn no hotter. Julvia made a small sound of appreciation.

‘Our friend and guide, King Oengus Og, died today,’ Eran said, his voice clearer and steadier than before. Mosk saw the firelight limning his brown skin, his eyes brighter, the flame casting blue shadows. ‘He gave his life for us and will be remembered by many, though only we had the honour of witnessing his last minutes. This wheat, grown on King Oengus Og’s own land, represents the generosity he showed us in a time of great need, to Unseelie and Seelie fae both. I give it now to the fire. May the sparks fly up and join the stars, so that when we look up, we shall remember his generosity always.’

Eran slowly lowered the hand with the wheat directly into the fire. The unhulled wheat popped in the blue flames, and sparks gathered up one by one, hovering in the air until it seemed there were hundreds of them. At once, they flew up towards the stars, and everyone’s faces turned up to watch them go.
Mosk watched Eran’s face.

‘By the warmth of this giving flame,’ Eran said, his voice thicker than before, ‘we observe a moment’s silence to remember the warmth he also gave us. By all the true hearth fires in our realm, may he be well-remembered by those who hold his last moments in their minds.’

By all the true hearth fires… So not all the fires in the world, not the destructive ones, but the ones designed to be about home and family. Mosk didn’t know how he could watch and not feel paralysed with fear, but he felt a strange breathlessness instead. Mosk didn’t seem to be the only one taken with what Eran was doing. Gwyn was watching with a fixedness that was almost alarming, Mosk wasn’t sure he’d blinked at all. Augus’ expression had softened, and Ash’s eyes were sheened. But he had a small smile on his face all the same, something gentle and good.

Minutes passed, and eventually Eran cleared his throat and leaned back from the fire, shaking flames from his fingers. They clung to him, wriggling like tadpoles, and he laughed softly as he let the last ones go.

He came back to Mosk’s side and after a pause, placed his hand on Mosk’s arm again, squeezing firmly. Mosk took a deep, shaking breath and wondered if Eran felt bad that he’d been awake to see the fire ritual.

‘Well, fuck,’ Ash said, clearing his throat. ‘I wish the Gancanagh had been here for it. That was really… Like, thanks for that.’

‘I wanted to do it,’ Eran said.

‘You may find yourself doing it a lot, on this journey,’ Gwyn said.

‘Don’t sugar coat it or anything, man,’ Ash muttered.

‘No, I…’ Gwyn sighed. ‘It was a lovely thing to do, and I’m grateful.’

‘We don’t have any death rituals,’ Augus said thoughtfully. ‘And common fae tend to just leave bodies on the ground to be absorbed by the earth.’

‘We do water burials,’ Julvia said. ‘Of course it was too late for me to do anything, when I came back to myself. But I still went to the river Dubna and did the best I could. It helped. Gulvi came too.’

‘She never told me about that,’ Gwyn said.

‘I don’t think she told anyone except Ash and Fenwrel, so that they knew where we were going,’ Julvia said. ‘But it was good. One of the few times she and I have seen eye to eye! They’re so rare.’

The conversation moved onto talking about Julvia and Gulvi’s sibling relationship, and Mosk felt himself drifting a little, still feeling queasy from everything that had happened. Eran’s arm resting on him seemed okay. It wasn’t a gentle touch, it wasn’t a deliberate caress, it was more like Mosk was a convenient prop for Eran’s arm. It was tolerable like that.

‘Is your light really gone?’ Eran said abruptly, cutting through the conversation and speaking directly to Gwyn. ‘Shouldn’t we be more concerned?’

‘Maybe,’ Gwyn said. ‘But I spent most of my life not using it, and the War General who was undefeated in all of his campaigns is the same War General who didn’t start using that light until about ten years ago. But who can I ask, Eran? And who is the likely culprit? If they think it a
disadvantage, then they do not know what that light is like to live with.’

‘What if he wants to *use* it?’ Eran said insistently. ‘Like they took Mosk’s power and shut down *teleportation*. What if it’s…? You have no idea what it’s for. Shouldn’t you be more worried?’

‘Yes,’ Augus said slowly, looking at Gwyn. ‘Shouldn’t you be?’

‘What good will it do us to sit here worrying about it?’ Gwyn said sharply, glaring at Augus. ‘Do you want to sit here and agonise about it over the fire? Should we hold a minute of silence for it? It is *good* that it is gone. Yes, I want to know what happened, but I’m in no rush to get it back.’

‘Did like *any* of us know how much it was hurting you?’ Ash said, looking at Augus.

‘I didn’t know!’ Gwyn said. ‘Maybe Olphix is taking powers to stop the plague of ice, or mayhaps-’

‘None of this is like you,’ Augus said. ‘Think logically for *one second*, oaf, if you can manage it? They had to be close to Mosk to strip his magic from him, and it took *days*. *So how-* Ah, the *headaches*. It was so unlike you to get so many. And they’re gone now?’

‘…Yes,’ Gwyn said slowly. ‘But it doesn’t matter. It’s-’

‘Will you *listen* to yourself?’ Augus said abruptly, sitting up straight and staring at Gwyn in disbelief. ‘Did they remove your good sense, too? Have you been brainwashed? Or are you such a *coward* that instead of confronting this head on, you’ll run from reality if it gives you a chance to live without something that is *innately yours* anyway?’

‘Augus,’ Gwyn said firmly, his eyes darting across the fireplace, ‘not now.’

‘Then *when*, perchance?’ Augus said. ‘Should I try to *fuck* it into you? Or would you prefer some other method that returns you to common sense?’

‘Augus,’ Ash said, sitting straighter, reaching an arm out towards him, but Augus shifted away.

‘No, this isn’t one of those ‘Augus, be nicer’ times,’ Augus said. ‘We are running for our lives. Ash and I can’t feed! And you, *Your Majesty*, are sitting there quietly thrilled that you don’t have your light anymore instead of seeing it for the danger it is. Meanwhile, the last time I saw eyes that blue, I had my hand in your mother’s viscera, watching the light fade from them.’

Gwyn stood up swiftly and walked away, quickly making ground past Eran and the rest.

‘Gwyn!’ Augus shouted. ‘It’s not safe, and you don’t have your light to protect yourself. Don’t be a fool.’

‘I’ll be whatever I like,’ Gwyn shot back.

It didn’t take long before his footsteps faded.

‘It was maybe one of those ‘Augus, be nicer’ times,’ Ash said eventually. ‘Like, because he just fucks right off sometimes. Just because you’re hungry, doesn’t mean-’

‘I am rightfully concerned,’ Augus said. ‘Fenwrel would be the same, and Gulvi. The only reason none of you are reacting any differently is because you don’t understand the magnitude of Gwyn not responding to this properly. Think about how upset he was when his armour wasn’t returned to him by the Seelie Court, now think of how he’s reacting to *this*.'
‘How did he react to that?’ Eran said.

‘Yeah, none of us know how he reacted to that,’ Ash said, stretching. ‘That’s the thing, Augus, there’s still a lot I don’t know, and I’ve lived with him for a decade. These guys here don’t know much either. Also, should I like…go after him?’

A pause, and then Augus shook his head. After a moment he stood and brushed off his pants.

‘I’ll do it. The good news is he can’t just teleport away like he used to, I suppose,’ Augus said.

And then it was only the four of them. Julvia said she was going to get ready to sleep, sounds of shifting beside them, and Eran and Ash faced each other across the fire.

‘I feel like I don’t know anything about Gwyn,’ Eran said. ‘The more I find out, it’s like… Augus says he was tortured by his family. That his mother made him pretend to be Seelie. But then why didn’t he say so when he was older? Why didn’t he try and do the right thing?’

‘Parents can make it seem like the wrong thing is the right thing, sometimes,’ Ash said. ‘If they’re cruel enough. Sometimes even if they aren’t, y’know, they’re your parents and you want to listen to them. You were lucky, Eran, in that your parents wanted good things for you, in a way that was good for you. But, fuck, a lot of people don’t have that. Imagine if, from the day you’re born, you have a mother telling you that she hates you, or a father that would dislocate your limbs when you’re only three years old? Tell me that wouldn’t shape how you see the world?’

Eran was silent for a long time.

‘It would change how I see the world,’ Eran admitted. ‘But you become the measure of yourself as you grow away from your parents into adulthood and maturity. I can understand centuries of hanging onto something, but Gwyn is three thousand years old. So…why not later? Was it because Crielle was in the Court? Everyone I’ve talked to who seems to know about it keep saying it was her Court, and not his.’

‘I wasn’t there for that part,’ Ash said, shrugging. ‘So I don’t really know. Unseelie fae don’t think of these things the way Seelie fae do, either. Gwyn was trying to survive in an environment where he knew he’d be killed for telling the truth. Maybe you think the honourable thing would be for him to die for the truth? But y’know, him…being Unseelie and not telling anyone isn’t the whole truth. Should he also die for his mother’s lies? Or his father’s? Like, how much do you put on a child just because the Seelie need a scapegoat?’

‘But he’s not a child, he was King. He’s still a King,’ Eran said.

‘He didn’t want to be King of the Seelie and he doesn’t want to be King of the Unseelie,’ Ash said. ‘And Gwyn is kind of still a kid, when it comes to some things. Which, I dunno, might be hard to see or imagine, but it’s still true. It’s not like we just get wiser with every year that passes, sometimes you just get stuck and nothing changes for millennia, yeah? You know that, you would’ve seen fae like that.’

Eran’s hand was slowly squeezing Mosk’s arm through the blanket. His fingers would clench over time, then release, then clench again. Mosk wondered what expression was on his face.

‘Also,’ Ash said, his voice quieter than before, now competing with the sound of the waterfall. ‘It’s… I don’t know much about it, but Gwyn tried to tell someone when he was a kid, apparently. And it activated a blood oath, and basically it was bad business all round.’

‘Children don’t make blood oaths,’ Eran said. ‘Wait- Did his parents…? But they’re Seelie!’
‘Well, that’s the thing, Seelie aren’t always good and Unseelie aren’t always bad. You know better than that.’

‘Yeah, okay, so some Seelie can lie and some Unseelie won’t murder you but that’s – what you’re talking about – is a whole other level of… I mean I…’

‘And that’s why the Seelie can’t really wrap their heads around what happened,’ Ash said. ‘I mean they don’t have all the details for a start, and then when you do start to get all the details… Trust me, it was hard for me to understand how awful his upbringing was and I still don’t know the full picture.’

‘They made him blood oath to not tell anyone he’s Unseelie? As a child?’ Eran said in horror. ‘They really did that? I’ve never heard of anyone, in either alignment, doing such a thing.’

Mosk hadn’t heard of it either, and he hadn’t known any of this. He knew bits and pieces, and he certainly knew that the story was more complicated than what the Seelie and Unseelie would have people believe but this… He’d never considered that he would have anything in common with the Unseelie King before, because Gwyn was – well, he was Gwyn ap Nudd, extraordinary warrior and War General and more, and Mosk was nothing at all…

But Mosk could relate to being made to agree to things as a child, and he felt a strange kinship with the fae who had just marched off into the dark after being compared to his mother.

‘I have to ask,’ Eran said, ‘I apologise for being offensive, but you don’t think…he’s lying about those things?’

‘I’m sure,’ Ash said.

‘He’s very clever.’

‘I am one hundred percent fucking certain,’ Ash said. ‘I’d swear on Augus’ life about it, but I’d hope you wouldn’t need that at this point on our journey.’

‘Wow,’ Eran said under his breath. ‘Shit. Maybe that’s why my father was…I mean after the mutiny, he was like- All his attitudes changed. He always spoke about him like he was…I dunno, worthy.’

‘I’m certain Ifir didn’t know,’ Ash said. ‘But there’s other details that have come out over time, and I don’t know what Ifir and Gwyn talked about. I tried to stay out of that after fucking things up.’

‘Fucking what things up?’

‘Ha, well, the mutiny was something…I kind of caused?’ Ash said. ‘But that’s a story for another day.’

‘You incited the mutiny against Gwyn? Were you a member of his Inner Court at the time?’

‘Yep,’ Ash said.

‘I…” Eran sounded completely perplexed now. ‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘Let’s just say you’re not the only one that had real fucking difficulty trying to understand who Gwyn was, or where he was coming from. And you weren’t the only one who thought he was a son-of-a-bitch traitor, once upon a time. I will freely admit I was completely wrong to go so hard down that path, and so I dunno man, it’s easy to see it in you. Obviously you’re way less hard-
headed than I am because you started to change your mind just by being around him. It took me nearly ruining my life and the people’s lives around me – and some people dying – to see the truth. It’s tempting, right? To think there’s just layers and layers of lies when it comes to Gwyn and his life? But actually if you just think ‘abused kid still trying to figure shit out,’ that’s pretty much…
the sum of it.’

‘So like Mosk then,’ Eran said. ‘Not actually being behind the plague of ice despite insisting he is. Like that.’

‘Well, do you trust that?’ Ash said.

‘Yes. I do.’

‘Then yeah, like that. Except imagine that Mosk is also made King against his will. There you go.’

Mosk wanted to argue against what Eran was saying, but he didn’t want to let go of this quiet, non-verbal space he’d stolen. They were all pretending he was still asleep, even though he was certain they all knew he wasn’t. Eran’s hand was on his arm, his warmth by Mosk’s side. The fire wasn’t doing anything it shouldn’t be doing. Mosk could even look at it sometimes without feeling horrified. He thought of blue flames, sparks wheeling up to the sky, wheat popping in the fire.

It seemed…familiar, even though he’d never seen anything like it. Eran doing rituals around fire felt right.

‘Anyway,’ Ash said, standing and walking towards the row of tents that Gwyn had set up, ‘I’m done for the night. Julvia, I know you were listening, do you want me to get you to a proper bed?’

‘Yes, please,’ Julvia said politely from the ground.

‘Yeah, thought so,’ he said, smiling tiredly. He walked over, picked her up, and then walked to one of the tents and closed the flap behind him.

No one talked. The waterfall poured steadily, splashing into the pool that belonged to an Unseelie fae that might be starving to death. The moss-covered branches of the trees creaked and waved in a wind that seemed wild up above, but they were screened from it on the ground.

Eran sighed after a moment. He lifted his hand, and when his fingers tried to brush through Mosk’s hair, Mosk jerked away from the touch, flinching.

‘Okay,’ Eran said. ‘Okay. I’m going to try doing it again.’

‘No,’ Mosk said.

‘You said you were curious about the truce, remember?’

‘I wasn’t curious about anything,’ Mosk said. ‘Not any of your stupid utopian visions for the future, you idiotic’

He hissed when Eran’s fingers came down and touched his hair again. Squeezed his eyes shut and felt something almost unbearable tingling across his skin. He locked up, finding it hard to breathe, and had to stop himself from lashing out when he felt Eran’s fingers start to move across his scalp, twist through his hair. The twisting continued, and Mosk’s eyes opened when he felt Eran carefully knotting his hand into Mosk’s hair, pulling it tight. The sense of gentleness went away, even though Eran had done it all with great care.
Now he could feel a dull pain in his scalp, and faint stinging here and there. The pull on the top of his head moved down his neck, he could feel it in his forehead. He blinked, feeling stupid, but didn’t feel the urge to run away.

‘Yes?’ Eran inquired.

‘Maybe,’ Mosk said, his voice slower and quieter than before.

‘I think yes,’ Eran said, sounding smug.

‘Shut up.’

‘Okay,’ Eran said, letting his fingers loosen and sliding them gently free. Mosk shivered, blinking at nothing at all, unable to concentrate on what they’d just been talking about, on what they’d run from, even the fire. ‘I’m going to do it one more time, and then we’re getting you to bed.’

‘Not you?’

‘Someone needs to be on watch until the others return,’ Eran said. ‘All right. Gently first, remember? You can do this.’

Mosk couldn’t stop himself from flinching again when Eran slid his hands back through his hair. His fingertips coasting over Mosk’s scalp, his thumb now rubbing the back of his head. Mosk’s hands clenched into fists, his breathing turned tight. He kept waiting for Eran’s fingers to tighten, but it seemed to take forever before they did. That thumb kept caressing him, each movement deliberate and slow. Just as he made a strangled sound, torn between allowing it and wanting to scream, Eran’s fingers began twisting his hair up again, tightening the skin of his scalp.

Muscles began to relax, his breathing came easier, his chest felt less tight. Mosk shuddered, unable to believe that Eran could do this with just one hand, the hair on the top of his head. Mosk had been fucked by countless fae, and a lot of them had pulled his hair, but none of them…

He wanted to say that he didn’t understand, that he didn’t know how Eran could do this, he didn’t understand why it worked, but he said none of those things. Eran kept that tight grip in Mosk’s hair, and Mosk breathed through it, feeling more goodness in it than anything he’d felt in a long time. It was like the ropes, but different from the ropes.

‘Good?’ Eran said.

‘Mm,’ Mosk managed. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I think it’s good. But I’m going to stop now.’

Mosk almost asked him not to, as Eran slowly moved his fingers away again. Almost asked him to do it again, but the words choked up in his throat. What if he asked for it and then hated it? What if Eran did it a third time and it was too much? Mosk just stared blankly at the fire ahead and felt his hair and how it was different now. Shaped by Eran’s hand.

‘It’s thicker than I thought it would be,’ Eran said.

‘It grows straight up,’ Mosk said.

‘Still, thicker. How are you feeling?’

‘I don’t know.’
‘We can work on that.’

Work on what?

‘Thank you,’ Eran added, ‘for letting me do the fire ritual. I know that must have been uncomfortable for you.’

‘Oh.’ Mosk’s fingers curled and uncurled. He was being thanked for it? Did Eran really expect him to make a mess of things?

Isn’t that what you do?

‘I didn’t realise you were awake until the last minute, and then I thought it was too late to back out of it.’

‘No, um, it was fine,’ Mosk said, swallowing. ‘I mean, it was… It was a nice thing to do for Oengus.’

‘You think so?’

‘Yeah,’ Mosk said, clearing his throat. ‘It was nicer than doing nothing. Even though it doesn’t matter. And we’re all going to die anyway.’

‘Ah, there it is,’ Eran said laughing, squeezing Mosk’s arm. ‘It’s okay, Mosk. I won’t tell anyone you’re starting to care about things again.’

‘I’m not,’ Mosk said, annoyed at the way Eran made light of it, annoyed at the idea that he was starting to care about things again, when it would only make him hurt in the long run.

‘I know,’ Eran said. ‘I know. I won’t tell anyone. It’ll be our secret. Besides, I don’t blame you, Mosk. It hurts to care about things, right? Sometimes I think you have the right idea.’

Eran fell silent then, and Mosk didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t imagine an Eran who didn’t care about everything too much, and he’d spent some time telling Eran he was stupid for doing it but…

What if Eran stopped doing it, or didn’t want to anymore?

‘I don’t know about that,’ Mosk said, and closed his eyes as Eran rubbed his upper arm, warmth and comfort and something hard to take all at once. He never thought he’d be glad to have Eran with him on this strange journey, but he was.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, ‘A Bad Turn:’

‘I just really don’t want to do anything that hurts anyone,’ Ash said quietly. ‘Y’know? I’ve had a lot of practice doing that, and I just… Isn’t there anything I can do?’

‘Ash, I think we’ll understand that if Olphix calls in his open debt, you won’t have a choice. It won’t be like before.’
‘But if I was in hiding, or…’

‘Augus would never accept that,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I don’t think there’s any ‘in hiding’ from Olphix, I’m sorry to say. No, if you stay here, perhaps we can work out some kind of non-verbal signal in the hopes that if Olphix swears you to secrecy, he does so forgetting hand-signals. I’m not hopeful. He likely knows what he wants to use you for. Ash, it’s done now. There’s no point fretting about it.’

Eran didn’t think that was true at all. He exchanged a long look with Ash, who seemed to feel exactly the same way.
Over the next few days, they travelled together. Julvia was sent out to scout on occasion, but it became obvious that she only had so much physical stamina, and Eran was surprised to see Gwyn spell her out into periods of rest. It was obvious that Gwyn wanted to be the one scouting ahead when he told her to rest, but all had agreed that it was best when Gwyn stayed with the group to keep them safe. Instead, Augus went.

Augus, who could turn invisible. The first time Eran saw him vanish, his heart leapt, thinking Augus had teleported. But then Ash laughed with his hands in his pockets and said:

‘Man, I’ll never get used to that. A waterhorse with invisibility? That’s not supposed to be a thing. How does the song go? The things you do for love? Something like that.’

Gwyn and Augus seemed to be in bad spirits with each other the rest of the time. They hardly ever talked, and it didn’t feel like the companionable silences they’d held in the past. It was obvious Augus was more upset about Gwyn losing his light than Gwyn was, and that Gwyn was in turn upset that Augus wasn’t happier for him. Ash tried to start conversations between them, but often ended up rambling to himself until Eran or Julvia saved him.

The absence of Gwyn’s light showed itself in ways that made Eran realise how caustic it had been. First, a rich golden stubble, darker than his hair, that caught the light and glittered at certain angles, making him look older and gruffer. It suited him. Then, Eran realised the base of his hair was growing out darker too, that same gold.

One day, Augus lifted Gwyn’s forearm and looked at it, and then looked at Gwyn.

‘Body hair,’ Augus said as a statement.

Gwyn nodded like he knew already, but Eran caught him touching the stubble on his face frequently. Rubbing at his forearms. Stroking his chin and jaw.

As they travelled, they came across fae that were hostile towards them for just being there, who recognised Gwyn and wanted him dead, who recognised Augus and wanted him dead, or who wanted to feed and thought they’d be a good fit. So far Ash had smoothed them all over with his dra’ocht, which was nothing short of miraculous. Anyone who came towards them with ill intent, went away thinking they’d made a new band of friends.

‘Won’t they come back?’ Eran had said. ‘Won’t they just come back?’

‘Maybe,’ Ash said, ‘but I’ve been doing this for a long time. I mean, using my glamour this way
for a long time. It’s not really...convincing them of something super false. It’s more just showing them inside themselves that they don’t have to hate a band of random fae who aren’t doing anyone any harm. So later when they feel less friendly towards us, they might not hate us, y’know?’

Eran was pretty sure that wasn’t how glamour was supposed to work, and Augus frowned at him.

‘You can do that with fae?’ Augus said.

‘Oh, I don’t fucking know,’ Ash said, laughing. ‘We’ll find out, bro!’

On the sixth night, Eran went with Ash and Gwyn to hunt some food. Apparently Ash knew how to fish, and Gwyn knew how to lay traps, though this evening he was out with throwing daggers. Eran had borrowed three. He wasn’t as good with daggers as with javelins, since they needed to be thrown differently due to their weight, but he was confident enough that he could ask for them, and Gwyn handed them over.

Ash caught several fish, and Gwyn landed a small deer, the dagger thocking into its eye at the perfect angle just as Eran had raised his, having only just seen it. He hadn’t even heard Gwyn approaching. They decided to butcher the deer away from the camp, in case the odour of blood and guts attracted any danger.

As Gwyn skinned the animal with efficient knife cuts, peeling back the skin in a way that looked like he was going to keep it and treat it – even though that was impossible – Ash watched, looking troubled. At first, Eran had just thought maybe Ash was uncomfortable with the violence of it – he didn’t like to eat people, after all – but then:

‘Gwyn, have you...been thinking about the debt I have? You know, the open debt?’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said. Then he cut the skin free neatly, laying it down on the ground, before beginning to cut away sections of muscle. Eran frowned.

‘Don’t you gut it?’

‘We’re not keeping the whole deer,’ Gwyn said, more patiently than Eran expected. ‘We’re not taking all the meat, as much as I’d like to, and this is expedient. You don’t always have to gut anyway. It would be different in the desert, where meat spoils faster and you have less trees to hang animals on to drain the blood.’

‘Yeah,’ Eran said, staring. ‘We gut and pack it, and then dress it and stuff at home.’

Eran wanted to give it a try, but Gwyn made the whole thing look so easy. Did he still hunt meat for himself? He certainly looked like someone who did. Even the way he arranged the muscle in the waterproof basket, he did it like he went hunting every day.

‘I have been thinking about it,’ Gwyn said, looking at Ash. ‘He can’t ask you to do something that will betray your Soulbond to Augus. He can’t ask you to do something fatal to one of us. But beyond that, there is tremendous room for movement. I dislike that he can call in that debt whenever he likes.’

‘Do you think it’d just be better if I wasn’t here, and didn’t know where you guys were?’ Ash’s voice was smaller than normal. ‘Like, I don’t want to put you all in a ton of danger. I’ll leave if you...want that. And logically…’

‘Sometimes it’s not always about logic,’ Gwyn said, not looking up at Ash or Eran. ‘Also, I think I want you right where I can see you, if you’re asked to fulfil a debt. Though if he swears you to
secrecy as part of the debt itself, it won’t mean much.

‘I keep hoping he’s forgotten,’ Ash said.

‘Unlikely. But so do I.’

‘Yeah, fuck,’ Ash said, laughing quietly. ‘This sucks.’

‘Who…do you have an open debt with?’ Eran said tentatively, not wanting to disturb their conversation in case they closed up, but also feeling like maybe they knew perfectly well that he was there and didn’t care to stay quiet about it anymore. Over the last few days, it seemed like there had been more acceptance of Mosk and Eran. Even Gwyn seemed more aware of Mosk and Julvia’s stamina, and rested them more often during the day.

‘Olpix,’ Ash said.

Eran felt the surface of his skin turn cold, the inside of his guts flash hot. He stared at Ash in shock, feeling like it was terribly dangerous just to be around him.

‘Yeah,’ Ash said, nodding at Eran’s expression. ‘See? Sucks.’

‘That’s…’ Eran couldn’t think of what to say. ‘Why would you make-? Why?’

‘He kind of pretended to be someone he wasn’t,’ Ash said, dragging a hand through his hair and leaning against a nearby tree. ‘I mean, I needed to try and make sure people wouldn’t just randomly assassinate my brother all of the time. So, welp, there was a Soulbond.’ Ash turned his forearm up so that Eran could see the smattering of that strange glinting blue, and the charcoal black stains on his skin. Eran had seen it before. He even knew what it was. It seemed like everyone knew the story of the brother who loved his ne’er do well older brother so much, he’d risk his life for a Soulbond to vouch for him. He’d never thought about where Ash got it from. Just…some Mage.

‘And it was Olphix who gave you the magic?’ Eran whispered.

‘Uh huh,’ Ash said. ‘We didn’t realise for like a year. He called himself Firebeard, and I didn’t think about it, and no one else really thought about it, and then as they made more trouble for us it all kind of clicked together. By then it was too late, the debt had been made and blah blah blah. But he hasn’t called it in yet. Gwyn has said that by like, debt rules, Olphix can’t ask me to kill my loved ones, he can’t ask me to betray the Soulbond, and he can’t ask me to do something that will kill me. But anything else is fair game.’

‘He can ask Ash to lie, to deceive, to create obstacles,’ Gwyn said, nearly finished – the basket was nearly full – and still not looking up at them both. He seemed totally focused in what he was doing. ‘Sabotage. A lot of things are on the table. Inconvenient things.’

‘Yeah, a fair fuck more than inconvenient I’d say?’ Ash said.

‘We’ll deal with it,’ Gwyn said.

‘I’m just thinking that maybe-’

‘We’ll deal with it,’ Gwyn said, looking up firmly, azure blue eyes glinting. Eran didn’t think he’d ever get used to how blue they were now, even though the pale had always been so jarring. This fit even less. Gwyn seemed more confident ever since his light had vanished, it was bizarre. ‘Ash, listen, it’s too late now. What’s done is done. Besides, I think it’s good for Augus that you’re here.’
‘I dunno about that, I just eat all the food. He just keeps pushing it on me and even Julvia, because he takes her health super seriously. If there’s enough food to divide equally, he never gives himself enough. Have you seen how little he’s eating?’

‘I…yes,’ Gwyn said, wiping his bloodied hands on the grass and picking up the basket. ‘Yes, I have. I can get him to eat more. But outside of that, he’s more protective with you here, and I think that makes him inclined to behave with more care towards the both of you. Augus can be prone to fits of recklessness, and I think… Besides, I know why you decided to come with us. I could have disallowed it. I chose not to.’

‘I just really don’t want to do anything that hurts anyone,’ Ash said quietly. ‘Y’know? I’ve had a lot of practice doing that, and I just… Isn’t there anything I can do?’

‘Ash, I think we’ll understand that if Olphix calls in his open debt, you won’t have a choice. It won’t be like before.’

‘But if I was in hiding, or…’

‘Augus would never accept that,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I don’t think there’s any ‘in hiding’ from Olphix, I’m sorry to say. No, if you stay here, perhaps we can work out some kind of non-verbal signal in the hopes that if Olphix swears you to secrecy, he does so forgetting hand-signals. I’m not hopeful. He likely knows what he wants to use you for. Ash, it’s done now. There’s no point fretting about it.’

Eran didn’t think that was true at all. He exchanged a long look with Ash, who seemed to feel exactly the same way.

It was hard to tell the difference between Gwyn’s cavalier attitude since losing his powers, and what was just how he was before.

He’d have to tell Mosk about this later. Though Mosk possibly wouldn’t care.

Mosk was often so exhausted from travelling that he could hardly talk at the end of the day. Eran knew the difference between Mosk going off in his own mind because he was checking out, and just being so fatigued that he needed to rest often.

Yet it was impossible to ignore how things were changing between them. Small moments where Mosk made eye contact more often, or where he actually volunteered sentences and tried to talk with him. That morning, Eran had quickly stoked the fire with his hands for breakfast, and Mosk had flinched away, but he hadn’t averted his eyes.

Eran remembered the feel of Mosk’s hair through his fingers, stronger and sturdier than he’d expected. It was much healthier than it had been when Eran had touched it back when he’d captured Mosk. It was gaining more of what must have been its true colour. What had previously been a pale brown base, was now pale green, like new grass shoots. What had been pale green before – the vast majority of his hair – had darkened into something glossy, darker and rich. Eran found himself jealously wishing that his own hair grew out in the colours of fire.

Mosk was getting stronger, too. His stamina was much better than it had been in the beginning. He ate more, and the night before Eran had counted it as a small triumph when he’d seen Mosk pawing around in Eran’s bag until he’d found a canister of sap for himself. It was the first time he’d ever looked for his own meal. Eran wanted to grasp him by the arms and shake him, so excited at the milestone. But Mosk wouldn’t have appreciated it and, well, knowing him, he probably would then refuse to eat out of spite or something.
Dreams, when they came, were either the nightmares he’d grown accustomed to since losing his family in the ice, or they were strange soft things featuring Mosk. Eran would wake up hard and a little embarrassed, not entirely sure if he was happy with what his brain was conjuring. Mosk was broken and maybe didn’t even really like sex. Eran had made him come once, but that had been a very strange circumstance. Eran had offered the truce and in response Mosk had asked him to just...force touch on him? Sex? Gentleness?

Forcing gentleness didn’t sound like it made much sense, and it was so unlike any other connection he’d had with any other fae. He wondered if his mother would frown to see him with Mosk now, if she would say that there were plenty of other scorpions in the desert if Eran desired to be stung.

Maybe he liked that too, the dangerousness of it. He was afrit-ambaros, wasn’t he? While he’d never say as much to Mosk – who would likely be deeply offended by the suggestion – sometimes being with him felt like playing with fire in a way that would get him hurt.

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It was well past midnight, and Augus had dragged Gwyn back to the tent, stating in no uncertain terms that Eran could handle standing watch for half an evening while Gwyn protested that he was fine for what seemed like his fourth or fifth night without any sleep.

Eran sat before their trio of tents – one for Mosk and Eran, one for Ash and Julvia, one for Gwyn and Augus – with his fingers on the hilt of his kh’anzar and his eyes surveying the dark. Taking watch was a big responsibility and he took it seriously.

Mosk, on the other hand, sat cross-legged and occasionally drank sap from a canister. The rest of the time, he plucked strands of grass up from the floor, making a little pile. If anyone else was doing it, Eran wouldn’t think much of it, but he wasn’t sure how he felt about a dryad doing it.

‘That’s…’ Eran said, looking down at the pile of the grass. ‘Should you be doing that?’

‘There’s no law against it,’ Mosk said.

‘Sometimes it’s actually hard to remember you’re technically an adult, and not a five year old.’

‘I’m not technically an adult,’ Mosk said, laughing bitterly under his breath. ‘No Aur tree, no golden eyes, it doesn’t matter if I live to be thirty thousand, by Aur dryad standards I’m immature.’

‘Does it influence anything?’ Eran said. ‘Are you physically a child still?’

That had never occurred to him, and no one else seemed to treat Mosk that way. A few seconds later, Mosk shook his head.

‘No,’ Mosk said. He sighed. ‘I suppose not. But there are a lot of cultural roles I can’t perform without having an Aur tree. And... that doesn’t matter anyway, because the Aur forest is dead!’

Mosk looked up, his smile bright, brittle and crumbling even as Eran saw it.

‘Couldn’t… Would it be possible to make another one?’

Eran knew it was doomed even before Mosk scoffed, even before Mosk’s shoulders hunched.

‘Can you make another Court?’ Mosk said quietly. ‘Would anyone come? If it doesn’t have that sacredness around it, in it, waiting for monarchs to sit within it? Could I find all the seeds of all the trees, or the corms and roots and those that magically appear in the ether and aren’t even birthed by
anything except the rarest of magics, and could I somehow treat the soil of one land, so that it comes to reflect the soil and weather of all landscapes? Could I grow Arctic species of every kind of pine, and then a day later reach a forest with lava trees?

Mosk’s voice broke, and he dashed the pile of grass apart with his fingers.

‘Could I do that when I can’t even speak to trees anymore? To coax their seeds from the fists of their cones? Could I talk to the tree to learn how healthy it is? To see what it carries? Could anyone? The story never said the Aur forest was made, it just appeared. Even if I tried to do it, could I do it, really? I don’t even want to. I don’t want to make the shadow of something, I wouldn’t even try and feel proud of it. Could you make your mother again? From the bones of stones and dead things? Would you pour your blood into a sack of skin and call it her? Because it looks like her? It’s not the same.’

Eran wondered how he’d feel if it was Kabiri who had been killed, but even that wasn’t the same. The way Mosk talked about it broke Eran’s heart, but also made him understand how much it wasn’t just…a bigger forest than other forests. Mosk had resided in something hallowed, as though a god had been born in the fae realm and gave its entire body to the Aur dryads. And then a Mage had callously destroyed it, turning a family against its son in the process.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eran said. ‘You’re right. It’s not the same.’

‘But maybe even if I could do it,’ Mosk said, ‘I don’t know if I would. I don’t know if I’d bring that back into this world. You don’t think the ice will just eat everything one day? We’re going to die.’

‘No,’ Eran said, staring back out into the shadows. ‘We’re not.’

‘You can’t just say words like that and make it so.’

‘You can’t just tell me we’re going to die, and make it so,’ Eran retorted quietly. ‘You know that’s true. You have been wounded sorely by life, for many years, but that doesn’t make you right about this. Just because you have more experience with living through wounds than most, doesn’t mean you can point at life and tell me it’s wounded, and will die. You’re not dead yet. You’re not a prophet.’

‘I’m not anything,’ Mosk said, a refrain which was common, and always annoyed Eran.

‘Am I talking to a ghost then?’

‘Might as well,’ Mosk said.

As though Mosk’s words brought it, there was a strange crunching sound in the distance, like a bone breaking. Eran’s eyes moved towards those shadows immediately, but he couldn’t see anything different. Nothing was out of place. He watched it like a hawk for some time, and even Mosk had fallen quiet. Ten minutes passed, broken only by night birds singing, the sound of the wind around them. Nothing else happened, and Eran decided it must have been some animal.

‘Tell me something,’ Mosk said. ‘About your home.’

‘So you can make fun of it?’ Eran said, his words far sharper than he meant them to be. He forced himself to take a deep breath, surprised by the rush of anger.

‘No,’ Mosk said sullenly. ‘Just because.’
'Yes,' Eran said. ‘Okay. Well. What though? Anything…in particular?’

‘You went hunting today with the others. Did you hunt back home?’

‘Yes,’ Eran said, turning and smiling at Mosk briefly. Mosk’s eyes widened at that, as though he’d not expected Eran to do anything except be annoyed at him. Or maybe he was surprised that Eran had good memories of his home still. Eran didn’t know.

‘When we’re little, if we want to hunt, we’re taken out on hunting trips to see how it all works. When we’re about nine, we’re paired with a kratel gazelle. They are – oh – there’s nothing like them. They’re large enough to ride like a horse, but the gait is different, and they have these large spiralling horns that seem to touch the stars when you’re looking up at them. And of course if you’re riding one and it doesn’t like you, and it throws its head back, you can be injured!

‘So when we’re nine, we’re paired with a kratel gazelle that is about the same as us, in terms of maturity, and we have to make friends with it. Of course, that year, all the does had so many fawns, because the rains had been generous in the deserts and many had twins and old Viashan had triplets. We help them raise their fawns. We’ve been doing it that way for so long. But there were just too many, and I kind of ah, well, I liked a lot of them? And so I sort cheated?’

‘You cheated?’ Mosk said. ‘Can Seelie even do that?’

Eran laughed. ‘No, not in the way you’re thinking. I mean not all Seelie. I couldn’t cheat someone out of their money or anything. But this is a different kind of cheating, I suppose. I sneaked more than one kratel gazelle into my room at night, so they had a warm bed, and honestly, it gets so cold in the desert – even when you’re a fire fae! – and it’s nice to have the heat of them against you. I had only just gotten my own room in the cliff, I suppose I was lonely.’

‘You adopted more than one baby gazelle?’ Mosk said, a small smile on his face. ‘How many?’

‘Five,’ Eran said, his cheeks heating. ‘I bonded really strongly with two of them. Roshni and Laleh. But I loved them all. And I was running around like crazy, trying to get them all enough supplementary food since they were only just starting to wean. And so there I was like, suddenly tired all the time, and sleeping through lessons, and not able to look after my younger sisters properly, and my parents are getting really angry like, ‘Eran Iliakambar! Why are you shirking! We didn’t raise this kind of child!’ And there’s me, so ashamed that I was keeping all these baby fawns in my room at night, under my blankets, I think I had fleas at one point…? Because we have a medicine we give them to keep them at bay, but I only had enough for one fawn, and not five. I even thought about stealing more, but that’s… I couldn’t do that.’

‘Too Seelie for that,’ Mosk said, his eyes livelier than before.

‘Far too Seelie,’ Eran said, shaking his head. ‘Of course it couldn’t last. I was having nightmares each night. What happens when they let me hunt, and I want to ride five gazelles instead of one? So one night I just felt too bad about it, and I went to my parents late at night, when my brother was away and my sisters were asleep, and all these little fawns followed me, obedient as you could imagine, nuzzling into my palms. And I’m like, ‘I may have made a mistake.’’

‘Did they punish you?’ Mosk said, sounding apprehensive. ‘Were they very angry?’

Eran thought back, he could almost feel those little noses in his palms and the way their little nubby horns would press into his skin. They smelled of grass and milk and musk, and their lanky legs went everywhere.
‘I thought they were very angry,’ Eran said. ‘But even at the time, I think I saw the way my father’s eyes were laughing. The way my mother had to leave the living space – I think to laugh. I thought she was ashamed at first. She came back and said to him: ‘He’s like you, Ifir.’ And I didn’t know, truly, but my father had done the exact same thing as a child. Though only four fawns. Not five.’

‘Because that makes all the difference,’ Mosk said quietly, and Eran smiled at him.

‘They did punish me. I had to look after all five of them and keep up with my chores and responsibilities until they were old enough to look after themselves! It was a hard lesson, but a good one. You don’t take responsibility for something unless you’re willing to see it through to the end. You don’t offer care just because it seems like a fun thing to do in the moment, or because tiny little faces are tugging at your heartstrings. You…commit to it. That’s what care is. Not just one moment of sharing your bed with some weanlings, but doing it even when you’re tired and have too many chores.’

Mosk fell silent, and Eran leaned back, still looking out into the shadows, still keeping his hand on his kh’anzar.

‘It was a good lesson,’ Eran repeated. ‘And my mother helped me. My father did too. In the end, I bonded to both Laleh and Roshni. I used to do a lot of night-riding with them. It’s hard you know, to learn how to ride an animal that can gut you if it turns its head against you. They have to trust that you know where you’re going, you have to trust that they aren’t going to suddenly rear and shove their head back, and get their horn in your throat. It takes a long time. A very long time. It’s harder to learn to ride them, than it is to learn to hunt.’

‘The girl gazelle have horns too?’ Mosk said. ‘Not just the boys?’

‘They both grow very grand horns,’ Eran said warmly. ‘Antelope does don’t always grow horns, so that’s how you can tell an antelope from a gazelle. Mostly. Kratel are very fast. Horses seem very fat and ungainly by comparison, but I’ve ridden one now, so I think I can see the appeal. A very smooth gait!’

Mosk rocked on his hips and carefully pulled together all the strands of grass he’d previously scattered with a sweep of his hand. Eran watched him, feeling warmer for having told the story. Mosk didn’t seem harmed by it either. Eran found it strange that Mosk seemed to like those stories. How did they not remind him of the things he didn’t have? The love and support that was missing from his life?

But it wasn’t that simple, Mosk had loved his family, even as Eran thought he’d been failed by them.

‘I never thought you’d like hearing about it. My…home.’

‘I like how you talk about it,’ Mosk said quietly, without looking up. He ran a nervous hand through his hair, and then shrugged. ‘It sounds…warm without being burning.’

‘Do you think it’s your way of trying to overcome your fear of fire?’

‘What? No,’ Mosk said, looking up. His eyes narrowed. Eran realised Mosk wasn’t trying to overcome his fear of fire at all. It was something else that Eran thought he understood, but wasn’t sure. He could never be sure with Mosk.

Staring at him, he ached to have him somewhere private. Eran didn’t even know what he’d do.
There was something in that rebellious, spiteful gaze that seemed to be daring him all the time, and Eran swallowed and forced himself to look away, because he felt like Mosk would dare him into dangerous acts.

‘You’d be hard-pressed to find a dryad that liked fire,’ Mosk muttered. ‘Don’t you hate water?’

‘No,’ Eran said, laughing. ‘You’ve seen me bathe in it, haven’t you? Wash our clothes in it? Did it seem like I hated it?’

‘But you’re a fire fae.’

‘I mean, I don’t like it when it’s humid all the time,’ Eran admitted. ‘But I’m not afraid of that, it’s just uncomfortable. And I can’t live in the water, but nor can you. I suppose…it’s because I have fire inside me. So even when I’m bathing, it’s still there. I’m not made of actual fire.’

‘It’s in your eyes sometimes.’

‘But it’s inside me. It’s not…’ Eran tilted his head, thinking, and then saw a shadow flit across his vision so quickly that he was on his feet with his kh’anzar out before he’d processed what he’d seen.

Everything seemed normal, but the hairs on his entire body were standing on end, and Eran knew to trust those instincts. Something insidious nearby. Then, a faint sound of wet chewing nearby. From above? He looked up and saw nothing. It sounded like something feasting hideously on raw meat.

He turned to look at the basket of meat they’d collected, and it was overturned. But he hadn’t heard it. He hadn’t even seen it happen.

He took several small, silent steps backwards. He raised his finger to his lips when he looked sidelong at Mosk.

Mosk, who had frozen, nodded, eyes wide.

Eran pointed to Gwyn and Augus’ tent.

Go. Get them, he mouthed.

Mosk hesitated for a long time, as the leaves made normal sounds and the shadows pretended to be normal shadows. Eran’s heart was in his throat. Something bad was out there, and he could tell from the look on Mosk’s face that he knew it too. Eran swallowed and called his inner fire closer to the surface of his skin. He wouldn’t shift unless he had to. He hated his true-form. But if a monster was coming towards them, then he would give it one in return.

Mosk was not silent as he moved quickly to the other tent and pulled the flap aside, but he was too exhausted, and Eran didn’t blame him. Eran edged closer to the overturned basked of meat. They’d cooked a lot of it that night, but some had been left in a basket with spells upon it to keep the food fresh. One of the biggest hunks of meat was gone.

Eran’s ire rose. He didn’t like this at all. Whatever had stolen from them had been stealthy, sneaky, and he didn’t like the feeling of being stalked.

His anger was bright, but the sense of the realm and the shadows looming upon him only grew until he felt small. He wondered if it was some predatory thing’s glamour. His palm turned sweaty against the handle of his kh’anzar, he swallowed again, looking around.
A child’s laughter, high-pitched and eerie. Eran knew of stories about things that lurked in the dark, things that play-acted at being children.

His stomach turned, his whole body broke out into a cold sweat that made his fire move, agitated, inside of him. But he was afraid.

Another burst of laughter from the other side of him, and as Eran turned to face it, weapon out, something launched at him from the opposite direction.

Eran’s reflexes were fast, but even then he was hit hard by something that smelled fetid and disgusting. His mouth opened, a tiny hand slapped onto his throat, and he felt his fire lock up inside of him even as a burst of rancid, meaty laughter sprayed into his face.

‘Bitch, you thought,’ the thing squeaked.

Eran blindly struck out with his kh’anzar even as the creature hopped away, moved too fast and unnaturally along the ground, and then turned and leapt again, Eran lashed out with his weapon, feeling defenceless, and then-

Gwyn was there, standing between them both, his sword out.

‘Do you mind?’ Gwyn said, sounding so exasperated that Eran thought he was being lectured for not being strong enough, for not being good enough to be on watch. His fingers were at his throat.

The creature had done something to him, to his fire. He opened his mouth and exhaled a cold stream of smoke.

‘I’m hangry,’ the thing said, its voice like that of a demented nine year old girl. Its mop of short, uneven, dirty red hair had flies clinging to it like black and brown beads. ‘Gimme some lovin’, cowboy. Not the kind you have with that pony, though.’

‘Are you okay?’

Eran jumped, turning in shock, to see Mosk standing there, his own eyes still wide, his eyebrows knitted together. Eran nodded, but Mosk’s expression didn’t change, and Eran didn’t take his fingers away from his throat. Had it hurt him? Was he hurt? He called his fire up and it responded, but something was wrong.

‘It was just the tip,’ the creature said. ‘That’s all. You know how it is. Gwyn, I’ve been looking for you, but fuck me if you’re not a hard one to find.’

And then it was standing there, head coming up to Gwyn’s waist, legs crouched and arms slightly bent like it was ready to spring, and Eran knew exactly what had found them.

*The Nain Rouge.*

‘By Kabiri,’ Eran breathed.

They were going to die.

‘Did she hurt you?’ Gwyn said, turning to look at Eran briefly.

In those seconds, the Nain Rouge leapt at Gwyn, laughing manically. Gwyn snarled and grabbed her by the arm, and then threw her away like she was vermin.

‘You give me an opening and sweetie, I’m gonna take it,’ she said, getting up like it was nothing.
‘I’ve missed you so much. I just wanted to give you a kiss.’

‘You’ll get no powers from me,’ Gwyn snapped.

‘Because you aint gonna let me? Or because you aint got none?’

Gwyn stilled, and the Nain Rouge fell down on the ground and started laughing. Her broken, crooked, miscoloured teeth were bared, her face covered with the brown and black stains of dried gore, offal and dirt. All of her furs were mismatched, ragged, uncured. The only fresh one was – Eran realised – from the deer that Gwyn had hunted that very day.

‘You aint got none!’ the Nain Rouge laughed, and then kicked her legs, exposing scratched, stained legs. She jumped to her feet and clapped her hands together, even as Augus joined them. Though he held no weapons, he looked ready to fight.

‘Eran,’ Gwyn snapped. ‘Answer me.’

Eran jerked, trying to remember what he’d been asked. Had he been hurt?

‘She did something,’ Eran said. ‘With her hand on my neck.’

Gwyn swore in another language, even as the Nain Rouge turned her hand palm up and smiled cheekily at the little dancing flame she called there.

‘You as good as gave it to me,’ the Nain Rouge said, ‘shining like you are. God, it’s like candles want to go out sometimes. Fuckin’ A. But, being honest now sweets, stealing your powers isn’t why I’m here. Hey, guess what, Gwyn? Do you know? Do you know that the classless have all just lost their fuckin’ powers? Me even. Well, I didn’t lose all of mine, but that’s because- Actually, you know what, I want asylum. There. I said it. You gotta protect me now.’

‘Because you’ve always needed so much protection,’ Augus said.

‘Bae, don’t be like that,’ the Nain Rouge said. But it was Gwyn she kept staring at, and he returned that gaze steadily. Eventually, to Eran’s complete surprise, Gwyn lowered his sword.

‘How much information do you have?’ Gwyn said.

‘Everything,’ the Nain Rouge breathed. ‘I am so here to do you a bad turn, Darkness. I’m here to negotiate.’

‘A higher status?’ Gwyn said. ‘You’re already Capital. You think I should make you Inner Court? The last time a King did that, you openly mocked his stupidity. How stupid-? No, don’t answer that.’

‘You need what I got,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘And I need some things from you. I’m obviously not human-side, and I will eat and eat and eat while I’m on this side, and you don’t want that. I’m a very hungry caterpillar, and everyone around me has the nicest things to slurp up. If you don’t want me to be a cunt, then you’d best buck up and talk, Fucko.’

Eran couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He’d only heard bits and pieces about the Nain Rouge. That she stole other people’s powers. That she was feral and unstoppable and one of the oldest of evils. That she couldn’t be killed. That she struck fear into the heart of all fae.

And there was Gwyn, staring at her like she was an annoying child, and he was a tired, exasperated parent.
Eran felt like his world had been turned upside down.

‘Can you eat Olphix’s magic?’ Gwyn said eventually, smiling darkly.

‘If I could eat magic, you think we’d be in this fucking mess in the first place?’ the Nain Rouge said, her eyes narrowing. ‘Get out of here with that ignorant shit. You being three thousand years old and knee high to a grasshopper is half the reason we’re in this mess. But unfortunately you don’t get a Yoda, you get me. I happen to like destroying the fae realm in my own damn time? I hate feeling rushed. And fuckboys like Olphix ruin everything for everyone. Capisce?’

Then Gwyn was talking to her in another language, and the Nain Rouge threw her hands in the air and exclaimed:

‘It’s a fucking piece of American slang you fucking shithead! Not an excuse to start talking Italian at me! God! You overachiever! Ugh. Ugh. I hate it here. I hate you all. You’re all goddamn stuck in the 1800s while some of us actually learned what a vending machine was ugh.’

‘Seems you need our help more than we need yours,’ Gwyn said flatly.

‘She does seem stressed,’ Augus said, bored. ‘Honestly, she’s Capital status. Just mark her down to underfae and get it over and done with already.’

Eran, for some reason, expected some kind of retort in that language that made references to things he didn’t understand. But instead the Nain Rouge just turned to Augus and stared at him for a very long time. After a while Augus cleared his throat and took a step backwards.

‘Yeah,’ the Nain Rouge said darkly, her voice sounding much older than it should. ‘That’s what I thought, fuckstain. Get out of here with that shit.’ She turned back to Gwyn. ‘If you think that me being hungrier, angrier and more desperate than usual is gonna make me roll over and show my belly, I think you need a mirror for all that damn projection, and I’m gonna play you for the fool you are. You lost all your light, didn’t you? But I didn’t lose all my shit. Don’t you wanna know why? Or would you rather I just fuck you up with what I got left?’

Gwyn appeared to be thinking that over, and the Nain Rouge sighed.

‘Alrighty-roo. Guns before bros, ho.’

She took a metal weapon out from under the furs, and even as Eran tried to understand what it was, she lifted it and did something and two explosions filled the night.

Gwyn staggered backwards, his hand going to his torso, and Eran was left staring at the back of Gwyn, where a whole wad of flesh had just been blown away and there was a gaping crater left. He was pouring blood.

‘That’s not helpful,’ Augus snapped.

‘Isn’t it?’ the Nain Rouge said, staring at Gwyn. ‘You want some in the head next? I don’t have that many bullets left but this is so worth it. It’s gonna take a long fucking time for even your pipsqueak brain to grow back, dipshit, so are we gonna negotiate? Or am I gonna make you into broccoli so I can eat the powers of all your Carebear friends here?’

Gwyn was gasping. Eran didn’t even know if he could talk. Eran also didn’t like the way the Nain Rouge looked past Gwyn and winked at him, like it was a game, like she was just waiting for an opportunity to steal the rest of Eran’s fire.
Eran trembled.

‘Fine,’ Gwyn said, one of his knees buckling. ‘Let’s talk.’

‘Oh yay!’ the Nain Rouge said, sounding even younger than before, bouncing on the balls of her feet and clapping.

Eran bit the inside of his lip, his fear not having vanished, and he was shocked when he felt a hand resting on his upper arm. He turned to see Mosk staring back at him, and couldn’t think of what to say, what to do, as the King of the Unseelie poured blood, and one of the greatest evils in the fae realm delighted before them.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Like Batteries:'

‘Welp,’ she said finally. ‘Whatever. We’ll see. So anyway, Mages need power, right? Olphix and Davix play the longest fucking games. It’s so boring. Like, ugh. But they needed power to steal and they were running out of sources. Basically they needed like, a new storage system. So what if they made this status of fae that y’know, kind of avoided company, had a fuckton of power, and they just…left them there for when they were ready. Didn’t you wonder why Davix was so fucking enthralled at that Coalition of the Classless meeting? He wasn’t excited about a treaty, fuckface, he was excited to see all that power there that he was gonna drain dry one day. We’re a storage system. The reason you lost all your light and I kept some of my shit, is because any fae that had the classless mojo cast on them – it’s random as hell by the way, well, sorta – and were alive before the spell existed, couldn’t lose all of their powers. Anyone born after? It’s all gone. They have it now. Davix and Olphix have your light, and you know what they can do with that.’
They sat around the fireplace, and Eran’s skin hadn’t settled at all, his body still painfully tense. It wasn’t right. The Nain Rouge just squatting there, while Gwyn bled and sipped at some vial of potion that Augus had demanded he take. Julvia emerged from the tent first, pausing when she saw the Nain Rouge, but then joining them at the fire, her large wings folding around herself for warmth.

It was Ash that shocked him the most.

‘Hey, Granny,’ he said sleepily, rubbing at his eyes. ‘Get stuck here too, huh?’

‘Don’t call me that, ingrate,’ she muttered, biting down into another raw hunk of meat and chewing it loudly, mouth open. Eran swore he could smell the rot in her breath from where he was sitting.

‘So Gwyn’s been shot,’ Ash said, looking like he was waking up all at once. ‘Guess I know who did that.’

‘Natch,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Now settle down, peeps. I got a fuckton of knowledge to drop on y’all. But first, I want Court status.’

‘And then, the world,’ Ash said jokingly, and the Nain Rouge just looked up at him like she was tired of him already. Ash sat next to her, apparently unbothered by how terrifying she could be, and stretched his hands out towards the fire.

‘Is there any point even arguing with you?’ Gwyn said. His voice was strained, but even though Eran knew Gwyn must have been in shocking amounts of pain, he behaved like he just had a stomach ache that was worse than usual. Eran didn’t understand it at all. He had holes in his body. He couldn’t fight like that. Not properly. Eran felt for the first time that their party – even with Gwyn ap Nudd among them – might not be enough to take what could be thrown at them.

‘Nup,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Until you upgrade to automatic rifles, you’re screwed. I mean swords, really?’

‘It’s oddly never a problem until I have to deal with you,’ Gwyn said.

‘What do you want me to say? Touché? Nah, bruh. Have some concrete from your sippy cup and harden the fuck up, more like. Think how hard it is for me! Think of all the quality memes I’m missing out on! That’s true cruelty. I’m gonna get back, everything’s gonna be different.’

‘If you ever get back,’ Gwyn said far too calmly given his hands were covered in blood.
‘Fam, you say that like your walking dildo over there isn’t gonna die from it. That’s cold. You’re a cold motherfucker, Glowbean. Or are you so far up your colon in denial that you just keep forgetting?’

‘Excuse me,’ Julvia said very politely, ‘but I don’t understand a lot of what you’re saying sometimes. Is that because you’ve lived in the human realm for so long?’

The Nain Rouge looked at her, thin eyebrows moving together, as though she didn’t quite understand what was happening. She tilted her head, and then finally looked over at Augus, and then shrugged.

‘Cute,’ she said. ‘Barf.’

She picked up the hunk of meat and bit into it, tearing a strip off and swallowing it whole like Eran had seen carnivores do. She didn’t even chew that piece.

‘Ima talk quick,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Because this is bad times to be in the fae realm. Olphix and Davix, hoo boy. Hoo boy. Strongest Mages in the world, yadda yadda yadda. You probably don’t know anything about them, because you’re three thousand, which means you were born after they lay all their spells on the world.’

‘I’m older than the King is,’ Julvia said.

‘Not old enough,’ the Nain Rouge said, ‘if you don’t remember a time when classless fae didn’t exist, Presh.’

Eran blinked, and then found himself leaning forwards, staring at her. What did she mean? Classless fae had always existed. They had always been in the tales – the fae that had status and yet were somehow outside of having status – and- He froze when she clocked him with a stare and smiled at him.

‘Candle, you are tasty,’ she said. ‘Lean closer. Come on. Over the fire. I know it won’t hurt you.’

‘You will though,’ Eran said.

‘Are we flirting?’ the Nain Rouge said, as Eran recoiled. ‘Is this-?’

‘When classless fae didn’t exist,’ Gwyn said sharply. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘See?’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘You need me.’

‘I will change your status after, if I think your information is good enough,’ Gwyn said. ‘You should know that I’m not one to back out of a deal.’

‘All that Seelie granola goodness inside of you,’ the Nain Rouge said. She glared at him for a long time, and then shook her head sharply, dislodging some flies. ‘Yep yep yep, okay then. Shit where to start, I hate story time. I’m not a goddamn Bard.’

‘Classless fae,’ Gwyn said. ‘They didn’t exist. Apparently.’

‘Oh you’re gonna play that? Like I allegedly don’t know what the fuck I’m talking about? They didn’t exist! They break all the fucking rules! Here’s the deal. Once upon a time, none of the formal statuses existed as they do now. And then two fucked up Mages came along and thought wouldn’t it be hilarious if there was a class system so that they could go up and down the ladder and see what all the classes were like.’
‘No,’ Gwyn said.

‘When you have Mages like those two- It’s bad enough when you get one. But when they pool their powers together, when they steal powers from other beings, they are powerful enough to put spells over the entire world. They can only do it every now and then, and they have to steal a lot to do it. Each time they make a big-ass change, they put a curse down on everything that lives. Nothing – or just about nothing – can break that curse. Even me, Glowbean. It’s only when the curse is broken, that we can talk about it. And this year? The Mages are preparing for something new, because a lot of those curses have broken, fucking finally.’

‘Or they broke because Davix is dead,’ Augus said.

The Nain Rouge scoffed. ‘He ain’t dead.’

‘He is,’ Gwyn said soberly. ‘The person who killed him sits with us at this fire.’

The Nain Rouge looked first to Eran, but then her lips pursed and her gaze slid to Mosk. She stared at him for a long time. Eran turned to look at Mosk, he wasn’t even returning her gaze. Eran didn’t even know if he was listening to the conversation happening around them.

Eran could tell that the Nain Rouge didn’t want to believe it, and Eran knew that feeling. He kept thinking that maybe there was a way Davix would return. Or perhaps Davix was just biding his time. But he could also see how a glimmer of belief entered her opaque eyes, the colour of old blood.

‘Welp,’ she said finally. ‘Whatever. We’ll see. So anyway, Mages need power, right? Olphix and Davix play the longest fucking games. It’s so boring. Like, ugh. But they needed power to steal and they were running out of sources. Basically they needed like, a new storage system. So what if they made this status of fae that y’know, kind of avoided company, had a fuckton of power, and they just… left them there for when they were ready. Didn’t you wonder why Davix was so fucking enthralled at that Coalition of the Classless meeting? He wasn’t excited about a treaty, fuckface, he was excited to see all that power there that he was gonna drain dry one day. We’re a storage system. The reason you lost all your light and I kept some of my shit, is because any fae that had the classless mojo cast on them – it’s random as hell by the way, well, sorta – and were alive before the spell existed, couldn’t lose all of their powers. Anyone born after? It’s all gone. They have it now. Davix and Olphix have your light, and you know what they can do with that.’

Everyone had fallen silent. The fire crackled. Eran wanted to stand and shout that it was a lie, that it couldn’t possibly be true. There was no way that all the statuses they had come to depend on – from underfae all the way up to Monarch – were invented by those Mages. There was no way classless fae – those magical, rare, powerful fae – were invented by Mages!

But no one else was talking, and the Nain Rouge didn’t look like she was lying.

‘So you’re basically like batteries,’ Ash said.

‘Yeah,’ the Nain Rouge said, sighing. ‘Me too, of course. I didn’t think it’d hit me so hard, and I kind of thought someone would’ve fucking killed them by now! But no one has. And obvs they’re strong now. They got- I mean you were there, Gwyn. Baba Yaga’s powers over the underworlds, the Ratcatcher’s voice, some of the Spider Queen’s everything, and just… If anyone’s going to end the world, it’s gonna be me. Out of every power they have, babe, you know yours is the one that’s the problem.’

‘I knew it,’ Augus said. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’
Gwyn still said nothing. It was Julvia who spoke next.

‘From what I understand of that light, it can destroy the world.’

‘Everything,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘Not just this realm. And I’m pretty sure those assholes can use it properly, the way it was meant to be used. Which means they can also eat the dead and decide where to send them. That’s a thing they can do.’

‘Only Olphix,’ Gwyn said finally. ‘Davix is dead.’

‘I’ll believe that when I see it.’

Eran wrapped an arm around himself. He’d had no idea that Gwyn’s light was so powerful, but he certainly understood now why Augus was so alarmed that it was gone.

‘See,’ the Nain Rouge continued, ‘when they founded the School of the Staff, I mean, they did want to teach, I guess. But also they just wanted to have their hands on every fucking Mage that passed through there, get as much knowledge as they could and still can! Kudos to being the greediest fucks on the planet, and that’s saying something. But, you gotta think with your actual head where all of this comes from. Has anyone told you what Old Lore is yet? Or is no one old enough to remember that?’

‘Jesus,’ Ash muttered, looking lost. ‘How much is there?’

‘That you don’t know? A lot,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘You don’t think it’s maybe an itty bitty bit strange that we live in this magical world, and we have all these magical creatures, and yet no fae ever talks about dragons? Y’all just kind of mysteriously forget they exist? Even you,’ the Nain Rouge said, looking at Ash. ‘Even you, who lives in the human realm and sees the illustrations? The movies and the books? It never makes you wonder? You’ve never asked the question about why we get pegasus and unicorns and griffins and more but not…dragons?’

Eran felt sick. He swallowed roughly, and then the hand around his torso came up and pressed into his chest, and the Nain Rouge was grinning at him again. This felt bizarrely personal and he didn’t know why.

‘You never wondered why Kabiri is like directly involved in antagonising all of their shit, and has been since forever? You think what, he’s just a god of volcanoes? You never think, man, wasn’t there something else?’

Gwyn’s breathing had turned shaky. They all knew what dragons were, they just never thought about them. Eran was certain of it. Somehow they all knew – though Eran couldn’t remember how he knew – and somehow it was just never important.

Except now, his thoughts weren’t glancing away from the subject like they so often did. He felt bile in his throat.

Gwyn stood abruptly – as though the wounds weren’t there at all – and the Nain Rouge cackled.

‘They told me they flew once,’ Gwyn said, his voice rough, hands pressing over his side where blood still oozed. The Nain Rouge rocked back and forth with her hands on her knees, her broken nails digging in, and laughed.

‘They fucking did! Before they were all broken down into tiny bits of a unique magic, a unique language, so that Olphix and Davix could get control over the creatures that could’ve taken them down.’
Ash was staring at the Soulbond mark on his wrist. ‘Oh shit.’

‘Are there any still alive?’ Augus said, his voice strange.

‘Nope,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘I mean I’m not one hundred percent for sure about it, but like, I ain’t seen one for tens of thousands of years. Not even a hint. And I remember what they look like, talked like, sounded like. I saw all of it. Y’all think you’re living in the first film, but this is a sequel of a sequel of a sequel, except they erased the first movies so you’d forget. They just...they do something awful, they make people not think about it, and then folks like me get mad as hell and spend the rest of our days in the human realm because what the fuck guys, who the hell would want to live here? Their magic’s not as strong there, at least.’

‘Dragons,’ Gwyn said. He turned to Eran. ‘Kabiri was a god of dragons.’

‘Fire dragons,’ the Nain Rouge said flatly. ‘There were a ton of others too. But yeah the fire dragons were the ones that had the big time magic. But it wasn’t just Kabiri, it wasn’t only the fire dragons.’

Gwyn nodded, then kept talking to Eran. ‘It means the ambaros were likely, somehow, connected to them. No wonder he wants you protected.’

‘That’s not-’ Eran said. ‘Kabiri is not…’

‘The Old Lore told me a decade ago, lying in too much blood for that much paper, that they gave me the Red Blessing. I had no idea what it meant. But they told me to pass it on to Kabiri. Specifically. I didn’t understand the connection even then. But it meant that they…the- whatever remnants of those dragons were left, had given something to me, and Kabiri changed when I told him about it. He knew.’

‘But he’s got almost no power up here,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘And obvs almost none at all in general, since Olphix and Davix committed genocide so they could yoink a new magic system to play around in. Except even that didn’t really…make the dragons obey. Whatever was left over still fought them. The Old Lore, that’s dangerous shit. Y’know Olphix and Davix are the reason the magic is banned now too? Like whoops they fucked up. Isn’t it funny, you think, that you have like...an ambaros, who were the carers of fire dragons, once? Or that you have Pony One and Pony Two, who both wear the mark of dragons on their bodies? Or fucking like, Gwyn, that you wore an aithwick in your body for three thousand years? Funny band of fae coming together against the Mages. I mean, y’know, I’d say it was coincidence except like, maybe not. I don’t give a shit. You’re all still gonna die.’

It was Ash who broke the silence, swearing under his breath and then wiping at his eyes. Tears had been falling down his face. Augus murmured something, placed a hand on Ash’s knee, and Ash just shook his head and the tears kept falling. The Nain Rouge stared at him.

‘You’re a bit too late to grieve for the dragons, Ponyboy,’ she said.

Eran pushed up from the ground, ignoring the way eyes moved to him. He couldn’t concentrate properly, and he walked with a strange calm away from the fire, into the dark, and then when he couldn’t think of where to go, he bent and gagged, his hands resting on his collarbones. The fire inside of himself felt chilled and strange, though it still came to his fingers readily enough, and it still warmed the core of him.

He wanted to believe the Nain Rouge was lying, but as soon as she’d said the word dragon, it was like she’d ripped back something inside of him and exposed a wound that had always been there. It was in how the others reacted, as though the same thing had happened to them.

But Eran didn’t remember how the ambaros used to interact with dragons. He didn’t remember any stories. He’d never seen any carvings or murals or friezes depicting them. He couldn’t stop thinking of the way Olphix – pretending to be Davix – had been so dismissive and condescending towards him, when he knew all along that Eran was under a spell that the whole world was under, when he knew that Kabiri suffered for what he had lost.

Eran breathed out smoke, a lot of it, a hard, deep rage curdling up inside of him. He wanted to fall into it. Wanted to swear that he would kill Olphix. But a sense of futility held those words back. A seventh son of a seventh son had only been able to stop one of them, and at great cost to himself. Gwyn didn’t know what to do. The Nain Rouge couldn’t stop Olphix.

Nothing was impossible, was it? Eran straightened and took several deep, unsteady breaths. He walked back to the fire, where no one was talking.

‘You all knew,’ Eran said roughly. ‘You and the other fae that were old enough?’

‘Yes and no,’ the Nain Rouge said. ‘It’s like a word on the tip of your tongue. I got exposed to plush dragons and shit over in the human realm and was like ‘I know that’ but then I’d stop thinking about it straight away. I didn’t get together with the other olds and like, shoot the shit about that spell we were under.’

‘What else have they done?’ Gwyn said, lowering himself down back into the kneeling position of before. ‘The statuses. What existed before?’

‘I mean you still had your Court and your royalty,’ the Nain Rouge said, shrugging. ‘Just…none of the level ups. Everyone was just what they were.’

‘Underfae,’ Augus said.

‘Underfae meant a different thing back then. I mean, y’all were just fae. It was such a long time ago,’ the Nain Rouge said, yawning hugely and burping. ‘Not as many fae, anyway. That was an age ago. But fae could kind of get more power through getting older, earning favour somehow, I dunno. It won’t go back to how it was. If Davix really is dead, they can’t reverse that. Those sorts of things… It needed to be them, the magic twins of douchery. Another Mage can’t meld and share their magic with Olphix the way Davix can. Could. I don’t think he’s dead.’

‘He’s dead,’ Mosk said. ‘His magic is in the ice.’

‘Hold up,’ the Nain Rouge said ‘What the fuck?’

‘Good to know you don’t know everything,’ Gwyn said thoughtfully. ‘Also, while what you’ve shared to us is news, it’s not all that helpful.’

The Nain Rouge looked at Gwyn like he’d just spat directly into her eye or something. Eran flinched backwards, but Gwyn just stared at her without blinking. Eran kept lurching between terrified, impressed, and some other nameless emotion attached to whatever she’d done to his throat, and the fact that no one was talking about it even though it had made Gwyn swear before. He wanted to know what she’d done. Taken some of his powers? But how much? Would it hurt him?

‘Wait,’ the Nain Rouge said abruptly, ‘I must’ve heard that with the ear that only hears stupid
fucking nonsense, can you repeat what you just said?’

‘We can’t do anything about the fact that statuses were fixed into place by Olphix and Davix, or
that they committed genocide against the dragons, and I can’t do anything about the fact that
Olpix has taken the powers of the classless. We seem to know more than you do, in this. We
know what is fuelling the plague of ice, and we have the person who killed Davix here with us.
You tell us you know everything, but it’s interesting learning that there’s gaps in your knowledge
too. Perhaps you’ve spent too long in the shadows or in the human realm to pay attention.’

Eran thought that if the Nain Rouge could kill with a dead, cold, empty look, Gwyn would be gone.
As it was, he wanted to edge backwards, away. He was fine fighting things he could fight,
but this was so out of his league he couldn’t think properly. Even his father was scared of the Nain Rouge.
It was the smart thing to feel.

‘I asked for asylum,’ the Nain Rouge said flatly. ‘You’re the fucking King.’

‘Then I grant you asylum,’ Gwyn said. ‘Tell me why you’re really here.’

The Nain Rouge leaned over and flopped onto the ground, and then rolled until her face was in the
dirt. Ash watched her with raised eyebrows, Augus watched Gwyn, and Eran was torn staring
between them both.

She muttered something into the ground and Eran could only make our garbled nonsense, but
Gwyn’s expression had turned vaguely triumphant and he leaned forward.

‘Could you repeat that?’ he said.

‘Walnut,’ she said, and then blew a raspberry sound into the dirt.

‘I don’t think that was it.’

‘I want to help,’ she muttered, pushing up again and staring balefully at him. ‘I want to help,
because if anyone’s going to destroy this goddamn realm it’s gonna be me. I’m tired of rude
fucking Mages – I was tired of them before your fucking ancestors existed, get me? – and I’m tired of-
Because you get it, right? If he’s just taken all the classless powers, and it’s him on his own,
well, guess who can eat powers, dickface? Who can suck all that out of him? And if you want your
light back, guess who can give that back to you?’

Gwyn stared at her, blank-faced, and Eran didn’t think that sounded like much of a solution. It also
didn’t change anything.

‘Wouldn’t Olphix still have his own magic, and Mosk’s magic, and…whatever else he’s stolen
though? Couldn’t he just steal more power?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ the Nain Rouge said, ‘somewhere in there someone’s gonna have to kill him. Maybe
tree stump over there who says nothing but apparently is a murderous little fiend or some shit.
Whatever. I get it. Silent but deadly. Like a fart.’

Mosk said nothing. Eran grimaced.

‘You’ve asked for asylum,’ Gwyn said, lifting one finger. ‘You’ve already attacked one of my
team.’ He lifted another. ‘You have a reputation for deliberately fucking things up because you feel
like it.’ A third finger. ‘And you’ve not been able to articulate clearly what you want besides
stealing the powers of all of the classless from one of the world’s most powerful Mages, and using
us to get you there.’ A fourth finger. ‘You shot me.’ His thumb. ‘You are also the Nain Rouge.’
The Nain Rouge stared glittery menace at him, and Gwyn tilted his head.

‘I want a blood oath from you, that you won’t harm my team or continue to steal their powers.’

‘Oh no,’ the Nain Rouge said, laughing.

‘That’s what I want. You thought you’d come to me, knowing my light was gone and antagonise me. You expect me to be desperate or needy for that light to return? I can take it or leave it. I didn’t use it to defeat the Nightingale – your adopted younger brother – the first time and I didn’t use it to become King on both occasions. You obviously think we have an important role in whatever is happening, drawing attention to our connection to a dead race of fae, which is obviously important to you. Are you out of practice with negotiating? I want a blood oath from you, and then I’ll consider taking you with us. Granting you asylum doesn’t mean I protect you personally, it means you get the protection of the Unseelie Court. Go there, if you want it so badly.’

The Nain Rouge was crouching, her fingers in the dirt, and she watched Gwyn like she was going to jump at him. Gwyn looked down to the wound in his side and touched his fingers to it and then lifted them, red and wet.

‘Blood for blood,’ he said calmly.

‘God,’ she said, dragging a hand through her hair and dislodging flies. ‘You’re really not like horse-breath at all. I thought this’d be easy.’

‘What did you do to Eran?’ Gwyn said. ‘How much did you take?’

‘It’s not fatal,’ the Nain Rouge said, rolling her eyes. ‘Just a sliver. I just wanted a taste. Something to fill me up after the Mages – or Mage – made me even emptier than before. He won’t notice. He didn’t even know he had that much. He won’t even get sick.’

Gwyn turned to Eran, bright blue eyes radiating nothing but command. ‘Tell me if you do.’

‘Yes,’ Eran said automatically.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ Gwyn said. ‘I want a better idea of what you’re aiming for, without a crowd.’

‘Such a trusting baby birb,’ the Nain Rouge squeaked, and then laughed. ‘Nah, sounds cool, let’s do it.’

Augus stood fluidly, opening his mouth, and Gwyn raised his hand in a gesture commanding him to keep silent. Augus didn’t exactly look infuriated, but there was something in the tic of one eye that suggested that Gwyn might pay for that later.

Eran watched the Nain Rouge and Gwyn walk off together in the gloom, and felt weak.

‘So we’re gonna lecture the shit out of him later, right?’ Ash said quietly. ‘Like, just an absolute crushing lecture about how you don’t walk off with the Nain Rouge?’

‘Mm. Something like that.’ Augus sighed. ‘He’ll be fine. He knows how to handle her almost as well as you do. They have a strange relationship. They always have. I don’t know why. It’s not like she spent any time in his Court.’ He turned to Eran. ‘Are you certain you’re all right? Here, stand and let me look.’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Eran said.
Augus’ lips thinned. ‘Stand and let me look.’

The compulsion took him by surprise. Augus hadn’t used them since they’d fled from Oengus’ tower. His body jerked upright, and he tilted his head back automatically, exposing his neck. His breath came faster. When Augus approached him, his hands clenched into fists.

‘There,’ Augus said. ‘I have no patience, Eran. None left, I’m afraid. This won’t hurt.’

One hand covering his, coaxing his fingers to lay flat, a palm resting lukewarm against his hand. Fingers gently brushing his throat. Eran didn’t feel any safer despite Augus being gentle. He jerked when he felt an energy that wasn’t his, cooler and different, but…it didn’t hurt.

‘Some people can’t feel that,’ Augus said, sounding curious. ‘Ah, I see. She was telling the truth, she didn’t take much at all. Your meridians are holding steady.’

He stepped back, and the compulsion faded as though Augus had issued a command. Eran lowered his head, his fingers curled where Augus had touched him.

‘Tell me if you feel unwell over the next few days,’ Augus said softly, turning and walking back to the tent.

‘Hey,’ Ash said, walking after him. ‘I have some spare food if you want some?’

‘I gave it to you so that you’d eat it,’ Augus said placidly, and then he disappeared behind the tent flap, and Ash stood there, clearly trying to decide if it was worth just barging in. After a while, Ash swore, looked apologetically towards Eran, Mosk and Julvia, and entered the tent.

‘He is not very well,’ Julvia said quietly.

‘Augus?’ Eran said.

‘I overheard the King talking to Augus some time ago. Augus hadn’t fed for over two months, before the ability to teleport was removed. He’d put it off because of Courtly duties, or some reason, but it is not a good time to have gone too long without feeding.’

‘Two months?’ Eran said. ‘He can’t die from it though, can he? He’s Inner Court status.’

‘No, he can’t die from it,’ Julvia said. ‘But he can slip into a coma. He can waste away. He can become skin and skeleton and require years to rehabilitate back from the death of his mind. He is far from that, but…I fear unconsciousness may be close. So does Gwyn.’

‘Because he keeps using his energy?’ Eran said, shocked. ‘And he hasn’t fed for some time?’

‘It is too long,’ Julvia said. ‘I know the King wants to find some humans in the fae realm, but all the humans here are kept, and there are high debts for taking one. Not to mention that any fae who eats humans who knows this is trying too. Of course he is the Unseelie King, but…this is what I have heard.’

‘Eavesdrop a lot, do you?’ Mosk said quietly. Eran was surprised that he’d said anything at all. Julvia only looked at him and smiled.

‘People forget I’m there and say a great deal,’ she said. ‘I listen to everything. You must do the same.’

‘I don’t pay attention,’ Mosk said.
Eran had to smile. That was true enough. He knew Mosk just withdrew from long bouts of conversation, and didn’t blame him. Just walking from place to place exhausted him, expecting him to want to listen in on strategy or other happenings… He wasn’t like Eran, he wasn’t expected to learn and understand strategy, to take an interest in a group of fae talking about what to do next.

Julvia smiled at Eran and turned towards her tent, and then paused. ‘I am going to lie down again, for I am also very tired. Do you mind?’

‘No,’ Eran said. ‘I was already keeping watch.’

‘Good evening then, to both of you.’

Eran slowly sat down again, kneeling, touching his fingers to his neck where the Nain Rouge had taken some of his powers. He was relieved to hear that it wasn’t serious from Augus, because even though he didn’t like his compulsions, he felt like Augus took health matters seriously. It was hard not to, constantly seeing Augus give Julvia and Ash more food than he himself was taking. Especially since he must be starving. Eran frowned.

‘Thanks for getting Gwyn and Augus,’ Eran said, looking over at Mosk, who was staring down at the ground. ‘When the Nain Rouge came.’

‘I was too slow,’ Mosk said, not looking up.

‘What? No you weren’t.’

‘Yeah, I was too slow. And you got attacked.’

Eran moved closer to Mosk, tilted his head to try and see his expression, but Mosk just turned his head further away and refused to look.

‘It wouldn’t have mattered how fast you were,’ Eran said finally, surprised that Mosk was behaving as though he felt guilty. Mosk carried a lot of guilt over what happened to his family, but he’d seemed immune to feeling bad for the times he hurt Eran. This was…new. Eran bit the inside of his lip, he kind of liked it. He didn’t want Mosk to feel guilty all the time, but it was strangely nice to know that he could feel bad if Eran got hurt by something. ‘She’s the Nain Rouge. She could’ve killed us both before I even told you to get them.’

Mosk nodded, wrapped his arms around himself. His head shifted like he wanted to look at Eran, but he didn’t. His arms shifted from his torso into his lap, and then Eran frowned as he saw Mosk wrap the fingers of one hand around the wrist of another, digging in too tight.

‘You’re hurting yourself,’ Eran said quietly.

Mosk said nothing.

‘No,’ Eran said, his voice stronger. He came close enough that he could reach out and grasp both of Mosk’s wrists, moving that gripping hand away from where he’d dug his fingernails in too tight. ‘You get that from me.’

He hadn’t even known he was going to say it, until he said it. He looked at Mosk in surprise, and Mosk turned and glared at him.

‘Then give it to me,’ Mosk bit out.

Eran stared at him, and then some fire in him kindled, eliminating the cold that the Nain Rouge’s
presence had left around him.

‘Go into the tent,’ Eran said calmly, ‘and get a length of rope out of the pack. Bring it to me.’

‘No,’ Mosk said, trying to flinch back away from Eran.

‘You heard what I said,’ Eran said. ‘Go do it.’

Mosk opened his mouth to retort, and then seemed to think the better of it. A few full seconds passed where Eran could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and then Mosk’s shoulders loosened and he just nodded. Eran let go of his wrist, and Mosk hesitated, then pushed himself up and walked towards their tent.

Eran watched him go, his mouth drying from the smoke that was pluming. He opened his mouth and it clouded out around him. He had no idea what he was doing, yet he couldn’t leave the challenge that Mosk had thrown down unanswered. Mosk needed something, and it wouldn’t be long before he started asking Ash and everyone in a certain radius to start fucking him. Eran couldn’t do that, not right now anyway, but he could at least…do something.

Mosk kept asking, and Eran was afraid he’d mess it up, that he’d do far more damage to someone already so damaged. But then he met that stony antagonism and just wanted to respond to it by tying Mosk down and touching him until Mosk’s rage bled away like water and left softness behind.

Their tent flap opened, and Mosk came back with a neat coil of the softer rope that Eran had purchased trying not to think about what he wanted to use it for. He’d purchased that back at the Many Meadows Market, just in unconscious response to seeing Mosk grasp his wrist all the time. He hadn’t even known then, exactly what he might use it for. He’d just…asked for softer ropes than the ones he had in his pack.

‘Sit,’ Eran said, as Mosk handed him the rope without making eye contact. Mosk knelt down, and Eran took the wrist that used to have the single shackle on it.

Carefully, quickly, he began winding the rope around his forearm, from his wrist to about halfway down. Then, checking that the pressure was even and tight, he knotted it off so that there was a trailing end. He took that length of rope and tied the other end, forming a leash. Then tugged it hard enough that Mosk’s arm jerked.

‘That’s not enough,’ Mosk said, though his voice was less biting than before.

‘I know,’ Eran said, staring at him. ‘But I don’t know what you expect me to do when I’m meant to be keeping watch. I can’t just drop all of my responsibilities whenever you want me to.’

Mosk flinched backwards, obviously stung by what Eran had said, but Eran found himself shorter on patience than usual. He’d been attacked by the Nain Rouge. He’d just found out that a whole species of epic, incredible fae connected to Kabiri and the ambaros were killed off by Mages who reduced them to magic.

It was tempting to say ‘Not everything is about you.’ But he knew it wouldn’t help anything. Not when Mosk had already shown far more concern for Eran today than he had since they’d met each other. He bit down on that fire inside of himself and wished he had another way to express it.

‘You think that I wouldn’t rather be in that tent with you right now, seeing what might work between us?’ Eran said, his voice low, deeper than before. ‘You think that I’d rather be out here? I wouldn’t, Mosk.’
Mosk nodded, his eyebrows knitting together as though he finally understood. The outrage had vanished. He placed his other hand gently on the rope on his wrist, looking down at it without digging his fingers in.

‘Okay,’ Mosk said.

‘Okay,’ Eran said, sighing. ‘You want to leave that on for a while?’

‘All the time,’ Mosk said, and then his shoulders hunched.

‘We can tell the others that it’s something you need right now,’ Eran said, wondering if they’d accept that. Well, it wasn’t like they were stepping up to give Mosk what he needed.

‘Okay,’ Mosk said. He looked up. ‘Are you…? Are you okay? Really?’

Eran stared at him for so long that Mosk’s cheeks coloured and he looked away, shrugging like he hadn’t meant anything by it. Eran wondered what it was like for him, asking something like that. Had he felt able to ask it when he knew that his mother was upset for sacrificing her son to a Mage? Did he like reaching out, knowing that the answer might be ‘no, and it’s connected to you?’ Eran thought that Mosk’s issues with communication might be more systemic than what he’d just learned as a result of being tortured by Olphix and Davix.

‘I’m scared,’ Eran said honestly. Mosk looked back at him in shock. Eran refused to feel embarrassed by it. ‘I can still do what we need to do, but I’m scared. I feel like I’m in over my head. All the time.’

‘We are,’ Mosk said.

_We are._ Eran’s lips quirked at the way Mosk just included himself automatically in that. Mosk’s smile in response was shy, small.

‘You should get some sleep,’ Eran said softly. ‘You need the rest. Go on. Go lie down, I’ll be okay.’

Mosk looked down at the rope on his wrist and sighed. It was obvious he was disappointed. Eran was too, but they didn’t have the luxury of the tower anymore, and he hadn’t even known to use it while they still could. Eventually Mosk just gave Eran a long, sober look where Eran couldn’t tell what he was thinking at all, and then he got up and walked to their tent and went inside.

Eran stood there, alone, his hand on his kh’anzar hilt once more. He thought of the wisps of things he’d heard about dragons, before his mind had steered him away from it in the past. But it didn’t steer him away from it anymore. He lingered there, in a space of loss and not enough knowledge. He wasn’t sure the pit of grief inside of him could have widened anymore, but as he stood there, he knew he was being hollowed out even more, his loss broadening until he felt like he was made out of smoke and the whistling wind.

*  

The Nain Rouge and Gwyn returned around dawn. They were silent, and the Nain Rouge didn’t seem in a very playful mood anymore. Eran watched as Gwyn woke everyone, obviously pained by the gunshots, but still moving, still talking, occasionally just pausing to take a deep breath and press his fingers to the exit wounds. Then they had a quick breakfast, packed up, and they were travelling once more.

The Nain Rouge was faster than all of them, and it was good that she’d rush off sometimes before
scurrying back, because she smelled of rot and Eran didn’t like it at all. It was like she’d spoiled. The cloud of flies that buzzed around her, were burnt to a crisp if they came too close to Eran. He’d flick his fingers at them and set them on fire, except he had to stop when he realised that Mosk was walking further and further away from him as a result.

As to the rope on Mosk’s wrist, everyone noticed it, but only Ash had said something about it.

‘Rope, the latest in all fashion accessories,’ he said. Then he looked at Mosk in concern. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Yes,’ Eran said coolly, staring at him.

‘Yeah,’ Mosk said. ‘Everything’s fine.’

Augus laughed quietly next to Ash, nudged him in the arm and then walked away.

‘God, I was just asking,’ Ash said, rolling his eyes and following Augus. That was that. Eran wondered if Augus understood it. If Augus would explain it. Even Gwyn didn’t seem to care that Mosk had rope wound around his wrist and that there was a trailing end that Eran kept hold of. Julvia watched curiously, and Eran knew she probably wanted to ask about it, but she was probably too tired. She stayed close to Ash, who was always quick to provide support when she needed it, or suggest it was time for a break.

The day was warm – nothing like how the desert could get – but enough that Mosk had broken out into a fine sweat before he was even fatigued. For Eran, it felt blissful. He could feel the fires inside him stirring happily, he felt nourished and good, despite the stink of the Nain Rouge with them. He listened to the conversation happening around him, looked around at the large rocky plateau of grass they followed a narrow trail through. Warm winds would come and bend the slender grasses, send them quivering, flushing the pale gold into silver as it swept across the stalks. He thought it was beautiful. Gwyn called it a moor, and Eran had never seen one before.

It didn’t stop him from looking behind him for the ice, but he never saw it. He had no doubt that he would see it again. He felt like his mind was overfull. How was he supposed to care about all the things he’d learned? How was he supposed to find the energy and time and space to care for Mosk, himself, his family, the fire dragons, Kabiri, the ice, what had happened to Albion, the Mages, the entire fae realm?

Instead, Eran concentrated on how they were out in the open, unprotected by anything except the occasional gnarled, stunted tree that provided nothing like shade.

It was Gwyn – ten minutes later as they had walked steadily up an increasingly steep incline – who stopped. They all stopped behind him. He tilted his head, stared down at the ground, then held up his hand indicating that none of them should move. He turned and ran quickly up the incline, fresh blood blooming out of the back of his shirt. He paused at the ridge and looked over it in a way that indicated he suspected people might be beyond. Eran hadn’t heard anything.

The Nain Rouge scurried up and looked as well, stealthy like the shadows of the grasses around her.

When they returned, Gwyn looked unhappy.

‘There is a large band of fae approaching,’ he said. ‘About three hundred. I suspect a small Seelie military or a private military, perhaps to go to battle with sea folk. We can’t continue this way.’

‘I could glamour them?’ Ash said.
‘They will have at least one Mage. If dra’ocht stopped battles, Crielle would have stopped at least one,’ Gwyn said grimly. ‘Dra’ocht works best in Courts, where Mages are only ever visitors and cannot permanently stay in something like a throne room.’

Gwyn closed his eyes briefly, then looked around at each of them. Then he looked down at the Nain Rouge.

‘Nup,’ she said abruptly. ‘I’m not at peak strength, and I don’t fight for you anyway.’

Eran realised then, Gwyn was anticipating a confrontation.

‘I could normally take them on,’ Gwyn said eventually. ‘But there are too many people here who require protection and I am not…the kind of fighter who is good at keeping that in mind.’

His deep blue eyes met Eran’s, he pursed his lips.

‘It may have to be you.’

‘What?’ Eran said, fingers slipping on the hilt of his kh’anzar. ‘Me?’

‘We’ll veer that way,’ Gwyn said, pointing in the change of direction that would take them off their narrow rocky path, directly over the uneven ground beneath the grasses. ‘But you are afrit-ambaros, and I have seen afrit and ambaros fight in my time. Your ability to make the liquid fire alone makes you the strongest of all of us.’

‘I’m not going to shift,’ Eran said abruptly, blinking. ‘I don’t do that. I’ve never fought like that.’

‘You’ll know how,’ Gwyn said.

Eran’s chest felt small and tight. He wanted to take a step backwards. He hated that they were all looking at him now. He felt like Mosk refusing to use the bow back at Oengus’ tower. But he didn’t have a reason anywhere near as good. He could see from the way Gwyn was looking at him, that if he didn’t have the best reason…

He looked at Mosk, who would almost certainly hate him more profoundly than ever if he saw Eran in his true form. It was monstrous.

Then he looked to Julvia, and Augus – who even now looked paler and more tired than usual – and the others. Even Mosk, who would hate him, still needed to be protected.

‘I will fight with you, if it comes to it,’ Gwyn said, and Eran felt humiliated to hear him give ground like that. Offer some consolation, as small as it felt. Could he even take on that many people in his true form? He realised that he probably did have the best skills for taking on a crowd of people out of everyone there. Augus and Ash were growing weaker and needed to conserve their strength. Julvia was a swan-maiden and a pacifist. Mosk had no magic, none of his abilities, no heartsong. Gwyn no longer had his light, was still healing from severe injuries given to him by the Nain Rouge. The Nain Rouge…

Eran didn’t trust her at all.

‘Okay,’ Eran said, clearing his throat, wondering if this was one of those times when his father would be proud. Would anyone be proud, to see his hybrid form? But if he could do it to protect them…

But Mosk would hate him. If they all lived, Mosk would hate him.
He remembered being in the miskatin’s cave, sacrificing his life for Mosk, knowing it was the more important call. It was still the more important call. Fenwrel had said that Mosk might have the secret to solving the plague of ice itself.

Eran stood straighter, squared his shoulders.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Tell me your plan.’

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Don't Look:'

Mosk’s breathing seized, then he couldn’t seem to get enough air, sucking in gasp after gasp as whatever it was in front of him – that...thing – yanked two arrows out of its arm and roared a sound that was both a rumbling bass and frenzied, splitting shriek at the same time. Gwyn turned quickly, spinning Mosk’s view away until he twisted to see. He couldn’t not look.

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said as Eran opened large paws, spread scythe-like claws and flung lava at the crowds around him.
They veered south away from the ridge Gwyn had been leading them to. Mosk couldn’t move silently through the tall grasses. He couldn’t even move well through them. Beneath his feet were the rocks and potholes of a craggy moor. Mosk found himself worrying about sudden cave entrances, sinkholes, and stared down at the ground fixedly, his breath rough in his lungs. Next to him, Eran’s breath was just as rough, but he knew it was for a different reason.

Gwyn had asked him to shift. Not yet. Maybe not at all. But Eran’s reaction to the command had been instant.

They headed towards rocky land in the distance. The rocks were grey and white, the sun bore down on them ruthlessly. Mosk missed the shade of trees, wished that they could stop travelling just for a day or so. Julvia wasn’t doing well. Augus looked paler than before and didn’t talk very much at all. They now travelled with the Nain Rouge, which Mosk thought was a sign of just how desperate and futile times were.

She’d attacked Eran, and they didn’t even have time to properly deal with that. Mosk still didn’t know what damage she’d done, or how bad it was. He didn’t know if Eran knew.

His hand kept straying down to his pocket for the piece of bone he no longer had. Then it strayed to the rope on his wrist, the leash he held in his other hand. Eran wasn’t leading him. Eran was lost somewhere in his own thoughts. It made Mosk realise just how often Eran was focused outward on other people. Now, he seemed so far away that Mosk didn’t feel like he could reach him.

Julvia exclaimed softly as she fell, her wings flaring out to catch her, but not fast enough to stop one of her knees from cracking on the rocks.

‘My ankle,’ she said softly. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’

She didn’t speak to anyone in particular, but Mosk thought he knew the feeling. He could feel how the both of them just slowed everyone else down.

‘It’s not a thing, hon,’ Ash said, walking over to her. ‘Put your arms around my neck, come on.’

He crouched down, she pressed herself up against his back and wound her arms around his neck and hid her face in his shoulder. He stood up easily, and Julvia tucked her wings in as tightly as possible.

‘I could shift to human form,’ she said. ‘Or swan. If it’s easier.’
'You’re as light as a feather, princess,’ Ash said, walking on ahead. ‘We’ll check your ankle over when it’s safer, okay?’

‘It’s fine,’ she said. ‘It won’t take too long to heal I think.’

‘Then I’ll check for my own peace of mind.’

They spoke quietly, voices only barely rising above the loud sound of the grasses rubbing their stalks together.

The land got rockier, and Mosk felt like they were so far from where shelter was meant to be. He kept turning back to the ridge, expecting to see fae swarming, but he saw nothing. Gwyn’s senses were so honed he could tell when fae were near, even when ‘near’ meant over an hour away. But even the Nain Rouge sometimes ran back, before sprinting to catch up with their party. It was like a wild, feral animal travelling with them. She didn’t just walk in one direction. She darted off, came back, sometimes with a rat or vole in her mouth, eating the flies that swarmed on the gore as much as she ate the rodent itself.

They kept walking, Mosk placing his feet down as carefully as possible, the focus wearing on his ability to think about anything else. It wasn’t until he bumped into Augus that he realised the others had stopped.

He looked up, saw the troubled look on Gwyn’s face and felt colder than before.

Gwyn knelt and placed his hands on the ground, eyes widenning.

‘Ash, get Julvia to safety. Augus too. Take the packs. Run towards the rocks, I’ll be along after.’

Ash grabbed Eran’s pack, Gwyn’s, moving quickly even with Julvia on his back. Augus opened his mouth, blinked at whatever he saw on Gwyn’s face and turned, bolting fleetly across the rocky ground like he’d been born to it. Ash followed quickly, both of them covering ground fast.

The earth rumbled, Mosk taking several steps back away from it, but then the ground rumbled on the other side too. A huge cracking noise, the manic laughter of the Nain Rouge as she bounced in excitement, and a mass of fae in mail and armour spilled forth from out of the ground itself. Dwarves and korrigan, even-

‘Brownies,’ Gwyn said. ‘Not war-going at all.’

‘They have to be,’ said a tall woman in plate armour, striding across the ground, an axe strapped to her side. She had blonde, flowing hair, a voice that lulled and made Mosk want to stop and listen to her. ‘We all have to be now. The sea fae threaten our lands, and we go to war, Traitor King. But on the way to war, we can always put down a King who is far from home, can’t we?’

Fae on the other side of them, at least a hundred, climbing easily out of the rocks and dirt that collapsed beneath them. The tiny brownies with their flat faces, their pinhole noses and hairy bodies, normally cheerful and uninterested in war, now holding tiny shovels looking like they would stab Mosk through the face with them.

‘Katel,’ Gwyn said, standing tall. ‘Let us pass. We mean you no harm.’

‘Perhaps we mean you harm,’ Katel said, tossing her hair back, dirt flying from it. ‘I fought for you once. But I’ll just as easily fight against you. It seems you’re already wounded, perhaps wandering through Seelie lands unprotected is not going so well for you.’
‘We are still alive,’ Gwyn said.

‘And so are we,’ Katel said proudly. ‘And it is not because we let traitors go free.’

Gwyn looked to Eran, then at the Nain Rouge. Finally, he looked at Mosk.

‘We should get you to safety,’ he said grimly. ‘Eran, now.’

Gwyn grabbed Mosk, picked him up and tossed him over his shoulder unceremoniously, leaving Mosk staring at Eran as Gwyn ran in the opposite direction. His whole body jolted. Gwyn carried him like a sack of potatoes, caring only for covering the land far more quickly than Mosk knew anyone could run on two legs.

Eran stared at Mosk in growing horror. But as the fae around him and the Nain Rouge withdrew their weapons, turning towards the Unseelie King, he mouthed:

‘Don’t look. Don’t look.’

Mosk was too shocked to close his eyes. Eran turned back even as arrows began to fly and the Nain Rouge pulled a nasty looking metal weapon out from under her cloaks and began shooting. The bullets were brutal, but they weren’t enough for the fae still pushing up out of the ground that caved in behind them.

In a plume of exploding dust, soil and rock, Eran shifted his form faster than any dryad had ever become a tree.

A creature at least eleven feet tall. Of red and dusky crimsons, of oranges and glints of fire-like amber. Scales and fur and skin. A mane that ended in bright tips of yellow and white, like stars. Multiple pairs of horns twisting up, alive with flame at the base, like living crystal, blackening up at the spiralling tips. One pair of horns behind large, furred ears, another below, another below that, until finally they merged into thick spines on his back. Wings. They looked at first like nothing more than glowing fire massed on his shoulders, but then they opened and spread, made of lava and flame and the impossible, yet stretching out in the sky nonetheless, alive and crackling, fire writhing around itself.

Mosk’s breathing seized, then he couldn’t seem to get enough air, sucking in gasp after gasp as whatever it was in front of him – that…thing – yanked two arrows out of its arm and roared a sound that was both a rumbling bass and frenzied, splitting shriek at the same time. Gwyn turned quickly, spinning Mosk’s view away until he twisted to see. He couldn’t not look.

‘Gods,’ Gwyn said as Eran opened large paws, spread scythe-like claws and flung lava at the crowds around him. Fae screaming, already falling back, retreating and disappearing into the ground again. Stray sparks catching the dry grass, burning it black in seconds, the glow of flame catching stalk after stalk. The air began to bloom with plumes of smoke, and Mosk couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t-

Gwyn said something, the word ‘hybrid’ catching in Mosk’s ears, but then Gwyn had turned and was sprinting now, faster than before, outrunning the fire that raced to catch up with them. Eran’s blasting shrieks of outrage sounded more and more fraught, but also more distant, each one sending a knife of cold up the back of Mosk’s spine.

A shriek like none of the others, and Mosk turned around automatically. In the distance, Eran and the Nain Rouge attacked whoever remained. The Nain Rouge stayed a distance from Eran now, and nothing around her was on fire anymore, it was already blackened and sooty. Mosk couldn’t
make them out properly in the smoke. He saw that Eran only had one wing, the other had been severed completely, a black rocky jut left where it used to be.

A strange awful tipping sensation in Mosk’s chest. He couldn’t look away, was seeing less and less. Fire glowed at Eran’s back, a new wing emerged where the other had been knocked away, and then Eran took a running leap at whoever had attacked him, and disappeared behind a massive wall of flame.

Mosk kept his head up, jerking uncomfortably with Gwyn’s running. He held onto Gwyn’s shirt, gagged at the smell of smoke in the air. The wind blowing their way was hot now, too familiar, and Mosk wanted more than anything to struggle and run, but he was being carried by the King, and some part of his brain, educated by his Court-aware Mamatree, reminded him over and over again that it would be wrong.

His ears rung from the gunshots, some happening so fast that they blurred together. *Ratatatata*-He’d never heard anything like it.

Another ten minutes of running, and there was no sight of Eran, the moor, of anything except tall, gnarled rocks jutting up from the ground all around them. The ground beneath Gwyn’s feet was uneven, but Gwyn ran easily, not even out of breath. Mosk couldn’t even smell smoke anymore, the air here brackish and damp.

It was longer still before Gwyn deposited Mosk heavily down into a scooped out section of tall rock, something not quite deep enough to be a cave. There, Augus had some fabric over his mouth and nose, but was still coughing. His eyes were red-rimmed. Mosk wondered if it was the smoke.

Ash coughed once, cleared his throat, frowned.

‘You’re taking us to the sea,’ Ash said, his voice rough.

‘There may be assistance there,’ Gwyn said.

‘When the sea and land fae are about to go to war? Again?’ Augus said, then his voice caught and he turned and hunched over, coughing violently. He removed the handkerchief to wipe smears of blood away from his lips.

Gwyn stood, staring, eyes wide. Augus raised the handkerchief again, stared back, and then seemed too tired to even do that and leaned back against the wet rock and closed his eyes.

Metal sliding through a sheath, Gwyn withdrawing his sword. ‘I have to go back.’

‘Go, then,’ Augus said, not opening his eyes.

Gwyn ran off, the sound of his footsteps vanishing quickly. Julvia was massaging her ankle, leaning against a curve of rock, her wings brushing awkwardly up against the not-quite-cave. Ash had his hand on Augus’ knee, thumb stroking.

‘He wouldn’t take us there if he didn’t feel that we had no other option,’ Augus said. ‘I’m thrilled.’

‘Stop using your voice, bro,’ Ash said.

‘Why are you not as sick?’ Julvia said. ‘Is it because you’ve been eating more?’

Ash looked over at her, then grabbed the pack on his back and rummaged around in it, finally drawing out a jar of creamy salve. He let go of Augus’ knee with one last squeeze, and shifted,
beginning to apply the salve to the redness on her ankle.

‘It’s because I’ve spent my life drinking poison and eating salt,’ Ash said. ‘Waterhorses aren’t supposed to drink alcohol, and we’re not supposed to eat junk food at all really. Not salty junk. Like I did. So I’m not…like, comfortable here, but it’s no different to how my throat feels after a bucket of KFC. Augus kind of lives the way he’s supposed to live, which makes him stronger, but yeah, makes it tough. We’re freshwater creatures. Not supposed to be near the sea.’

Mosk watched everything, the queasiness inside of him building. He hadn’t sat down yet, knowing that standing would be hard if he even tried it once his muscles stiffened. After a moment, he turned, walked several shaky steps down a narrow path surrounded by rocky walls, and threw up.

‘Ah, shit,’ Ash said. ‘Mosk?’

Mosk managed to make some thin sound of acknowledgement, before retching again. It was strange, awful, he knew Eran wasn’t Olphix, he knew it was different, and yet his body couldn’t help it. He could smell smoke, he couldn’t tell if he was imagining it. Not the pipe smoke from the Gancanagh. Something deeper, familiar.

He looked up to the blue sky above them, the hot sun. The walls were damp. He could smell salt too. They really were near the sea.

Wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand, he turned to see Ash’s concerned gaze.

Mosk shook his head. What would happen to them, if the King thought they were in so much danger? They’d die, of course, but instead of feeling a bleak satisfaction about it, he felt a curdling of dread.

‘Do you think the King knew?’ Julvia said to Ash. ‘About what the fire would do to Mosk?’

‘I’m right here,’ Mosk said roughly.

‘I’m sorry,’ Julvia said, smiling apologetically. Her eyes were sad, and Mosk felt like he couldn’t be angry at her, even though he wanted to be. ‘Sometimes he doesn’t know what he does. What the repercussions will be.’

‘He knew,’ Augus said, those words enough to send him into another wracking fit of coughing.

‘Stop talking,’ Ash said sharply.

Augus’ eyes opened just a sliver, and he gave Ash a side-eye glare that Ash only rolled his eyes at.

Mosk couldn’t stay there. He thrummed with energy, and he looked at the strange intersection of pathways around them. In one direction, the rocky path sloping upwards to the fire and the fight. In another, a path that wound through walls that got taller and taller, jutting messily upwards. Then the one he’d taken, the acrid smell of vomit in his nose.

He turned and walked slowly down the path he’d not taken, the one with no vomit, waving a hand when Ash asked him where he was going.

‘Not far,’ he said.

The path curved, narrowed, and Mosk had to turn sideways to navigate it. He was surprised when it opened up into a large stony clearing that could have comfortably fit at least fifty fae, maybe more. It was too neat and circular to be naturally formed, especially with the overhangs sensitively
providing shade. In the centre, the black smears from an old bonfire. Empty shells all around. Mosk took a step backwards, heart pounding.

In a darker corner, a creature assembled itself from an old rope fishing net, limpet, oyster and abalone shells, bits of rock and bone. It stood not more than three feet tall, staring up at Mosk, holding a rusty knife in one hand.

Mosk took another step backwards.

‘I’ll just go,’ Mosk said, his voice thin.

‘Mosk?’ A voice from behind him, Ash approaching. ‘Oh, thank fuck. It’s a verkhwin.’

The verkhwin looked up at Ash, then scratched at the shells that formed where another fae might have hair or horns. Mosk felt a wave of warmth cover him, not like the sun, not like fire, but like something he’d lost sight of a long time. It was nice, sweet, comforting. He felt his shoulders relaxing a little, felt his chest loosen.

‘Hey there,’ Ash said. ‘I’m Ash Glashtyn, from the Unseelie Court. We have the King with us, and we’re looking for very, very temporary safe haven. Could you grant it to us?’

The verkhwin considered Ash with a tilted head, the smoky black shadows indicating its eyes giving away no expression at all. Then it put its knife away and held one hand flat, with the other it mimicked a spoon. Then, eating. The meaning was unmistakeable.

‘In exchange for a meal?’ Ash said. ‘You’ll grant us temporary safe haven?’

The verkhwin nodded.

‘Easy done. All right, Mosk, you stay here a moment. I’m gonna get the others.’

Ash left, and the warm feeling left with him. Mosk walked to the other side of the circle, careful of the remnants of the old fire, any old shells in case they were precious, and slid down against the damp wall in the shade, feeling weak. Ash had used his glamour? Did the verkhwin mind? But no, the verkhwin seemed…at least non-violent. It hadn’t moved from where it had assembled itself. It watched Mosk, then quietly picked off a shell from its own bedraggled body and tossed it in Mosk’s direction.

Mosk wasn’t fast enough to catch it, but the shell didn’t break even as it clinked upon the rocky ground. He picked it up, not recognising it. He knew very little about the sea. Even the sections of the Aur forest that held the sea flora, the sea trees, he’d never spent much time there.

The shell itself was a pale green, flashing blue or violet when the sunlight hit it. The spiral shape of it curved inwards, until it made a perfect circle in the middle. Mosk wondered if it was part of a larger creature, or if it had been a bead once, or if it was a unique thing that the verkhwin made. When he turned it over, the rough side was carved with letters.

The creature gestured to him with fingers that were covered in slivers of bone. Mosk didn’t know what it was trying to say. Could Mosk have it? Should Mosk give it back?

‘Is this for me?’ Mosk said.

The verkhwin nodded. Mosk wish he knew more about the proper modes of address with fae, like Eran did. Mosk didn’t know if he was being trapped, if he would owe a favour, if he should accept, if it was rude to accept, if he was allowed to say thank you. His thumb was drawn to the spiral and
he traced it, thinking of pale green things. Shoots and tender new growths on deciduous trees.

‘It’s very beautiful,’ Mosk said.

Then Ash was there, Augus, and Julvia limping along behind them. They settled on the other side of the circle, nearer to the verkhwin, and Ash opened his pack and drew out some of the meat that the Nain Rouge hadn’t gotten her teeth into. The verkhwin accepted it, gave Ash a shell in exchange, and then covered the meat with its body. The food disappeared behind rope, grey-white rocks and shells, and presumably that meant the verkhwin had eaten.

It was a tense two hours after that. Augus didn’t talk. Julvia and Ash chatted quietly, and Mosk tried to fight his own fatigue. He couldn’t quite understand what he’d seen. Eran was…like nothing he’d ever seen before. And it was horrifying, and awful, but Eran had clearly been trying to help them. He hadn’t turned once and tried to hurt Gwyn or Mosk. He’d stayed despite the arrows, despite his wings being injured, despite being hurt. He’d done that for them.

He’d told Mosk not to look. Like he knew exactly how much it would hurt him.

Mosk absently traced the spiral of the shell with his thumb and stared up at the blue sky. Strangely, he missed lying on the high boughs of sturdy trees, staring up at the sky with a bow in one hand and his quiver hanging from a smaller branch. He missed the way even strong branches creaked and flexed in strong winds. He missed being connected to the tree, missed listening to the leaves rub against each other, missed squirrels and songbirds running across him, as he became so much a part of the tree that they no longer cared about staying out of his way.

It was so much simpler, then. Even if it had never truly been simple. Even if he only had that bow and those arrows for one reason.

The Nain Rouge returned first, then climbed up the rocky walls like a squirrel, and vanished. The verkhwin sagged in relief after tensing at the sight of her.

Gwyn was next, covered in some blood spatter, a lot of soot, his hair and face smeared with it. After chatting briefly to Ash, he walked straight to the verkhwin, knelt down, took up two stones and started squeaking and banging them on the ground. The verkhwin replied in the same language. Mosk wanted to watch their conversation, but instead he couldn’t look away from the narrow corridor that led to the verkhwin’s home.

Where was Eran?

A while later, when Mosk was tempted to actually go looking for him, he heard the scrape of someone’s body squeezing through the narrow gap. Eran in his human form, bleeding from one arm and barely paying attention to his surroundings. He didn’t even look at Mosk. He moved as far away from everyone as possible into a shadowy cove carved out of the circular space, each step heavy, scuffing across the stone. There, he sagged down against the wall and leaned into it, staring down. His back to Mosk. To everyone. His fingers loosely brushed the ground.

Mosk bit the inside of his lip and looked over to Gwyn, Augus, Ash and Julvia to see what they’d do. Ash looked like he wanted to go over, but Augus shook his head, seemed to be saying no.

The verkhwin was a pile of shells and stones once more. Whatever conversation it had with Gwyn seemed to have made it happy enough.

After another few minutes of Eran not moving, Mosk pushed himself up – wincing at the soreness in his muscles, the thumping in his head – and walked over. He stood facing Eran, and then when
Eran didn’t move, didn’t look at him, he slowly lowered himself to the ground and crossed his legs. He looked down at the shell that the verkhwin had given him, and placed it on the ground where Eran seemed to be blankly staring.

‘You’re hurt,’ Mosk said.

Eran shook his head slowly, but his fingers dragged across the ground and he touched the piece of shell.

Mosk tried to understand how Eran could be what he’d just been, and then be this, now.

‘I looked,’ Mosk said.

Eran’s shoulders rose and fell in a slow, silent sob. Then he smiled bitterly. Mosk was shocked when Eran looked up. His eyes were still glowing. But all Mosk could see was the exhaustion, the sadness.

‘I wish you hadn’t.’

‘I’m…’ Mosk swallowed. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t have to sit with me.’

Mosk looked down at the rope on his wrist, the trailing edge of it. He wanted to put the opposite side of the leash in Eran’s hand. Instead, he stood up and walked carefully over to the main group, going into Eran’s pack and looking around. He drew out some sap, a package of meat jerky, and the little slender wooden box that Eran took with him everywhere. Julvia watched quietly, but Gwyn was leaning back against the wall on the other side of Augus, his arm around his shoulders, his eyes closed. Augus seemed to be resting too. Ash was brushing tangles out of Julvia’s hair, his hands clever about it.

Mosk walked back, feeling like the circular space around them was even larger than before. The sun wasn’t directly overhead anymore, but the sky was making the world too bright. Mosk could smell fresh waves of salt with every strong breeze that managed to find its way down within the rocky walls. Every now and then, the silence was broken by the sound of small rocks falling, or Augus’ wracking cough.

Mosk knelt down by Eran, who looked up in surprise. His eyes were wetter than before, there was a tear track down one side of his face.

‘Why are you back?’ he said.

Mosk placed the jerky down by Eran’s knees, and then opened the slender wooden box, taking out one of the black sticks of the eyeliner Eran used, the little pot of remover. Mosk had seen him do it whenever they had a quiet moment. There was the stuff Eran used to get rid of the old liner, and then he painted fresh lines after. Mosk’s hands were rarely steady, but he didn’t know what else to do, what else to say.

He opened the pot of cream and took up a tiny amount, and then reached up to the underside of Eran’s eye, his heart beating harder than normal. Would Eran hate it? Would he not understand? He was just staring.

Careful touches, moving away all the liner that had made shadows of him, but even as the stuff came away black on his fingertip, Mosk could see the circles under his eyes. He wiped his dirty finger on his pants and kept working, carefully touching Eran’s eyelashes to indicate he should
close his eyes. Eran did, his breathing shallow, and Mosk didn’t want to break the silence between
them. Eran wasn’t rejecting it, he didn’t seem to hate it, and he wasn’t crying anymore.

Mosk knew it wouldn’t really help. But he couldn’t stop himself.

Then, Eran’s eyelids were clean of eyeliner, and Mosk took up the stick. He raised it carefully to
Eran’s face, but then realised he’d never done this before, and after making a tiny black mark at
the corner of his eye, he didn’t know what to do.

He started to lower his hand, but his wrist was caught in Eran’s gentle grip. Mosk stared at him,
and Eran stared back. Even now, he looked exhausted, his eyes lidded even as his irises were so
much brighter than usual.

‘Like this,’ Eran said, his voice raspy.

He slid his fingers down the rope to Mosk’s fingers, and then pulled their hands together towards
his eye. He had more control of the stick of liner than Mosk did, and with a surprisingly steady
hand he guided Mosk in making a smooth line from the inside of his eye to the outside, carefully
drawing out the tip so that it swept slightly upwards away in a sharp point.

‘I’ve never done this before,’ Mosk said. Eran had talked first, so maybe it would be okay if he
talked now.

He thought Eran would say something like ‘that’s obvious’ or ‘I would never have guessed’ but
instead Eran just watched him.

‘I told you not to look,’ Eran said.

He moved their hands and they lined his other eye, and Mosk was finding it harder to concentrate.
They were very close. Eran’s whole body radiated a heat that came in waves, there and gone and
then back again. It felt threatening, Mosk had smoke in his nose and fire in his vision and Eran’s
eyes were right there.

‘I know,’ Mosk said.

‘Why are you here, Mosk?’ Eran said. He sounded almost empty. ‘Why aren’t you over there with
the others?’

Mosk chewed on the inside of his mouth. Eran had let go of his hand, because his eyes were
finished up now. Mosk held the stick of it in his fingertips on his lap.

‘I’m worried,’ Mosk said.

‘I’m not going to hurt you.’

‘I’m not worried about that,’ Mosk said. He was shocked to realise it was true. It was Eran’s eyes
that widened though. He jerked backwards, his fingers suddenly clenching.

‘You should be.’

‘You saved us,’ Mosk said.

Back with the miskatin, Mosk had hated him for it when he’d realised. But time and again, Eran
had done difficult things to save others. It was impossible to ignore the terror and anguish when
Gwyn had said Eran had to shift. But Eran hadn’t once hurt any of them. Mosk knew that some
creatures in their bloodlust couldn’t help it. He knew Gwyn couldn’t help it.

Eran never made it seem like an option.

‘I killed a lot of people,’ Eran said woodenly.

‘But you’ve done it before?’

‘Never,’ Eran said, and then he looked down, smiling a little. ‘Not once.’

‘But…’ Mosk didn’t know what to say. Wasn’t Eran a warrior? Didn’t they kill people? Eran had seemed like he was definitely going to kill Mosk at some point, when they’d first met. He seemed like someone who had killed a lot of people. ‘Not anyone?’

Eran shook his head. Then he rubbed at his hair, the black curls having sweated through, clinging to him. He still wouldn’t look up. ‘Mosk, if this is one of those times when you’re going to suddenly change your mind and tell me I’m a coward or…I don’t know, I don’t think I can take it. Maybe just go sit with the others.’

The indignation came and went. Mosk couldn’t say he wouldn’t do that, because he did do that. But he didn’t understand how Eran couldn’t see that he wouldn’t do it now. But even Mosk didn’t understand it. The rules had changed. It seemed so obvious.

They’d run and left Eran behind to deal with everything on his own. The Nain Rouge didn’t count as support. They’d left him there, surrounded by people who wanted to kill the King.

‘You have wings,’ Mosk whispered. ‘Can you fly?’

‘No,’ Eran said. ‘No. Ambaros can, but I’m not…’

Mosk waited for him to finish his sentence, but Eran didn’t.

‘It sucks that you can’t fly,’ Mosk said, feeling awkward, stupid. Feeling like an ignorant Aur dryad who was supposed to just be some kind of Mage meal before he was drained of all his life-force and died from it. Feeling like someone else should be sitting where he was sitting, doing this part. Maybe it was right to leave Eran alone. Maybe he was meant to be alone. Mosk wanted to be alone all the time.

Mosk didn’t know what to do.

‘I liked your wings,’ Mosk said.

‘They look prettier on ambaros,’ Eran said. ‘Bigger. Functional.’

‘But you were still using them,’ Mosk said. ‘And I haven’t seen an ambaros aside from you. And besides…’ Mosk cast around, looking for a memory, anything, to help him. How did people ever know what to say in moments like these? ‘Besides. You- Didn’t you… Back- A long time ago. Not that long ago… Didn’t you say that your god said he had claimed you as his? Remember?’

Eran blinked several times, then slowly looked up and met Mosk’s eyes. His lips were pressed together in a thin line, and Mosk didn’t know if he’d messed up, and he was tired, frustrated, unable to help. He didn’t know why he’d bothered.

Stupid. He should give up.

‘I’m just going to…’ Mosk said, pushing up from the floor.
Eran’s hand on the rope circling his wrist stopped him from moving. Mosk felt desperate then. *What* did Eran want? It was hard to know what to do when looking at the rope just made him want to tell Eran to use more of them. More, and somewhere else, away from the others, and to do what he wanted, so Mosk didn’t have to *guess* what he wanted.

‘He did say that,’ Eran said. ‘I remember.’

‘So even with smaller wings, you’re still…y’know. Ambaros. And afrit. That’s how it works, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t like shifting,’ Eran said, as Mosk sat. Mosk picked up the greenish shell and traced its spiral nervously.

‘I could tell.’

‘It’s dangerous when I shift.’

‘Well, yeah,’ Mosk said. ‘That’s why Gwyn got you to do it. Because he needed that. Everyone knew what a big deal it was to get the afrit in his military.’

‘Even afrit don’t like to shift,’ Eran said, smiling a little. ‘It’s built into us from birth. Just…don’t do it. Don’t shift. We’re too dangerous. It takes hundreds of years to learn self-control.’

‘But you saved us,’ Mosk said.

‘It doesn’t feel like I did much at all,’ Eran said roughly. ‘Except murder a lot of people. Mosk, there’s- There’s another band of hundreds coming, marching down towards the sea. Gwyn said… I don’t know how we’re going to get out of this.’

They fell silent for some time, and Mosk watched as Eran half-heartedly took two bites of the jerky and then stopped, the stick of burned meat hanging limp in his hand. The next round of coughing from Augus was followed by Gwyn talking lowly to him in Welsh, and Augus responding weakly. Ash talked over him and told Augus to be quiet in Welsh, and Mosk listened as they talked about the circumstances they were in.

It didn’t sound good. Mosk tuned it out. He didn’t want to know. If he was going to die, he was going to die. He’d expected it all along.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eran said. ‘I forgot that piece of bone from your family. I wish I’d remembered.’

‘I forgot it,’ Mosk said. ‘Not you.’

‘I should’ve remembered. I was the one who grabbed everything.’

It hadn’t even occurred to Mosk that Eran would blame himself for that. *He* was the one who’d forgotten it, not Eran. It wasn’t even his to remember.

But then Eran was the one who carried all the sap and everything else they had. Mosk’s forehead creased, and it was all suddenly too hard to think about. He leaned his shoulder against the damp rock and closed his eyes. In the distance, Ash was asking what their options were. Gwyn laughed, but it wasn’t a nice sound.

‘I’ve never seen the sea,’ Eran said.

‘Me either,’ Mosk said, without opening his eyes.
A pause, a deep breath, and then Eran said: ‘I thought you’d hate me. Never talk to me again.’

‘Yeah,’ Mosk said, looking at Eran. ‘But I don’t hate you. We… We have a truce, remember?’

‘We do,’ Eran said, smiling a little. He looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

‘The eyeliner is nice,’ Mosk said. ‘It…suits you.’

It really did. But Mosk felt more awkward than before, his cheeks warm, his ears burning.

‘Thank you,’ Eran said. ‘We all wear it. All ambaros.’

‘Really? So it’s…not just makeup?’

‘No,’ Eran said, looking up at the blue sky for a moment. ‘We wear it to draw attention to the fire that lives inside of us. To show that at all times, we know we are connected to Kabiri, and other fire gods besides. That we are of the flame and fire. We wear amber and gold, and we decorate ourselves to celebrate that flame. There were festivals, you know, where we wear more makeup, and veils over our eyes, and then remove each veil until finally you see this brilliance, our eyes alight. My mother had the loveliest dances with them. I was still learning, and not very good! But I remember how she used to move her hands.’

The hand not holding the jerky moved out, curved sinuously, his fingers extending like they were balancing a ball on the tips of his fingers.

Eran’s hand held that position, then dropped limply to the ground. He closed his eyes.

‘I forget though now,’ he said. ‘I don’t know if the fire in me feels sacred. And I don’t know that I understand how to be what they wished of me.’

‘I don’t know if I’m a dryad,’ Mosk said. ‘Sometimes you just don’t know.’

But I’m glad you’re here with me, anyway.

Mosk didn’t dare say it. He looked down at the rope on his wrist and traced a finger over the coils of it. Never tight enough to stop circulation. Sometimes it felt like a bandage, almost. As though he was wounded, and Eran had seen that, and tended it. He didn’t even mind that the others could see it.

He picked up the leash handle and draped it over Eran’s fingers, and watched as Eran’s hand closed over it.

‘I’ve…killed people,’ Mosk said, hating the words when he wasn’t biting them out in spite or anger. ‘I wish…I knew what to say. But I don’t know what someone could have told me, to make it okay. It’s just not okay.’

‘It’s not,’ Eran said.

‘But you’re still okay.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Maybe not with…feelings. But you- you’re okay. Your fire is still sacred. Right? I think so.’

Eran didn’t respond. He didn’t even twitch.
Mosk wished he was like Chaley. She always knew what to say. She knew when to be silent. She knew when to laugh. She knew when to gently tease or take things seriously. She knew how to be soft and gentle with words, or be hard and firm when she thought Mosk needed that too. Everything she said was always just…the right thing. And he was nothing like that. She was vivacious and full of life, and he was the one who was supposed to…be dead by now.

‘Eran,’ he said quietly, ‘if you just want me to go though, I can.’

‘Don’t,’ Eran said, his voice rough, his hand clenching tight on the leash. ‘Just stay. Just stay here.’

‘Okay,’ Mosk said, nodding. He could do that.

He could stay.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Closing In:'

‘What’s wrong?’ Mosk said, his voice uncertain.

Eran felt a burst of displeasure that Mosk continued to talk, and then reached for his pack automatically, his body making the decision before his mind had caught up.

Lengths of rope, and a bandage. He took the bandage up and stared at it for a long time, feeling breathless and strange, then he looked at Mosk.

‘Open your mouth,’ he said. He could hear his voice, it wasn’t a request, but a command. He felt as determined as he had the night Mosk had goaded him into this, but Mosk wasn’t goading him now.
Eran

He’d changed back into his human form while still on the battlefield, the reek of burned bodies and char in the air, smoke from the grass, and Gwyn standing beside him, sword out and looking around them with a calculating eye. Gwyn didn’t even register all the dead and burned and cut up bodies around them. He didn’t care.

‘Stay there,’ Gwyn said to Eran, running to the ridge.

Ten minutes after that, Gwyn returned and told him the grim outlook. There were hundreds more Seelie fae coming. There were Seelie and Unseelie fae in the sea who were likely taking advantage of Albion’s absence – and Gwyn’s too – to conduct massive land raids.

There was nowhere left to run. There was nothing left to do except seek temporary shelter, and see what might happen. The Nain Rouge hadn’t said a word, only laughed and kicked a dismembered head with apparent glee as she scurried towards whatever shelter might be. In that moment, Eran viciously hated the Unseelie fae more than he could remember, but the flash of it vanished beneath the guilt he felt.

He was a Seelie fae who had killed Seelie fae. His father would not have been proud.

Now, Eran leaned back against cool rock and felt crushed, despite his fire having been more alive than it had ever been only an hour ago. Mosk sat before him, his eyes closed, dark green lashes against his cheeks. He’d had a whole canister of sap, and now seemed to be sleeping while sitting up. At least dozing. On the rocky ground by Mosk’s knee was a shell that was strangely pretty. Eran didn’t know where he’d found it, but the spiral was a nice distraction.

Eran looked tiredly over to Gwyn and saw that his eyes were closed too. The Unseelie King wasn’t even looking for better shelter. Augus coughed frequently, some of the jags sounding more pained than before.

Julvia saw that Eran was awake and stood, walking towards him – limping only a little – skirting around the old dead wood where a bonfire had once been. She lowered herself by his side, then reached out and took his hand. She didn’t say anything at all, just stroked her thumb over the back of his hand. The skin of her thumb was smooth, but she had a wicked looking claw at the end of it, her hands partially webbed. Her white-blonde hair was stained with soot and grime, but it looked freshly brushed.

‘You’re very sweet,’ Eran said, his voice rough, tired.
‘I’m not,’ Julvia said, smiling down at the ground. ‘I’m taking comfort too. Unseelie pacifists, we’re a rare thing. It’s hard sometimes. Not all Unseelie fae like us. There’s sometimes this odd kick back against us, against fae like Mosk.’

She looked over to him, but Mosk didn’t respond. Eran thought with some amazement that Mosk might actually be asleep. But then, the events around them had been exhausting. Eran still couldn’t believe Mosk had gotten the eyeliner for him, he’d really thought Mosk was just walking away from him.

‘I know you didn’t want to do that,’ Julvia said. ‘If there was another way to protect us, I know you would have taken it. In my heart, I know that. So thank you, for your sacrifice for us. I fear that the others over there are far too used to bloodshed, at least…the King and his consort are. But outside of feeding my Unseelie appetite, I have never taken a life, and I am so sorry that you had to.’

‘Thank you,’ Eran said, shifting so that he was leaning with his back against the wall properly, his legs stretching out in front of him.

‘How does it feel, to shift like that? I feel so lovely and right, as a swan.’

‘It’s…’ Eran swallowed, shook his head, looked up at the sky that was turning to the colour of a faint bruise. It seemed that somewhere beyond their circular, rocky walls, a captivating sunset might be taking place. ‘I’m not used to it. But then afris are not swans, and nor are ambaros. I think creatures of fire have to be careful.’

‘You are one of the most careful people I have ever met,’ Julvia said warmly. ‘I’ve seen how you are with us, with Mosk. Where do you get that from? Your mother?’

Eran turned his head tiredly, looked at her all-black eyes, the way her eyebrows twisted up earnestly, like she genuinely wanted to know. It would be easy to think of her as Seelie, except she wasn’t.

‘My family,’ Eran said, unable to even smile to recall them. It didn’t feel like warmth to remember them now. ‘All of them.’

‘I wonder what it’s going to be like after,’ Julvia said. ‘After all of this. I keep feeling like it’s water slipping through my fingers. We don’t know what we’re losing, we can’t even take stock. And I fear for the moment we are able to stop and see what we’ve lost.’

‘Me too.’

Julvia sighed too, and then she petted Eran’s hand gently. ‘Do you want to do a bit of exploring? Gwyn said it will be safe around the verkhwin’s home. The creature is an illusionist.’

Eran wanted to say no, because he wanted to be by Mosk’s side, he didn’t want to see hundreds of fae marching towards them. But he couldn’t hear them, he couldn’t see them, and he felt like Julvia needed to stretch her wings. He nodded and stood, and Mosk didn’t move at all. Eran watched him a bit longer, the day was warm, but the rocky wall Mosk leaned against was cold and damp. He walked over to the pack and drew out a blanket, bringing it back and draping it carefully over Mosk.

He still couldn’t quite believe that Mosk didn’t seem to hate him. Kept expecting it to be a delayed response, some trauma that would reveal itself later but wasn’t visible now.

He followed Julvia through the narrow opening out of the verkhwin’s home, and then they walked down another path. Julvia led the way, and they walked quietly and carefully, checking around
corners. Eventually they came upon a set of stairs carved into one of the rocky walls and Eran poked his head to look above and only saw a rising wall of rocks before them, the blue sky, and in the distance, the Nain Rouge sitting back and looking up at the sun, smoking a cigarette. She didn’t even acknowledge them. Several bodies of gulls had been dismembered around her, and Eran wondered if it was food, or for the fun of tearing them apart.

‘It seems okay up here,’ Eran said.

‘The smell of the sea is so strong,’ Julvia said, stretching her wings wide, feathers moving with the small breezes once she’d cleared the last stair. Eran watched her white-cream feathers catching, ruffling gently. He looked around them, but couldn’t see the ocean.

‘Is that why the air is so salty?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. She looked up at some gulls that flew overhead. She sat, stretched her legs out and touched the tips of her fingers to her toes, her wings flexing at the same time. ‘I feel like I’m supposed to be on this journey, but I can’t tell if I’m meant to survive it.’

Eran sat down next to her, keeping his hand on the hilt of his kh’anzar, unable to relax. ‘I think you are.’

‘You care for Mosk a lot,’ she said. ‘If I was using swan-maiden parlance, I’d say you were in the process of giving your heart to him.’

Eran swallowed, not knowing what to think. Was he? And back in Oengus’ tower, the Gancanagh had called him broken-hearted. Eran didn’t know what to think. Of course he had feelings for Mosk, but feelings like that?

‘You don’t want to?’ Julvia said.

‘He’s a very bitter person,’ Eran said. ‘He has his…moments, I guess. But even- I’m not sure…I would have ever noticed him even before. The worst part is he knows it. I can’t lie to him and tell him that just because he’s so beautiful, it doesn’t undo so much of what I find frightening or off-putting about him. That sounds cruel, doesn’t it?’

‘Honest, actually,’ Julvia said. ‘It sounds honest. So what were you like, before the ice came? What did you like?’

‘Oh,’ Eran said, laughing softly, tiredly. ‘Fun. I mean, I had…a long time before they were going to make me be chieftain, and I was determined to make it less serious than my Uncle did. But even so, I just wanted to have a good time. It feels right, you know? A fire does best when it’s leaping and crackling and laughing in a hearth. I loved people who shared that with me. People who loved to dance, or laugh, or sing songs around a fire.’

‘That does sound fun,’ Julvia said. ‘Do you think you’ll still want that after all this is over? Are you the same person now that you were back then?’

That was the issue, really. Eran had been losing track of the person he used to be. It was even harder to do the fire rituals than it used to be, though he still loved them when he found time for them. It was harder to laugh. He hadn’t danced. He rarely sang. He felt like a candle with the snuffer hanging over him, a fire staring up at the blanket that would put it out.

‘Maybe Mosk can learn to dance,’ Julvia said. ‘And maybe he knows how to sing. I’m sure he can laugh.’
‘You’re a matchmaker,’ Eran said, smiling at her, and she shrugged her shoulders, her wings, and then nodded.

‘Yes, well, it’s what we do. But also I think he wants to learn things from the world, and I think he wants to learn from you. It doesn’t just have to be you teaching him how to survive, Eran. Unless it hurts too much to think about the dancing and laughing and singing now.’

‘This isn’t a very relaxing conversation,’ Eran said reproachfully. Julvia smiled at him, creases around her eyes crinkling.

‘Isn’t it? Oh well. You can blame it on my being trapped in swan form for so long? Or whatever you like. But I’ve always been a little like this. I feel more and more like myself on this journey, which was why I knew I had to come. I was never going to grow and get stronger in the Unseelie Court. They all cared about me too much to let me grow. I fear my sister wants to preserve me as she remembers me, but I am not some static thing. Even feathers don’t stay still once they’ve been detached from the wing, do they?’

‘But it’s so dangerous.’

‘I know,’ Julvia said seriously. ‘And I am no help at all. I cannot wield any weapon and I would refuse even if I knew my wielding a weapon could save a life. The King prefers violence as an answer to his problems, and the rest of the fae he encounters are like that too. So I’m scared, too.’

‘Fenwrel said she thought I was running towards my death,’ Eran said quietly. ‘Do you think you’re doing the same?’

‘I don’t think any of us are running towards our deaths,’ Julvia said, sighing. ‘Though the Nain Rouge being here with us might make me reconsider that. She is death incarnate, isn’t she?’

They looked over to her, and the Nain Rouge chose that moment to look back at them. She had gore and feathers around her mouth. It made Eran’s skin crawl. But then she ignored them again, and Eran sat there feeling strange. Like he’d been dislocated out of himself.

‘I really thought he’d hate me,’ Eran said.

‘Maybe he’s changed,’ Julvia said.

Eran frowned, thinking it over. It wasn’t only that. It was that his true form was fire. It was huge – taller than afrit and ambaros both, as though his hybrid form had gained height and breadth out of nothing. He frightened himself. He lost his ability to think properly. He could only focus on what was in front of him. Could only see that he needed to survive, to not hurt the people he was protecting, to not burn only for the sake of burning.

The last was the hardest of all. A fire really only wanted to burn, and given the opportunity, to burn the whole world if possible.

Eran startled when Julvia wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her head alongside his, her wings bending forwards and shadowing him.

‘Maybe you’ve changed too,’ she said gently. ‘But it’s okay.’

There was something about her, the way she just offered the comfort like his mother might, and Eran was frozen in it. He knew the right thing to do would be to return the hug. He really liked Julvia and didn’t quite know why she was travelling with them, but was grateful for it all the same, but his brain wouldn’t work. Her body was sun-warmed and it seemed like his mother could be
right there, warm arms about his shoulders. But his mother’s hair had smelled of fire and smoke, and Julvia’s smelled of bird musk, and even then he couldn’t move.

She held him for a long time, easing back slowly and gracefully, a sad smile on her face.

‘I think I’m meant to be here,’ she said finally.

‘Yeah,’ Eran said, his voice cracking.

‘Really,’ she said. ‘I know the King doesn’t believe in fate or luck, but I do. I wavered, at first, when I first met you both. But then I just knew, when we lost contact with you at the forest. And it’s frightening isn’t it? To walk a fated path. But then I think…’ She pressed her hands down into her knees and looked up at the sun, taking a deep breath. ‘Then I think, ah, that might be exciting though. But it seems to be a lot of running and also thinking that you need some more care, and so does Mosk. And Ash, actually.’

‘Ash?’

‘Yes, he’s…’ She squinted. Then shrugged. ‘Oh, I don’t know. Do you think we should get back though?’

Eran nodded. He’d grown a bit more at ease while they’d been talking, but he didn’t think it was safe to. Best to get back where they had something like shelter. For all that it was good to get away for a bit, he felt how trapped they were. He couldn’t see or hear the people who would hurt them, but he knew they were coming.

‘Are you coming too?’ Julvia called to the Nain Rouge.

‘Later,’ the Nain Rouge called back, waving her hand dismissively. She was smoking another cigarette.

Eran didn’t know what to make of her. Even in true-form he’d been terrified of her weapons, felling people in a way that he hadn’t seen before. He steered clear of her and what she was doing, stayed focused on the others. Even once the Nain Rouge ran out of ammunition, she then leapt directly onto fae, ripping at their eyes and jaws and throats. Her method of murder was unrestrained violence.

Gwyn’s wasn’t much better.

Eran had done it though. He’d shifted. Mosk…didn’t currently hate him.

Eran was disturbed by how much that mattered to him, after Julvia’s words. There was no way he was giving his heart to Mosk. He just cared about him.

It was the right thing to do.

*

As night fell, the verkhwin woke and moved around its large, circular pit in the rocks. Occasionally it stopped and seemed to inspect the fae around it, and sometimes it crawled vertically up the walls and vanished. Gwyn returned with it the third time – having gotten up to do some more scouting – and when he came back, his expression was grim.

‘They’re coming,’ he said.
Augus watched silently, eyes red-rimmed and skin paler than normal. He had a strip of cream cotton wrapped around his face now, tied at the back, protecting his nose and mouth from the worst of the salt in the air. It reminded Eran of the veils he’d worn back home to protect him from the dust, but they’d been translucent.

Then, Augus lifted his hands and signed rapidly, and Gwyn signed back just as quickly, shaking his head.

Gwyn approached the verkhwin, picked up the same rock he’d used before and started making those same noises before. It woke Mosk, who startled with a sharp intake of breath, then clawed the blanket off of him before realising where they were. He looked to Eran straight away, and he didn’t seem angry even now. He seemed…like he was checking for someone he needed.

Eran felt queasy.

‘It’s okay,’ Eran said, unable to believe his own words. He felt how their world was narrowing, how their options were closing.

‘Is it?’ Mosk said.

‘You don’t believe me?’ Eran said, a faint teasing in his voice, a weak smile.

Mosk frowned and looked around at where they were. Finally he just shook his head and looked down, and Eran wished he could show his own fears that easily.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, standing abruptly, commanding all of their attention. ‘The verkhwin has allowed us to stay overnight. In the morning we will be going down to the shore, in the hopes of summoning a boat.’

Augus signed a curt response, eyes narrowing, and Gwyn stared at him for a long time.

‘We are out of options,’ Gwyn said firmly. ‘And I believe this is our best chance for survival. I shall be working on a charm overnight to summon the resources I think we need. I still have my magic, if little else.’

‘We cannot stay here,’ Julvia said. ‘We are so exposed, aren’t we?’

‘We are,’ Gwyn agreed. ‘The verkhwin has agreed to let us into the adjacent pocket of space that they occupy. It’s quite unlike this place, and will be protected, but still give us something of a view to what is happening around us. At first light, we move down to the shore. There will be a lookout where we can assess what’s happening without being seen. The verkhwin’s illusion magic is strong, but also no one will expect us to be sheltering here. Even if it’s picked up by Mages or other magic-crafters, the likelihood is good that they will just see this as a verkhwin’s lair and leave it be.’

‘Unless they want to kill the verkhwin too,’ Ash said, his voice rough.

‘It’s possible,’ Gwyn said, shrugging one shoulder. ‘Eran, you may need to shift again if we need that.’

Eran nodded, couldn’t say anything. He’d done it once, so he could obviously do it again. He didn’t think it would make a difference now. It was as though he could feel the energy beginning to crowd around them. It wasn’t cold like the ice, but like a thrumming aliveness in the air. Jangling and pressing in too close, making him feel claustrophobic.
‘What about the Nain Rouge?’ Julvia said.

‘She can slip into the pocket realm if she wants to,’ Gwyn said. ‘But she was quite clear that she would detach from our party and rejoin us when necessary. We can’t rely on her. No one in their right mind ever should.’ He paused and then added: ‘She has, however, made a blood-oath to not harm us unduly, at least for a short period of time. It’s the best we can hope for. Does anyone have any questions?’

Augus was already signing, and Eran watched as they began a conversation that he didn’t understand. There were so many languages he was meant to learn but hadn’t gotten around to yet. So many Court languages, or languages more relevant to trading, to maintaining connections to other groups. Instead, he’d learned what was relevant to him in the desert, what was necessary as a fire fae. He was fluent in twenty languages, could understand the basics of many more, but he wasn’t in the desert anymore, and had never really thought about how their realm was filled with thousands of languages.

‘Have you ever been in a realm within a realm before?’ Mosk said softly. ‘Properly?’

Eran shook his head, and Mosk’s lips lifted. ‘I have. We had them in the Aur forest. I don’t know what it will be like here, but…I liked them.’

‘What do you like about them?’

‘You’ll see,’ Mosk said, looking around them curiously. He picked up the stone with the spiral on it, holding it tightly.

*

The verkhwin pulled a bag from under its clothing of shells and fishing nets and other debris. Inside, many quartz point crystals that gleamed like mother-of-pearl. It moved around the circle quickly, jumping up to shove the long points at varying hollows in the walls that otherwise looked meaningless, and no different to other random places where the stone had been eaten away.

Once all the points had been placed, the verkhwin moved until it was standing in front of the black-stained stone where the fire had once been. There was nothing left except bits of charcoal, smudges of soot.

‘Brace yourselves,’ Gwyn commanded, and Eran looked at him. He had no idea what to expect.

A wave of dizziness, and Eran was glad that he was still sitting on the ground. He braced his hands on the stone floor, and blinked as the air around them rippled like intense heat haze, the kind that made the desperate see oases where there were none. The rippling grew stronger, until Eran had to close his eyes.

When he opened them again, it was to the crackling of a large fire in the middle of the stone circle where the husk of a fire had been. The stars were no longer above them, they were protected by a dome of stone with small holes to help vent the smoke. Eran stared at the large bonfire, the fire healthy and happy. He looked around the circular space only to see many caves branching off from it now. At least eight.

The walls glimmered and shone with mica and other crystals embedded into the walls. Shells had been strung on twine all around the room in rich garlands, gleaming as the firelight touched them. Fish were smoked nearby on a rack by the fire.

‘Nice,’ Ash said to the verkhwin. ‘What a beautiful home. Thanks so much for letting us stay here,
The verkhwin pointed at a cave, and Gwyn nodded.

‘We’re to stay out of the way,’ Gwyn said. ‘There will be lodging. Come along, I’ll show you.’

Augus signed in the dim lighting, and Gwyn made a noise of agreement.

‘A few times,’ Gwyn said. ‘I’ve never stayed for long, but I’m familiar with the etiquette. Once we’re in their proper abode, we’re to keep to ourselves as much as possible. Let’s go.’

Eran grabbed the rope trailing from Mosk’s wrist, more for himself than for Mosk. He followed Gwyn, Augus, Ash and Julvia down a cave that led them into almost complete darkness. Here, tiny bits of phosphorescence glowed in blues and greens on the cave walls, and when Eran looked closer, he saw the silhouettes of the tiny worms and insects that made the lights. When he looked at Mosk, his deep green hair shone brighter, something in the strands reacting strangely to the glow around them. It was even in his eyebrows, his eyelashes.

Mosk looked back at him, unaware.

Eventually, the pebbles crunching underfoot became something that felt like moss, but it was dry. Eran stared down at it, trying to understand, even as it muffled and absorbed all the sounds. No longer were their movements echoing, and soon, the walls themselves had the same substance attached to it. The only place it wasn’t found was the ceiling above them.

‘This is a very old lair,’ Gwyn said, sounding relieved.

‘Can we not just stay here until the battling is over?’ Julvia said.

‘Verkhwins are too private to allow more than a day’s proper lodging,’ Gwyn said with a surprising amount of patience. ‘Even if I were to negotiate with my finest offerings, the verkhwin would turn me down. Also, there is no telling how long this battle will last, and when the ice will come again. I do not want to be caught in a cave system when it comes.’

Not if it comes, but when. Eran looked around them again, tried to sense if the cold he was feeling in his skin was fear, the fact that they were in a cave system and near the sea, or the strangeness of the ice.

He wound the trailing piece of rope around his hand until Mosk bumped into his side, grunting. Eran didn’t let go again. He sensed Mosk’s eyes on him.

‘Okay,’ Gwyn said, when they reached an intersection of tunnels, the ceiling bright now, as though the verkhwin had encouraged all the glowing things to amass together to give more light. Here, Eran could see that the soft floor covering, the walls, seemed to be made of a combination of bird down and spiderweb. It glittered coolly in the light, was soft but faintly clinging to the touch. ‘Let’s scout the rooms and work out sleeping arrangements for the evening.’

Twenty minutes later, Mosk and Eran had their own cave. It was more like a nest, and Eran lowered his pack onto the moss-like floor and sank gratefully onto it himself. Because he sat, Mosk had to do the same. For the first time since the beginning, Eran had complete control over Mosk’s actions, and he wasn’t willing to surrender the rope. Not yet.

‘Eran?’ Mosk said quietly.
Eran said nothing, thinking about how Gwyn had gone to explore further, about how Augus and Ash were in a cave on the other side of the intersection. Julvia had a small cave of her own, requesting a place to stretch her wings and be with her own thoughts. Eran and Mosk had a choice of several caves, and Eran chose the one furthest away. He needed space.

‘Eran?’

‘Not now,’ Eran said. ‘Be quiet.’

To his surprise, Mosk fell silent. A few minutes later, Eran looked over at him, the shape of his face in the dim glowing light. The way his hair even now still shone brighter than before. He looked down at the rope he gripped tightly in his hand. Mosk hadn’t asked the rope to be taken off his wrist once. Mosk was the one to say that Eran would have to force him, the one to say that he knew what he wanted, and Eran was the one who kept rejecting him.

He gripped the rope so tightly that he felt his skin stretching over his knuckles. He felt the rope fibres burning into his palm. It wasn’t even a rough rope, but Eran was so tense, on the precipice of something too great, too wide to understand.

One more night and then they were all probably going to die. Except the King, because Kings couldn’t be killed.

But he might wish he had been. There were lots of things you could do to a nigh invincible fae. Mosk would know, Mosk had killed Davix.

‘What’s wrong?’ Mosk said, his voice uncertain.

Eran felt a burst of displeasure that Mosk continued to talk, and then reached for his pack automatically, his body making the decision before his mind had caught up.

Lengths of rope, and a bandage. He took the bandage up and stared at it for a long time, feeling breathless and strange, then he looked at Mosk.

‘Open your mouth,’ he said. He could hear his voice, it wasn’t a request, but a command. He felt as determined as he had the night Mosk had goaded him into this, but Mosk wasn’t goading him now.

Mosk hesitated for a long time, then his lips parted. Eran moved forwards and unwound the bandage, then he doubled it so that it was thicker and shorter, and pressed that into Mosk’s open mouth. He tied it behind his head, staring down at Mosk as he did so.

‘I told you to be quiet,’ Eran explained, feeling his heart pound harder. Mosk wasn’t even fighting him. Not yet. He would though, he would when he realised that Eran wasn’t going to hurt him the way he so often wanted to be hurt. ‘So you’re going to be quiet. Because if you can’t do something on your own, I’ll help you do it.’

Mosk’s eyes flashed up to him, half-glare, half something else. Maybe appeal? Eran couldn’t tell. Eran reached out to trace one of Mosk’s eyebrows with his thumb, and Mosk jerked away from the gentle touch, scowling. So Eran grasped his hair instead, holding Mosk’s head still, keeping him in place.

Julvia was right. He wasn’t the person he used to be. He wasn’t sure he’d ever know that person again. Whenever he’d done this in the past with other lovers, it had been playful, not serious. Could he ever be playful with Mosk? Could it ever be fun, between them?

The eye contact must have become too uncomfortable for Mosk, because he looked away. Then he
tried to move out of Eran’s grip, and Eran didn’t let him. Eran knew he was stronger than Mosk, even if they were both the same status. He would always be stronger than him.

‘Stop,’ Eran said.

Mosk stopped. His chest was moving with shallow, fast breaths. His fingers had splayed. Eran looked down at them, and then let go of Mosk’s hair and picked up another length of rope.

‘Arms behind your back,’ Eran said.

He hadn’t heard anyone else talking. Hadn’t heard Gwyn return. The wall and floor coverings took the sounds and hid them deep. No one would know what he was doing right now except the cave itself, Mosk, and whatever tiny glowing creatures observed from above.

Mosk huffed an exhale from behind the gag and then moved his arms behind his back. Eran shifted and began roping them together. He left the other bit of rope on Mosk’s wrist, and instead focused on his elbows, his forearms, even his fingers and the way they cupped his forearms. When he rubbed his fingers gently along Mosk’s forearm, Mosk made a muffled sound of discontent, and Eran wondered how much it was reminding him of what had been done to him. What the Mages had done.

They’d tied him up, hadn’t they? But Mosk said he liked the ropes. They’d touched him gently. Mosk said he hated that.

Eran touched him gently again, and Mosk jerked away. Eran caught him by his bound arms and pulled him back.

‘You said,’ Eran said quietly, ‘that I’d have to force you. I hope you knew what you were doing.’

Of course he wouldn’t have. So Eran remembered that he’d have to be vigilant. Mosk jerking away from him, scowling at him, that was allowed. Mosk’s gaze turning distant and lost, going still and withdrawn in terror…that was not.

Eran met that scowl calmly, and Mosk’s breathing was audible between them. Eran knew he’d have to somehow make this a mix of what they both wanted. Except that Eran wanted all of it so far. He wanted to grip Mosk’s hair, he even wanted to shake him and see if Mosk would tense against him or allow it. He wanted to push him down, he wanted to bind him in so many ropes that Mosk couldn’t turn his head away, couldn’t kick his legs, couldn’t do more than squirm. He wanted to trail his hand down Mosk’s chest and rub soothingly at his flank, and by Kabiri, he even wanted the way Mosk would react to it while he still hated it.

‘Down,’ Eran said, pushing Mosk at the chest as he said it, onto his back and his bound arms. It wouldn’t be comfortable, but at least he had a soft surface beneath him. ‘Take some deep breaths, Mosk.’

Mosk made a muffled sound of anger, and Eran stared down at him implacably. For a long time nothing happened and then, impossibly, Mosk’s chest heaved at an attempt at a deeper breath. Then another. Unsteady and hitching and Eran couldn’t tell if he was terrified, enraged, aroused. He wasn’t willing to press a hand between Mosk’s legs to find out. Not yet.

‘That’s good,’ Eran said, his voice softening. ‘You’re so good when you listen, Mosk.’

Mosk’s eyes squeezed shut, his breathing turned shallow all over again, but then – making a rush of warmth trickle through Eran’s chest – he tried to take those deeper breaths again. He was trying to be good. He was trying to be good for Eran.
Eran rubbed firmly at his chest, reassuringly. He hoped the touch was hard enough, offered enough friction, that it wouldn’t be interpreted as gentle. He didn’t want this part to aggravate. He was genuinely pleased that Mosk was trying, and it felt important that he was. Nourishing, somehow. He was still so exhausted after the day they’d had. Tired after so much time running, keeping watch, never getting a full night’s sleep because of duties or anxieties.

‘You were so kind today,’ Eran said, his voice surprisingly smooth despite the rush of feeling inside of him.

Mosk’s eyes opened, he stared up for a long time, before his eyes slid down to meet Eran’s.

‘I didn’t think you’d be like that,’ Eran said. ‘Sometimes you’re not kind at all.’

Mosk’s shoulders moved, he was pulling at the ropes, and Eran watched him closely. Maybe too closely. But he couldn’t help himself. He leaned closer, keeping a hand on Mosk’s chest, pinning him down, sliding the other down Mosk’s torso.

It was like last time, and yet nothing like last time. His fingers rucking up Mosk’s shirt, touching the skin beneath. It was so smooth. Then he dug his fingers into the hem of Mosk’s pants and tugged for the sake of it, knowing they wouldn’t move until he’d undone the fastening. His instincts were right. Mosk’s resistance melted away. His eyes fluttered closed.

Mosk had never gotten aroused when he’d been used roughly by the strangers back in Summervale. Eran had seen that for himself. He’d been forced to see it. But when Eran did it, something changed. Eran could feel Mosk’s hardness through his pants, against his palm.

Maybe Mosk was – in swan-maiden parlance – giving his heart to Eran. The thought was terrifying. Eran doubted Mosk had enough of his heart left to do anything with it.

‘I’m going to do what I want,’ Eran said abruptly, moving his hands to Mosk’s pants and undoing the fastening. ‘Can you breathe okay through the gag?’

Mosk nodded, even as he swallowed loudly enough that Eran could hear it.

‘Good,’ Eran said. He looked up as he crouched between Mosk’s legs. ‘I like it when you answer me, when you interact. Even with a gag, I still like it.’

Mosk squirmed beneath him. Was it too much? Did he not like hearing good things about himself? Or did he like it a lot?

He was still hard. Eran was too.

Eran eased Mosk’s cock out of his pants and stroked his fingers along the underside of it. Pressed into the base, rubbed the sensitive skin beneath the head of his cock, thumbed the foreskin that hadn’t fully retracted. Mosk made a small, choked sound, and Eran bowed his head and touched his tongue to the tip of Mosk’s cock.

Mosk’s entire body went rigid, then one of his legs bent and pressed down hard into the soft ground.

‘Since a handjob was new,’ Eran said, his breath over Mosk’s cock, ‘is this new too? Did any of those clients ever care enough to do this? Would you even have let them if they did? But you’re going to let me, aren’t you?’

He looked up, and Mosk was staring down at him, his eyes wide, his breath harsh.
‘Aren’t you, Mosk?’ Eran repeated, squeezing his hand gently on Mosk’s cock.

Mosk nodded, blinking rapidly, and then as Eran lowered his head again, he felt the way Mosk’s upper body went limp, his head falling back. His torso shifting as his bound arms moved behind his back.

His cock tasted salty, which didn’t surprise Eran at all. It wasn’t like they had an abundance of opportunities to shower, and while they didn’t have to worry too much about odour like underfae did, Mosk’s flavour was stronger than Eran thought it might normally be. Eran didn’t care. He spent his life eating burned, charred foods. He found nuance in blackened food the way others found it in sweet flavours. He liked the earthiness, the saltiness, even that faint flavour of green, like he’d just tasted grass.

He pushed Mosk’s foreskin down with his lips. Normally he’d be gentler about it, coax it down, but he knew with this he had to ride the line between caring, but not too caring. He kept one hand on Mosk’s hip, pinning him down, the other circled around his cock. He lowered his head until his stubble could scrape his own hands, and then he lifted off entirely and deliberately scraped his stubble along the underside of Mosk’s length.

The noise Mosk made then was beautiful. Rich, tortured, needy. Eran’s cock felt like it pulsed in time with it. Eran looked up, but Mosk wasn’t looking back at him.

So Eran bent down again and felt how much hotter his mouth was compared to Mosk’s skin. But Mosk wasn’t struggling beyond the reflexive squirms that happened whenever Eran sucked too hard, whenever he changed the rhythm so that it was faster, harder.

Mosk made increasing amounts of noise, his mouth sometimes shaping around words that were always unclear. Sometimes he sounded like he hated it, sometimes like he loved it, and Eran imagined it was a bit of both. He remembered receiving his first blowjob, an ambaros woman who had poured wine over his cock and pants before sucking him down, while Eran laughed in disbelief and then couldn’t stop stroking her shoulders, her neck, her hair, filled with more love than he’d ever felt before.

He’d spent the rest of the night learning how to eat her out, his tongue and mouth exhausted, his face wet, his heart singing with this newfound knowledge of the things he could do to enchant others. It felt like only a secret he knew, except he learned that so many fae knew it. This giving and taking, how good it was.

But he also remembered the tension and thrill of that first time. Worrying he’d somehow do it wrong, even though all he was supposed to do was be a part of it, be present in it.

He desperately wanted Mosk to be present in it too.

He lifted off suddenly, relishing the way Mosk’s hips arched up needily, like he wanted it. Eran stared at him hungrily. The way his eyes were squeezed shut, his mouth open, a tiny glimmer of drool at the corner of his lips.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ Eran said roughly.

Mosk shook his head.

‘Because I can,’ Eran said. ‘I could stop right now.’

The rush of power at saying those words, coupled with the way Mosk planted his feet and pushed his hips up, it was so good that Eran’s balls ached with it.
‘But you hate this,’ Eran said. ‘Don’t you? I thought you wanted me to hurt you.’

Mosk made a visceral sound of frustration, his eyes opening, his head lifting. Eran watched him, kept that gaze, and slipped his hand between their torsos, curling two fingers around Mosk’s spit slick cock. He rubbed them up and down teasingly, then let go, pinning Mosk’s hip down instead.

‘You really haven’t a single idea of what you like, do you?’ Eran said, staring down at him. ‘You think you just want to be tortured, but…tell me someone has done this to you, like this? How can you know what you like if you haven’t even experienced it yet?’

Mosk couldn’t tell him anything at all, but Eran was soaking up all his direct eye contact.

‘Is it too much?’ Eran said.

Mosk nodded.

‘Do you hate it?’

Mosk nodded again, tearing his eyes away and staring off to the side. Eran grit his teeth and grasped Mosk’s cock, jerking him off, making the most of the saliva that was drying, and Mosk made a wounded sound, his whole torso jerking towards that touch.

‘Do you hate it?’ Eran said again, his voice harder. ‘Don’t lie to me.’

A strangled sound, Mosk wasn’t shaking or nodding his head, and Eran knew Mosk didn’t know how he felt about it. He couldn’t respond to anything that might be good like it was good.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ Eran said.

Mosk hesitated, then shook his head, his eyes closing again.

‘Then I won’t stop,’ Eran breathed, moving back down between his legs and using his own hand to rest the head of Mosk’s cock on his tongue. Mosk shook, one thigh falling outward and the other collapsing down.

He didn’t stop. He let Mosk’s cock brush against the back of his throat, he kept a tight ring with his fingers at the base, and he loved feeling Mosk trembling beneath him. Loved the tension in his muscles. Loved that he wasn’t limp and unresponsive, or hitting and fighting him. Loved that he couldn’t do anything to get away, and that if he wanted it to stop, he’d have to communicate it without punching or hitting or insulting him.

He also loved that this might be Mosk’s first time experiencing a blowjob, maybe only his second time at receiving pleasure from a sexual experience. It still boggled Eran’s mind, but he pushed away the complicated feelings he had about that, and applied his skills instead, his hot tongue, his wet mouth, the saliva dripping down onto his fingers.

The irregular, fractious sounds from Mosk built until they broke into rough cries, until his shoulders twisted and Mosk’s torso went to move to the side, like the sensations were too much. Eran kept his hips pinned in place, listened to the way Mosk’s voice broke behind the gag, wondered if he’d be saying Don’t over and over again, but it sounded like he was past words.

Eran wished he had more hands to touch him with. To touch his chest, to stroke his sides, to cup his balls or massage the skin behind them.

Mosk’s noises strangled down into silence and then his cock swelled in Eran’s mouth. His hips
jerked several times, he shook, his breath deeper than it had been all night, and then he was coming, the taste of it earthy and less salty than his sweat. Eran swallowed easily, and when Mosk went limp, he chanced the opportunity to rub circles into the soft skin of his pelvis, to be gentle.

He lifted up, letting go of Mosk’s cock to press the heel of his palm into the base of his own, breathing roughly. He was so close. He fumbled with the fastening of his own pants. Last time he was so focused on Mosk, he forgot about himself, and it became not easy exactly to forget about his arousal, but it was possible. Now, all he felt was heat and fire, and his breathing came unsteady even as he knew he needed to untie Mosk’s arms.

Mosk made a sound, and Eran looked up to see Mosk watching him with bright, pleading eyes.

*You have to take care of him.*

He was still wearing the gag, Eran couldn’t just leave him like that. He wrenched his hand away from himself and reached for Mosk’s head instead, fingers moving behind to untie the knot. He unwrapped the bandage and saw how the chafing was worse at one corner of Mosk’s lips. Absently, he touched his fingers to it, stroking. His lips were soft too. Eran wanted to kiss him so badly.

‘Fuck me,’ Mosk said, staring at me. ‘You want to. I know you do.’

‘No,’ Eran said. ‘You’re not- I’m not ready for that.’

‘Then just…’ Mosk stared down between Eran’s legs, and then his arms jerked behind his back. ‘Let me- *Something.* Please. Let me suck you, even. I’m not as good as you, but I can still do it.’

Eran stared at him for a long time, the image of Mosk’s lips around his cock stealing his ability to think. He wanted that. He did.

‘I should untie you,’ Eran said, uncertain.

‘No,’ Mosk said, pausing to inhale hugely. ‘Just…come up. Use me, *something,* just-’

Eran was moving before he’d even agreed to it. Crawling up Mosk’s body until he was straddling his chest, until he could wrap his hands around the back of Mosk’s head, one sticky from his own saliva. Mosk was already lying on something of an incline, if Eran pulled his head up a little more, Mosk would be able to taste him.

He kept thinking of all the reasons not to do this, but Mosk’s mouth was half-open, his eyes were bright, he wasn’t shoving Eran away because he *couldn’t.* If Eran did this, he’d have to be careful.

‘Just a little,’ Eran said finally. Mosk closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and the image was so good, so intense, Eran felt like he wouldn’t need much anyway. He inched forwards, the tip of his cock pressing between Mosk’s lips. Enough that the head of his cock could rest on his tongue, but no more.

Mosk waited, and when nothing else happened, he closed his lips to make a seal, his tongue moving hesitantly, gently exploring. Eran stared down with wide eyes, wondered if Mosk had ever been allowed to do that before. If he was ever allowed to just…take a little, take his time. His tongue was so soft. The gentle ridges of his teeth rested against Eran’s cock, but it didn’t hurt. Eran felt dizzy with the control he had. He knew he could yank Mosk’s head forward, or thrust deeply, do whatever he wanted, and Mosk couldn’t even kick him or twist away.

Eran’s breathing came faster.
He didn’t do any of those things, but he did let go of Mosk’s head with one of his hands, bringing it around to wrap fingers over the rest of his cock that Mosk didn’t touch. He jacked his cock slowly, watched the tiny movements it made in and out of Mosk’s mouth.

‘Like that?’ Eran said, forgetting that he was supposed to be commanding, shaken by the idea that Mosk might actually want this.

Mosk nodded imperceptibly, and Eran couldn’t look away, his shoulders bowed, his eyes staring straight down at Mosk’s face. It was mostly in shadow, but he could see the stain of eyelashes on Mosk’s cheeks. See the way his lips didn’t once break that seal they’d formed. He could feel the saliva in Mosk’s mouth building, creating a tighter, wetter, warmth.

‘Fuck,’ Eran breathed, his spine feeling tight, his lower back tensing. ‘Okay, okay, that’s good. By Kabiri, that’s…’

He couldn’t make himself look away, even though he wanted to close his eyes and surrender himself to it. Mosk looked like he was made for it, and of course that wasn’t true, it couldn’t be true, but in that moment the idea that Mosk wanted this as much as Eran did – even if it was a myth – was enough to have Eran’s balls tightening. He fought with himself not to thrust deeper, to not be too reckless, but his fingers still scraped over Mosk’s scalp, he still caught up his hair in a tight grip.

Mosk moaned around him then, and Eran cried out hoarsely in response, his voice low and thick. He hadn’t realised he was so close, hadn’t realised it would affect him like this, to have so much control.

He didn’t think to withdraw, and after his first pulse of come, Mosk’s eyes flew open and he jerked backwards, making a sound of pained shock. He’d been hurt.

A burst of horror in Eran.

His mouth opened, he forced himself backwards, unable to stop the jets of come as they spilled onto Mosk’s shirt, the down and spider-web behind him. He braced himself with one arm by Mosk’s side, unable to even talk, to ask if he was okay.

‘It burned me,’ Mosk said, after swallowing. Closing his mouth, looking away.

Did it? Eran let go of his cock, still shuddering, a mix of alarmed and sated and tired and concerned. He raised his thumb to Mosk’s chin and pulled his mouth open, but it was too dark to see inside. He let go and Mosk closed his mouth, his breathing still shaky.

‘It’s not…’ Mosk trailed off, he stared at Eran. He seemed to be moving his tongue around his mouth. ‘It didn’t- It just felt like it was…’

‘It didn’t?’ Eran said. He’d never encountered this problem before, but…his body temperature was hotter than a lot of fae, and his come was hot because of it. ‘Are you sure?’

Mosk nodded. ‘It just felt like it was. I can do it next time. I’m sorry.’

*I can do it next time.*

Like there would be a next time.

Eran wanted to bend down and kiss him. He wanted to press his lips to Mosk’s forehead. He wanted to stroke and kiss his chest.
Then his mind caught up with the rest of what Mosk had said and he frowned.

‘You don’t need to be sorry,’ he said. ‘Why would you be sorry for that?’

Mosk stared at him, expression unreadable, and then he turned away and said nothing at all. Eran frowned, sighed, and then moved off Mosk’s chest as guilt crept back in. But he didn’t have time to indulge that, not now. It was like in the tower, he needed to make sure that Mosk was all right first. Or at least, as much as possible.

‘Here,’ Eran said, helping him to sit up carefully. ‘Let me untie your arms. Do they hurt?’

‘A little,’ Mosk admitted after a pause. ‘I think I just…sort of forgot about them.’

‘That’s okay,’ Eran said, undoing the knot he’d made. He’d tried a different knot this time, and it hadn’t tightened while Mosk had struggled, making it very easy to undo. It also meant that the pressure of the ropes hadn’t constrained Mosk’s arms further as he struggled. He slowly unwound the ropes, rubbing blood back into the skin as he went, listening to Mosk’s unsteady breathing. ‘Why were you sorry?’

‘Fuck off,’ Mosk said thinly.

_Because you couldn’t do what you thought I wanted you to do? Do you want to please me that badly?_

How could it be possible? Yet, as soon as Eran thought it, it felt like it might be true. And he couldn’t imagine Mosk would be ready to say anything like that yet. Maybe he didn’t even know he felt that way.

‘You don’t have to tell me, it’s okay, we’ll just let it go,’ Eran said.

‘Stop being nice to me,’ Mosk muttered.

‘No,’ Eran said, smiling a little. ‘I get to now. Because you were so good.’

Mosk twisted quickly, his arm flying up – despite how sore it must have been – to hit or punch now that he was free, and Eran caught his wrist in a tight grip.

‘Don’t ruin it,’ Eran said, his voice harder than before.

‘Don’t…ruin it,’ Mosk echoed, sounding uncertain. But Eran took a moment to think over the words, still holding his wrist up in the air where it’d been about to connect with his face.

Maybe it would have been too much, to be gentle to him now. Eran wanted to believe Mosk was ready for it, wanted to believe it, because it would make his own life easier to be able to care for and comfort Mosk as much as he thought Mosk needed. As much as they both needed. Eran wanted to press his face next to Mosk’s and not think about what might be coming, what might be ending. As fatalistic as he’d been only a short while ago, he wanted at least another few months, some more time to understand what was happening, what he could do to help.

He lowered Mosk’s wrist back to the ground and drew all the rope away except for one. With the one that remained, he took up the leading edge of it and held it in his hand, stroking his thumb over it, wishing it was Mosk’s face or arm instead.

‘I’ll try not to,’ Eran said. ‘Ruin it, that is. Are you sure you weren’t burned?’
‘It was different,’ Mosk said, his voice rough. A second later he yawned, his shoulders slumping, and Eran knew this was a lot for him. A lot of exertion. A lot of feeling. A lot of emotion. Eran was tired too, it stretched all the way down into the depths of his chest, and made him want to curl up by a fire and gaze at the fire’s spirit leaping. ‘It’s fine now. I thought it was…burning me. I didn’t know it would be like that. But there was…a snow fae once, I think, and it was different.’

Eran didn’t really want to hear about all of the ‘clients’ Mosk had in the past. He put the rope away with care and drew out a blanket and a handkerchief. With the handkerchief, he wiped away the spilled come, thinking that if it happened again, it would be easier to just lick it away. Then he crumpled that up – it had been cheap after all – and threw it to the side of the cave, encouraging Mosk to lie down. Surprisingly, Mosk did, pressing his back to Eran’s chest.

Mosk lifted his hips and pulled his pants back up where they’d slipped a little. Did the fastening back up. Eran thought he felt a little cold, he leaned closer, tucked the blanket in around them both. Listened to Mosk’s unsteady breathing.

‘Do you ever want to talk about it?’ Eran said. ‘Those…clients? Those fae?’

‘No,’ Mosk said. Eran felt relieved, because he wasn’t sure he could hear about the string of those fae that had found him. Mosk didn’t have a single bit of coin to show for it either. He’d just…let himself be used.

‘You know you can, if you want to?’

‘Is there any point?’ Mosk said, sounding surprisingly neutral given how bitter the words were. ‘With what’s coming? I know it’s bad. It’s bad, isn’t it? You’re afraid. You’re never afraid.’

‘You’ve seen me afraid,’ Eran said chidingly.

‘Not like this,’ Mosk said. ‘Not like today.’

Eran closed his eyes. He tilted his forehead forward until it pressed into Mosk’s hair. Until his nose bumped against Mosk’s scalp.

‘Nothing has been like today,’ Eran said.

And I don’t know if we’ll have a tomorrow. And neither does the King.

‘We just have to hope,’ Eran said.

‘I’m bad at that.’

‘I know,’ Eran said. ‘I know it’s hard for you. It’s hard for me too. But that’s what we have to do, okay?’

Mosk was silent. His breathing turned slow and even, and Eran’s eyes burned with tears that he didn’t want to shed, because it seemed like he would never stop crying on this stupid journey, and he wanted to feel bold and full of confidence, not scared and lost.

He was surprised when Mosk twisted and faced him, close enough to hear and feel each other’s breathing.

‘Okay,’ Mosk said. ‘Don’t let go of the rope tomorrow.’

Eran didn’t want to let go of it at all.
'I won’t,’ he said. ‘I won’t. Unless I have to. To save your life.’

Mosk’s breath paused, and then after a moment he just said tiredly, softly: ‘You’re so stupid.’

For the first time since Eran could remember, it didn’t sound like an insult.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'The Sky Is Falling:'

From the sea, a Mer-fae military with catapults of water held into balls with their magic, only shattering once they’d made impact. It seemed like slow-motion, the one that shot across the sky and crashed into fae near Eran, the water leaping up over his wings and destroying them. He went down, other fae crawling on top of him, and he disappeared beneath them.

He disappeared.

‘Eran!’ Mosk gasped.

‘ERAN!’ Gwyn roared, and then he was running fleet of foot across the sand, which sprayed up around him and he leapt into the throng with his sword.
Mosk

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Mosk was awake with his eyes closed when he felt the finger trail across his forehead. He flinched, the finger paused, but Mosk didn’t open his eyes and after a moment, the finger continued.

He knew it was Eran. He could smell the smoke of him, that scent that never left him. Could imagine his brown finger against his green hair. Could almost feel the ropes around his arms from the night before, Eran’s burning mouth around him, his saliva dripping down, hotter than Mosk’s own blood. Could taste the shock of that first pulse of come over his tongue, the roof of his mouth. He thought maybe it had burned him, but that his body had cooled it quickly, and he’d swallowed, but now he imagined that if he swallowed all of it, his throat and mouth would be red.

So he shouldn’t want to do that, should he? No one would.

For a moment, he could imagine that they were just two fae in another lifetime. Mosk had been free to meet whoever he wanted, and he’d met Eran, and they’d somehow stolen a moment together. Would Eran wear different clothing given the choice? He’d had all that gold and amber jewellery when they’d first met. What would Mosk wear? He didn’t know. But maybe they would have a moment like this in the morning. Eran touching him, Mosk listening to the trees around them.

But there were no trees to listen to, Mosk couldn’t hear them, and a few seconds later it wasn’t Eran’s touch on his forehead but Olphix’s and he jerked backwards, gasping. Eyes flying open to see Eran staring at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eran said.

Shut up, Mosk wanted to say. Then, I’m sorry. Instead, he said nothing. Eventually, Eran pushed himself up onto his elbow and stared down at Mosk. He already looked less shocked, more comfortable. Less apologetic. Mosk half-expected him to reach out and just touch him again.

‘Any regrets?’ Eran said.

Mosk blinked at him, then realised what Eran was talking about and felt his cheeks beginning to burn. Did he regret obeying everything Eran said the night before? Getting tied up? Getting hard when he was given orders that he could follow?

‘Um,’ Mosk said, looking away. ‘That’s not really- I mean I’m not… I didn’t used to be like that. This.’

‘Maybe we’ve changed,’ Eran said. ‘You knew nothing of what you liked anyway. Even before
Olphix. They never gave you a chance.’

Mosk felt stung, he pushed himself upright, pulling down his shirt, feeling exposed. That wasn’t true. His family had loved him. Well, Mallem less so. But everyone else... They’d tried to make a bad situation as good for him as possible, and it wasn’t their fault that he’d ruined it for all of them. It didn’t seem fair to feel anything negative about them, they weren’t here to defend themselves.

‘You don’t have to be embarrassed about it,’ Eran said.

‘Just because I’ve had your cock in my mouth doesn’t mean you know dick about me,’ Mosk spat, pushing up and away, feeling weak and blinking at the familiar morning dizziness that found him. The spells of vertigo were improving, sometimes he’d go through chunks of hours where he didn’t feel woozy or dizzy at all. But in the morning, it was bad all over again. He sat and waited, listening to his unsteady breaths, and then hissed when he saw the canister of sap appear in his field of vision.

‘Stop being so good all the time!’ Mosk shouted at him. ‘Why are you like this? You’re just a stupid, pathetic-’

‘Stop it,’ Eran said, and Mosk was brought up short. Normally Eran just let him rant. The forbidding look on Eran’s face reminded him of the night before, Eran’s commanding voice. ‘I know you hurt a lot, more than I can imagine. And I know you have more anger in you than you know what to do with, but if I’m going to die today, I’m not going to die with your poisonous words in my head. If you have to keep saying them, tell me so I can leave you here.’

Mosk’s mouth dropped open and he felt scolded. He hated it. He almost started with a whole new run of nastiness, it was never hard to find, and there were always so many things to attack Eran over. But he knew from Eran’s expression that if he did it, Eran would walk away.

‘You’re not going to die today,’ Mosk said, unable to stop himself from sounding petulant. ‘You said we had to have hope.’

‘I know what I said last night,’ Eran said, pushing himself away, letting go of the rope he held and getting up. Mosk watched in shock. Eran was never like this. Of the two of them, Eran was the one who always knew what he was doing, and wasn’t scared, and always seemed to be in control. Mosk looked down at the leash of rope and felt cold, even though Eran hadn’t been touching him at all.

At first, Mosk wanted to tell him that Eran couldn’t be like this, that it wasn’t fair. But Mosk had been terrified the day before. Scared that something in Eran had broken and wouldn’t go back to how it was, and now he felt like he was seeing that again. He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t help. He could ask Eran to fuck him, but Eran would say no, and Mosk didn’t think it would help anyway.

Eran was getting ready for the day. Blotting away the old eyeliner, drawing new lines far quicker than Mosk had done with Eran’s help yesterday. It was a pang in Mosk’s chest. It wasn’t his responsibility to do that, but he knew he’d never get to do it again, and it was one more way he’d feel useless. Because he was useless.

‘You said you wouldn’t let go of the rope,’ Mosk said, his voice small.

‘It’s only while I get ready,’ Eran said, and then he paused and looked down at Mosk, frowning. The expression on his face seemed to clear and soften. ‘Maybe you don’t like that I’m having a bad day today, but it’s my personal experience that being in cold, damp places, particularly underground in damp caves, does not make me feel like a fire fae at all. I’m sorry for taking it out
‘Don’t be sorry,’ Mosk said automatically, a little annoyed.

‘No?’ Eran said, looking through their pack before taking the blanket half-resting on Mosk and beginning to fold it up. ‘What should I be instead?’

‘I just think—’

They both stilled at the sound of footsteps approaching, and then Gwyn was there, peering into their cave.

‘We’re leaving in five minutes. Meet at the cave intersection.’

He was gone just as quickly. After that, Eran didn’t speak again, and Mosk pushed himself up from the ground and ended up draining the entire canister of sap so that he had something in his stomach, even if he’d just throw it up again later.

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The soft, nest-like coverings that had made their stay in the verkhwin’s caves comfortable, had vanished. Gwyn led the way through a dark cave, the echoes of their feet around them. Soon, a shaft of bright light streaming in, and Mosk could hear the noise from beyond, but couldn’t make sense of it. A cacophony of sound, and he knew it was something, because of the way Eran tensed next to him.

‘They can’t see us until we leave the boundary of the verkhwin’s home,’ Gwyn said, looking over his shoulder. ‘But overnight the land and sea fae have converged upon the shore.’

‘So we’re walking into a war?’ Ash said, clearing his throat. He coughed into his palm. Augus wasn’t talking at all. He didn’t even seem to be walking with the usual confidence and poise he had. ‘We can’t backtrack now that they’ve converged?’

‘If we are to make it to the Seelie Court, even to allies near the Seelie Court, I no longer believe we can make that journey on land.’

‘So…’

Gwyn held up a tiny piece of stone. ‘I have a charm. We will see what happens.’

‘And if it doesn’t work?’

‘You may find yourself grateful for your Inner Court status, or not, if they have torturers.’

‘Sweet,’ Ash said, though he looked alarmed. ‘That’s just— Okay. I’ll follow your lead man. You’re the War General, I’m just a dude who knows how to use his fists.’

‘Don’t be afraid to roll out your dra’ocht too,’ Gwyn said abruptly. ‘As we discussed last night.’

‘For sure, for sure.’

With that, everything fell to the relative silence of their footsteps. Mosk smelled more and more salt, eventually heard and felt the sound of a rhythmic throbbing pulse through the cave itself. He’d never felt anything like it before, but he knew it was the sea, had heard enough stories about it to understand.
A sharp bend in the tunnel, and as they followed it, a bright cave mouth opened up into a world of blue, a strip of dark grey, and hundreds of fae in the blue, in the foaming white, standing on the shore. Mosk felt exposed, vulnerable, blinking the brightness from his eyes. They were above the scene looking down, rocky ground trailing away before them. No one noticed them. They were protected, like Gwyn said.

The sea transfixed him. It went on forever. So flat, so huge, so endless, it stretched out and out, unbroken by anything except lines of crisp white on undulating waves. It didn’t stop. Mosk had seen giant lakes, but nothing like this. Where the air was piquant with salt – Augus hacking roughly beside them, mouth over his handkerchief and eyes squeezed shut against the burn of it – the crashing of waves never ended. It was an assault on his senses, and for a moment, it turned his mind to stillness and fear and some profound recognition in his deepest self to see something so awe-inspiring in his lifetime.

The shock of it ended, he came back to himself slowly, realised that Gwyn was pointing to different groups of fae on the ground, in the sea, and talking urgently to Ash. But Ash, too, was coughing intermittently now and shaking his head.

Then Gwyn turned to Mosk, as though to check on him, but his eyes stayed on Mosk for only seconds before they tracked to Eran.

His eyes widened, and Mosk turned.

Eran’s blanched skin, his wide eyes, his inability to look away from the ocean, all had Mosk turning and stepping closer to him. But Eran didn’t acknowledge any of them. And then Mosk thought he felt it, the terror that Eran was feeling, beyond anything Mosk had ever sensed from him. But there it was, bright and sharp and like the brittle edge of a new, weak fire.

‘Ash,’ Gwyn said sharply. ‘Help him. We don’t have time for this.’

Mosk touched his fingers to Eran’s arm, but Eran didn’t respond. He didn’t even blink. His eyes were sheened over, he wasn’t looking away from the horizon, the ocean endlessly stretching.

‘Ah shit,’ Ash said roughly.

‘What’s happening?’ Julvia said, coming closer.

‘It sometimes happens with fire fae who haven’t seen the sea before,’ Ash said, walking in front of Eran and blocking his view. But still Eran stared, like it was all he could see. His chest rose and fell in shallow, trembling breaths. It made Mosk afraid for him, he thought he’d seen the most scared Eran could be, but this was like nothing else he’d seen. Not even when Eran ran from the ice. Not even when he’d forced them to run past their endurance.

‘Okay,’ Ash said, his voice soothing, gentle. Then warmth in the air, making Mosk feel like it was going to be okay. That warmth moving into him, relaxing his muscles, making his shoulders go slack.

But Eran was still locked up, not responding to Ash’s glamour.

‘It’s all right,’ Ash crooned, lifting up his hands, placing one gently on Eran’s shoulder. ‘Come on now, it’s okay, it’s not going to hurt you. It’s just the sea. It’s like a blue desert, and you know the desert, don’t you? So you’re going to be fine, aren’t you? Can you look at me?’

That warmth strengthening, and finally Eran gasped hoarsely and blinked several times, staring at Ash instead.
'It’s just the sea,' Ash said. ‘And you’re fine. Your fire isn’t going to go out, okay? We’re all here, just fine.’

‘It’s so…’ Eran said, his voice thin, trailing into emptiness. ‘It’s so…’ 

‘I know,’ Ash said, and Mosk had to close his eyes as that glamour rolled so hard into him that he thought he’d fall over. Even Julvia’s wings drooped. ‘I’m sorry, guys,’ Ash said as an aside to the rest of them. ‘I’m trying to keep it on a narrow bandwidth but there’s some spill over.’

‘Just get him functional,’ Gwyn snapped from the cave mouth. 

Mosk opened his eyes in time to see Ash make a face that Gwyn couldn’t see.

‘Look at me,’ Ash said to Eran. ‘Just like that. I’m sorry, it’s so rude of me to use my dra’ocht like this, I know, but see? You’re just standing here, and you’re fine. Really. Take some deeper breaths, love. The fire inside you is going to be safe.’

Ash broke off to cough, but whatever his glamour was doing was working. Eran took a step backwards and looked around like he’d realised everyone else was there. His chest was moving on deeper breaths.

He opened his mouth, but didn’t seem to know what to say. Then his eyes fixed on the horizon again, and Mosk thought he was right back in that paralysed fear when he said:

‘It’s a war. There’s so many people.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said grimly. He was rummaging in the pack, and then brought out a vial of a bright green liquid that he handed to Augus. ‘Take it.’

‘That’s gonna buy him like only thirty minutes of being able to breathe a bit better,’ Ash said harshly. ‘We’re both going to be fucked, Gwyn. By the end of the day, with…everything, and-’

‘We just need half an hour,’ Gwyn snapped.

Augus was taking the healing fluid, eyes closing in apparent relief. He didn’t talk once he was done, dropping the recorked vial back in the pack and pushing himself upright from the weak crouch he’d been in.

‘Wait,’ Eran said suddenly, ‘there’s only two of us who can fight?’

‘You’re going to need to shift,’ Gwyn said. He’d unsheathed his sword. ‘There’s hardly any fae up here, but as we run down to the shore – we’ll need cover. I need to get my charm into the water for it to work at all.’

‘You mean we’re running down where everyone can see us,’ Eran said. ‘Down there? That’s…insane.’

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said, deep blue eyes flashing. ‘Now, I just need to-’

Mosk never heard what Gwyn needed to do, because a horn sounded on the shore. There, amongst the milling sea and land fae, some kitted out in armour, others wearing nothing at all, the gleam of weapons among them – a Mage in a motley cloak of green and blue – pointed at the cave mouth.

They’d been seen.

‘The King!’ someone shouted.
‘Kill him!’

Gwyn swore vehemently. Then the orders came. ‘Eran, shift. Ash, your dra’ocht and compulsions. The rest, follow and watch for arrows and weapons. Stay close.’

Fae were running towards them. An explosion of rocks impacted the cave mouth next to them, they sprayed everywhere, several hitting Mosk in the arm and back, grazing his neck.

Mosk realised why none of the fae had been waiting on the land just outside the cave mouth, as he bolted down the scree and rough unsteady limestone and sand, the ground slipping and sliding beneath him. Mosk went down several times, his hands cut open, pants tearing at the knees, bare feet embedded with pebbles in moments.

Gwyn and his sword created sprays of blood that arced over them, that made the air even saltier. The fae obviously knew it was the King. Some were running towards them. Some ran away. Noise and explosions pounded into Mosk’s ears and the early morning sky had turned into smoke and projectiles and stones and bombs of contained water that fell apart around them and had Ash hacking hideously.

The compulsions when they came were so strong that Mosk’s mind blanked through every single one. They weren’t meant for him, but even so, Ash’s torn apart voice had a power so great he’d never heard anything like it.

‘Lay down your weapons!’

‘You want to clear a path!’

‘Let us through!’

‘Stop!’

Eran shifted in the middle of it all, and there were so many fae in true and human-form that his shrieking, monstrous voice wasn’t the loudest. When Mosk reached the gritty grey sands of the shoreline, he looked at Eran and forgot to run, Julvia grabbing his wrist and dragging him. Mosk stared at those wings of fire as Eran charged off into the fray like he could stop the war on his own.

From the sea, a Mer-fae military with catapults of water held into balls with their magic, only shattering once they’d made impact.

It seemed like slow-motion, the one that shot across the sky and crashed into fae near Eran, the water leaping up over his wings and destroying them. He went down, other fae crawling on top of him, and he disappeared beneath them.

He disappeared.

‘Eran!’ Mosk gasped.

‘ERAN!’ Gwyn roared, and then he was running fleet of foot across the sand, which sprayed up around him and he leapt into the throng with his sword. Seconds later, the great horned, scaled, red-and-brown-and-orange beast that was Eran was galloping back on all fours towards them, new wings unfurling from his shoulders, the flames bright.

Behind Eran, Gwyn had sprinted to where the waves were crashing, wading into the water, swinging his sword to keep others away as he flung a tiny stone into the sea. A Mer tried to catch
it, the fins on their head flaring in excitement and aggression, but it flew past them, plinking in through foes and the foam.

‘This shit is ridiculous,’ Ash said into his sleeve. He flinched backwards as two arrows flew right past him. ‘Mother**f**uck!’

Augus – who had previously just been trying to keep up – moved surprisingly quickly to dodge a sharp piece of rock that flew towards him. He dropped to his knees and coughed wretchedly. The scarf around his nose and mouth was stained wet with blood.

The blast of Ash’s compulsions that followed had Mosk frozen to the ground again, hoping he wouldn’t get hit or hurt, his loud breaths drowned out by the frenzy of noise.

A burst of heavy, thick song came from the sea, and Mosk blinked towards it. Words he didn’t recognise, a woman’s choir of music that seemed to speak of brutality. Mosk felt small then, like he would certainly die. He turned towards the waves to see a band of thirty fae walking towards them, half-covered in feathers, some with wings, all of them bearing gleaming golden brown fish scales on their bird-footed legs.

‘Fucking sirens,’ Ash gasped. ‘Julvia! Run down towards Gwyn, *now!* All of you, *go!*’

Mosk’s legs worked to get him down to the sea, even as Ash had Julvia by the hand. The lumbering beast that was Eran followed, growling and roaring at the threats around them.

There were dead bodies on the ground. Mosk saw a recurve bow and quiver of arrows by a stretched out hand ending in a cat’s paw. He stared at the bow. No one else was going to use it now.

If he could pick it up…

If he could *use* it…

He stumbled to a halt, his hands shaking. He kept seeing the way the arrow disintegrated as it flew towards Olphix, but he could *feel* the familiar wood of the bow in his hand, the string against his finger as he checked it. He could just…pick it up, *use it*.

The scent of fire beside him and he flinched, crying out, falling to the wet sand and looking up to see eyes of fire staring down at him. *Eran*.

He watched as Eran lowered his huge clawed paw to the ground and covered the bow and arrows, then stared menacingly at Mosk. He crowded towards Mosk, smoke billowing from his mouth. Mosk turned and fled down towards the sea.

It was only as his toes reached the water that he realised that Eran hadn’t wanted him to use the bow and arrow.

Or maybe he knew Mosk *couldn’t*.

Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Mosk turned back to look at Eran, but Eran was snarling at the crowd of fae running towards them. His paw turned to flame and lava, and he threw the ball of it directly at them, scattering the crowd. The air crackled with flames, and then more arrows came at them, the wooden ones with bird feather fletchings from the land fae, and then ones from the sea, shaped in metal and fletched with the stiffened fins of flying fish.
Gwyn knelt in the water, his hands in it, his eyes closed.

‘Come the fuck on,’ Ash barked, ‘what are we even doing?’

‘I’ve made a connection,’ Gwyn said, without opening his eyes. ‘It won’t be long.’

Fae crowded ever closer. From the land. From the sea. Mosk turned in a full circle, backed into Julvia’s wing. There was nowhere they could go.

‘That’s great? But we’re going to fucking die.’

Augus took a stumbling step away from them, ripping the scarf off his face. His lips were stained red, there was blood around his mouth, around his nose. Flakes of it had dried all over his skin. His eyes glowed fiercely green, and he bared blood-stained teeth at the scene around them. He looked half-mad.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Ash gasped.

Another rain of arrows fell around them, and Ash cried out when one struck him in the forearm. He stared at it, and then gritted his teeth together. He opened his mouth, to speak or use a compulsion, and then Eran blasted out a pure noise of pain as several arrows hit his thigh and flank.

Gwyn cried out at the same time, jerking one of his hands from the water and pressing it down hard onto his thigh, like he’d been wounded too.

Julvia made a sound of shock when the Nain Rouge suddenly skidded into their group, holding a dismembered arm in one hand and a wicked looking switchblade in the other. She leapt onto Gwyn’s back, yanking his hair repeatedly until he growled and tried to throw her off.

‘I can’t cross the fucking sea!’ she shouted at him. ‘You know that! I can’t come, asshole!’

She threw the limb down after tearing off some of the flesh from the grisly place it had been torn and cut away. She chewed only a couple of times before gulping the meat down.

Gwyn stood up, staggering back from a larger wave that crashed towards them. Mosk thought he saw tentacles waving ominously from within. The Nain Rouge sprang off Gwyn’s back, but pointed the blade at him.

‘You know where to meet,’ she said.

‘Don’t forget what you swore to me,’ Gwyn said, staring at her.

‘Bitch, don’t you fucking forget what you swore to me.’

A brief, shared nod, and she sprinted away after meeting Mosk’s eyes briefly, squinting like she was still trying to figure him out. The sea and land fae parted before her, but she still slid her knife across the throats of many, laughing manically as she went.

The rest of the fae that weren’t outright battling each other, turned towards Gwyn and their party once more, and Mosk cringed, didn’t know what to do or where to hide or where to go. He’d never been in a situation like this in his life.

‘How much longer?’ Augus shouted at Gwyn, his voice unrecognisable. Blood dripped from his mouth. Whatever healing potion he’d taken, hadn’t lasted the full thirty minutes.

‘Five minutes,’ Gwyn said, shaking his head, looking around them. His sword was up and out and
covered in blood. His body spattered with it. ‘I hope.’

‘We don’t have five minutes,’ Ash said.

‘I fear we don’t have any time at all,’ Julvia said, pressing close to Ash, her wings pulled in tight and her hair stained with blood and grey sand.

Eran seemed to be weakening too, the proximity to the sea making his body language crouched and withdrawn. When a wave touched his feet, he growled at it, smoke flowing from his mouth and nose. His wings tucked in close to his back, the flames turned from wild leaping to small creeping.

Augus looked desperately at Gwyn, his eyebrows twisting up. Mosk had no idea what was passing between them, but Gwyn abruptly stepped away from the water towards his consort.

‘Augus-’ he said, his voice a warning.

But Augus only turned and dropped to the ground, placing his palms flat against it. A few seconds later, the ground began to shake violently beneath them, and Mosk gasped when his foot sank into sand that became swampy.

‘Augus!’ Ash shouted. ‘You fucking can’t!’

Augus didn’t look up. His wet mane curtained his expression from everyone, his shoulders occasionally heaving in violent coughs. There was blood on his hands, dripping from his mouth, his nose. Mosk had no idea what he was doing. Several of the fae that had been running towards them were now backing away.

The air around them glimmered, then Mosk clapped his hands over his ears when the air pressure abruptly changed. It hurt.

‘Augus!’ Ash screamed, running towards him, trying to push him into stopping. Augus wouldn’t budge. He didn’t look up. ‘Fuck, at least let me help!’ He shoved his hands down into the sand and looked up at the sky.

Mosk looked up at the sky too, only to see green instead of blue. He turned around and saw that it was all around them. The sky had changed colour.

But no, it wasn’t that, because he caught a glimpse of blue before the green dome came down and cut it off. All around them, a bubble of shielding energy, and Mosk remembered that the Each Uisge lived in a human-like home in his lake, and that it was protected by a green dome that took so much effort to make that he only ever made one.

The dome sealed them off. Arrows fell against it, sliding down it, fae couldn’t walk through it, and Mosk knew that wasn’t right… The dome shouldn’t be able to do that, should it?

‘Augus?’ Ash was saying, and Mosk turned back to see Augus limp on the ground, and Ash beside him, shaking him roughly, face twisted in distress. ‘Augus? Augus! Shit. Gwyn, he’s-’

Gwyn crashed down beside Augus’ side, gathering him up into his arms, staring around them at the dome and then looking with thinned lips towards the sea.

‘How long will the dome hold?’ Gwyn said to Ash, cradling Augus in his arms. Augus’ arm hung down weakly. He was the palest he’d ever looked, and there were lines of blood trailing from his closed eyes, even from his ears.
Ash shook his head, and the dome shook beneath the weight of fae now leaning against it, throwing themselves onto it. The only thing that was able to pass through were the waves from the sea, encroaching closer and closer. Mosk looked down at the seawater around his ankles, then turned to stare at Eran’s large feet—paws? The claws just cleared the edge of each wave, and Eran shuffled back from every one.

Mosk’s eyes reluctantly trailed upwards, looking at a face that was nothing like Eran’s face and yet…his eyes…

Eran was staring at him, flames licking out of his mouth with every breath, glowing against his eyelids. He looked afraid. Or maybe it was the scent of him. That same brittle smoky scent of before, when Eran had seen the sea for the first time.

Mosk watched, unable to move, as Eran reached out with his long arm, his giant paw, and then scooped up the trailing piece of rope that Mosk had forgotten about. He curled his claws and held it tight, and didn’t look away. Mosk felt it like a touch to his own body, but one that didn’t make him panic.

As the world crashed in around them—fae’s voices muffled as they screamed and banged against the dome, as it held against the dazzling lights of magic trying to dispel it—Mosk realised he wasn’t as afraid as the others. Not Gwyn with his troubled and stern face, cradling an unconscious Augus close. Not Ash, arrow still in his forearm, barraging Gwyn with questions. Not Eran, arrows still in his flank and thigh, staring at Mosk like Mosk had answers. Not even Julvia, who for once didn’t seem to be taking everything in calmly.

He didn’t mind dying. He didn’t want it, but he…didn’t mind it.

The world passed by him. So he turned to stare at the sea. If he was going to die, he wanted to watch the sea. He looked past the Mers and other races of sea fae he didn’t recognise. He stared past the giant squid shifters that had come up from the depths. He watched, instead, the ethereal blue on the horizon and listened to the rain of projectiles on the dome above him and thought that there was something mesmerising and hypnotic about the sea.

The sea sounded like a wind pulsing through a huge forest. Every wave crashing could have been the leaves talking to him again. His heart ached.

He stepped deeper into the water, staring.

He let the screaming and the panic go past him. He didn’t notice the places where he was bleeding, or where his clothing had torn. The ocean spoke to all of them, and no one was listening. Mosk couldn’t understand it, but he could hear it. And it seemed to be speaking to him. A voice coming up through his feet, telling him to be calm, to be patient, that it would be okay.

That it was going to be okay.

The ocean must have known he was going to die.

The fae before him in the sea began to scatter, move in different directions. It wasn’t until Mosk paid closer attention, that he realised they were fleeing. They were leaping, diving and swimming away from something. Shouting to each other, pointing, leaving. Soon, a clear blue road from Mosk’s feet to the slightly curved horizon was no longer marred by any fae at all.

A huge ripple of bubbles, and Mosk thought maybe it was a sea monster coming up, and he stared in fascination.
Another ripple of bubbles, and something sharp, like a needle – but much larger – pressed up out of the water. It pushed up, getting longer and longer, growing like a spire of wood with no leaves or branches. Then another needle, and another.

It wasn’t until Mosk saw the rigging, that he realised it was a boat. But not a small boat. Not like anything he’d seen in books. It was enormous.

Abruptly, the lilac sails unfurled at once and revealed the same black symbol on each: A stylised woman’s face with black tumbling hair, closed eyes, and two hands held outward. Each sailcloth streamed water, as the boat did, gaining more buoyancy with every second.

All the sea fae were fleeing it now, pointing at it.

‘Ondine!’ They were shouting. ‘Ondine!’

‘Why is she here?!’

Even the land fae were falling back. The ship, apparently, a cursed thing to see, according to what others were crying. Ondine of the seas, who never involved herself in war, but if her ship was ever seen by a battle…

Mosk ignored all of it.

Gwyn splashed past Mosk, carrying Augus close to him with one arm. He raised his other arm high. As though the ship heard his signal, it swung sharply towards him. It moved on winds that didn’t reach Mosk, commanded by magic or powers that were alien to him.

It cleaved the seas towards them, and Mosk realised this was what Gwyn had been waiting for.

Chapter End Notes

In our next chapter, 'Somewhere Safe:’

‘And…the rope at your wrist?’ Gwyn said. Mosk was shocked at how hesitant he sounded. Mosk looked down at it.

‘Do you want me to take it off?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said quickly. ‘No. Not that. Do you think it helps?’

‘Yeah,’ Mosk said, thinking back to the time that Eran had told him that Gwyn bottomed for Augus. He wondered if Gwyn understood it in a way none of the others did. ‘I didn’t know it would. But…I’m not like I used to be. It’s not normal.’

Gwyn was silent for a long time, and then finally said: ‘Mosk, you’re a seventh son of a seventh son, the last survivor of the Manytrees legacy and custodian for a forest that no longer exists. You travel with a party of fae who seek to do the impossible. Nothing about this is normal. But the rope on your wrist- Just because you don’t often see such things in public, doesn’t mean it’s unusual. Augus would tell you that it's fine.’
Mosk
*

Mosk had heard of Ondine of the Seas. The Sea Prophet. But he’d never known how fae would move to get out of her way. Never seen the seas churn as sea fae cleared space all around the ship, until finally, many minutes later, they surfaced and pointed at the sails, tiny specks on the water.

Fleet sea fae on the ship – Mosk didn’t know what kinds – armed with spears and bows and arrows, flanked the guard-rail, talking to each other. Mosk couldn’t hear them over the spray of the sea. The water was getting closer, the tide coming in. Gwyn walked deeper into the sea, until it covered his knees, at the sight of a short woman with long, dark curling hair coming to face them at the bow of her boat. Her long hair tumbled like that of the woman shown on the sails.

She raised both of her hands, palms held cupped and outwards. Mosk wondered if she was returning Gwyn’s signal. Then he realised what she was doing and gasped.

The sea began to thin before her, as though it was draining into the rest of the ocean on either side. The waves swept away from them, the water lapping at Mosk’s feet began to lap on an angle, either side of him, until his feet were no longer touched with water. And as the deep blue began to part before them, one of the fae on Ondine’s ship opened a large circular porthole halfway down, where the waters were still splashing the wooden frame, and dropped a ladder of rope and wood.

Water trickled backwards before them, repelled away, and Gwyn was the one who stepped forwards onto churned shells and exposed seaweed and kelp, onto rocks that hid green, brown and white octopuses trying to get their limbs out of the way before Gwyn’s feet came down upon them. Molluscs moved across the dark sand, or dug in beneath it, and Mosk watched in amazement as he followed, the waves continuing to recede on either side, the sea level rising in the area around them because of it.

‘We’re going to reach the end of the dome before we reach the boat,’ Gwyn said as he walked, Augus clutched tight in his arms and sword now sheathed. ‘Get ready to run when we do. The Mantissa has its own protections.’

The rope that Eran was holding pulled tight, and Mosk turned to see him – still in true-form, still exuding heat and flame, wings writhing like they had a life of their own – looking down at the soggy ground. Mosk couldn’t read the expressions on that broad, monstrous face, but he thought from his body language that he didn’t want to walk down a path that had previously been ocean.

‘It’s...it’s okay,’ Mosk said.
'Quickly,' Gwyn said, and Mosk looked back past Eran to see the other side of the dome, the other fae trying to break through it. The noise was muffled by the dome, but Mosk could tell they were shouting and yelling. Some had changed or shifted and were beating their beast forms against what Augus and Ash had made.

Mosk thought Eran would be more likely to come if he shifted back, but…he’d taken arrows, and most fae that were wounded stayed in true-form to protect themselves, their more beastly selves better able to handle the pain.

It was Ash who hung back and rolled them both with his glamour – Mosk not knowing if it was intentional or not - sagging on his knees with the heavy sweeping wave of relaxation. If he thought that Ash had been trying to affect him before, it was nothing compared to what he was doing now.

‘Eran,’ Ash said, his urgent voice at odds with how Mosk was feeling, with Eran’s wilting shoulders. ‘You have to shift back now, buddy. We’ll get you seen to on the boat, but you gotta come with us. Come on.’

Whatever happened next had Mosk’s eyes rolling back in his head, and he fell, being caught by a strong arm before his knees hit the ground.

‘Sorry,’ came Ash’s voice. ‘I can’t- *Fuck*, I can’t control it properly. Sorry.’

Mosk didn’t say anything. He didn’t feel bad exactly. He just couldn’t move properly. But somehow he knew Eran had shifted because the heat near him wasn’t as strong, but he could still feel tension in the rope.

‘Mosk?’ Eran said, his voice wrecked. ‘Is he okay?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Ash said, ‘come on, we gotta go.’

‘I can take him.’

‘You can’t take shit, Eran,’ Ash said harshly. ‘You’re wounded and your leg’s gonna go out from under you in about five minutes. Get to the boat. I’ve got Mosk, okay? Okay? You clear on what we’re doing?’

‘The boat,’ Eran said, sounding confused. Then, a more resolute: ‘Okay. Yes, let’s go.’

Mosk was swept up into Ash’s arms, his head beginning to pound, until he realised it was Ash running, his footsteps fast. Mosk forced his eyes open, but saw only the underside of Ash’s stubbled jaw, his damp hair, the green sky above them. He could hear the waves nearby, the wet splashing of their feet, and then a weird tingling feeling and the sky was blue and they were beyond the dome. Eran’s footsteps lagged behind him, a heavy limp, the scrape of one of his feet dragging. But Eran must have been holding onto the lead at the end of Mosk’s roped wrist, because Mosk felt the tension.

*Don’t let go,* he thought.

A spear rushed past them, another, and then aggressive screaming that had Mosk bunching up in Ash’s arms. He wanted to get free, wanted to run, but he was still too dazed. Ash opened his mouth and Mosk felt the blow of the compulsion and the dra’ocht before Ash even spoke. Something about stopping, something about *stopping,* and his mind just…stopped.

*
‘Fuck, fuck, wake up- Come on, man. Mosk? Mosk? It’s okay. Jesus fuck, I… No, seriously, I had no idea. Mosk? It’s okay, we’re on the boat.’

Mosk moaned thickly, his eyes fluttering. He felt like he’d been hit with a broad, long piece of wood. His head pounded and he raised weak fingertips to his forehead. Then the nausea clambered up the back of his throat and he heaved before he could move. Hands around his chest and back pushing him upright so that he didn’t vomit while lying down, and he lost all the sap he’d eaten, vaguely remembering that he’d eaten the sap so he’d have something to throw up later.

Foresight meant not having to taste the bitterness of his own bile, and instead the sourness of curdled sap instead. It was preferable.

The whole world was moving, wouldn’t stop moving. Everything swaying back and forth.

‘I don’t… feel well,’ he gasped.

‘Some of that’s seasickness,’ Gwyn said. ‘It will pass.’

Mosk opened his eyes to dimness and more silence than he knew what to do with. The roar of the sea was still in his ears, but otherwise he was lying against a pile of thick fishing nets. In some kind of storage room, buoys and wicked fishhooks swinging on the walls. No windows, a low ceiling, everything made of wood, smelling of salt. Augus was nowhere to be seen. Gwyn and Ash crouched before him, Ash had blood on his lips. Eran lay there next to him, the arrows removed and his legs covered in blood. He was pale and clammy and his eyes were closed. Unconscious. Julvia was also gone.

‘Where…?’ he said, looking around. His eyes rolled, he saw a woman standing there with a spear at her side. She had long, blue-black hair that was plaited down her back, brown skin covered in tattoos.

‘You are aboard the Mantissa,’ she said. ‘I am Uhina. We have sailed free of the battle. Ondine awaits your audience, Gwyn.’

‘Are you feeling okay?’ Ash said, drawing his attention. ‘I had no idea I’d knock you out like that. It’s been about an hour.’

‘Head hurts,’ Mosk said. ‘Is Eran okay?’

‘The seasickness and the blood loss got to him,’ Gwyn said, sighing. ‘The climb up the ladder was too much. He’ll recover, he just needs some time.’

‘We will take him to another room,’ Uhina said. ‘So he may recover. Take this dryad to the deck, he will get his sea-legs better with exposure to the air, and he is not poisoned like the Each Uisge and the Glashtyn.’

Gwyn nodded, extended his hand to Mosk. When Mosk took it – his hand small in Gwyn’s – he was pulled to his feet. He nearly fell, but Ash was there, bracing his shoulders. Concern all over his face.

‘I’m okay,’ Mosk said weakly, trying to ignore the pounding dizziness. ‘No worse than… normal.’

‘Uh huh,’ Ash said sceptically. ‘Just take it easy, come on. Gwyn, be careful with him.’

‘I don’t need that,’ Mosk said, feeling like Gwyn wouldn’t ever be careful with him anyway.
‘Hush,’ Gwyn said, shifting so that he could place his hand at the base of Mosk’s spine. ‘Head towards the steps, I’ll be right behind you. Ash, after you help get Eran settled, make sure you rest.’

Ash opened his mouth, looking like he was going to say he didn’t need it, then broke into a series of violent, hacking coughs that covered his hand with a fine mist of blood. Mosk stared in horror. Was this really the answer? All of them aboard a boat on the sea?

He concentrated hard as he climbed the steps, Gwyn following directly behind him. His hand slipped on the railing, his palm was so sweaty, but he made it up eventually, through the ceiling up into a wooden corridor with lanterns hanging above him, swinging back and forth. He didn’t know which way to go.

Gwyn emerged and with that same hand at his lower back, steered him down the corridor, not walking as fast as he usually did.

‘Are we…okay?’ Mosk said, feeling like everything he was asking was very stupid.

‘For now,’ Gwyn said.

‘But…Augus…’

‘I know,’ Gwyn said. ‘There are some things we can use to try to protect him from the worst of the salt, but he’s unwell.’

‘And can’t feed.’

Mosk had never spoken to Gwyn about this before. In fact, he’d hardly spoken to Gwyn at all. His most significant conversation with him – not including the one about weapons that had made him throw up at Oengus’ tower – had been about the recurve bow over a decade ago.

‘There are some things we can do for that too,’ Gwyn said eventually. ‘But they will be harder.’

‘Are you okay?’

Gwyn’s fingers curled against Mosk’s back, and Mosk wanted to stop and see the expression on his face. His Unseelie King, who had in an act of desperation taken them all aboard a cursed boat captained by Ondine, who was Seelie, and part of his old Seelie Inner Court. But Mosk didn’t stop, it was hard enough walking, his arms extended a little in front of him for balance. The ship was definitely rocking in huge back and forth motions.

Mosk was alive, he wanted to see the sea again. He wanted to see it spread out everywhere, huge and endless, big enough to fill the hollow in his heart.

‘I’m okay,’ Gwyn said.

‘But…you don’t have your light,’ Mosk said, biting into his lower lip nervously to dare to be so bold around the King. ‘You don’t want it back, do you?’

Gwyn’s hand slipped on his lower back, and Mosk kept his head down when he sensed that gaze on him. After a moment, Gwyn sighed.

‘I was born with it,’ he said. ‘So I didn’t have any way to compare what I felt to what others feel. Not until it was gone. I’ve felt it quenched by Mages, but that always hurt. But when it went…’
Mosk risked looking up, and Gwyn slowed to a stop. He seemed to be considering whether to even keep talking, and Mosk didn’t know why Gwyn was sharing any of this with him. He still didn’t know if Augus and Gwyn had ever reconciled over it. It felt like they’d been running from place to place ever since it had been taken.

‘It ate at me,’ Gwyn said, frowning, staring past Mosk’s shoulder. ‘I could never feed properly with it, and so… I can survive without it. I am not ailing like Augus or Ash. Without it- I know it’s changed me. Augus says it makes me more careless, and that is the kindest thing he has to say about it.’

‘But why would you want it back when it hurts you so much?’ Mosk said.

Gwyn smiled ruefully and his deep blue eyes met Mosk’s. The eye colour he always would have had, if his power had been anything else.

‘Does Augus care about that?’ Mosk said.

‘Yes,’ Gwyn said quietly. ‘He’s…afraid. More afraid than he wants me to know.’

‘Of the way you behave? We’re alive, aren’t we?’

‘He is afraid that should I not take it back, the world will be ruined,’ Gwyn said. ‘He fears how I will cope if it’s returned. He is afraid that I will not survive, should I try and take it back. If my body isn’t holding it, there is a possibility I may react to the light as everyone else does when it’s reintroduced. And he is afraid that I am someone he doesn’t know.’

‘But you seem the same to me. Just…harder sometimes.’

Gwyn pressed his lips together. ‘I have always been… I suppose there is some aspect of me that has always been harder. I think I’m the same. But perhaps the light held me back, made me more cautious, wary. Yet, we’re alive.’ Gwyn paused and looked sad. ‘Augus is hungry and sick, and I want nothing more than to take him back to the Court, but it’s too late for that. Too late to stop my light from being taken. It’s gone.’

‘I miss my powers,’ Mosk said, scratching at his neck. ‘So much. But they never hurt me. They made everything better.’

‘I can no longer hear the earth in the same way I once could,’ Gwyn admitted, looking down the corridor. ‘I can no longer feel the atmosphere or the happenings just above it. I cannot see light as I once could, it feels…duller now. Body hair is odd. But do you know, I can still call animals? The Nain Rouge said that Olphix took everything but- Whatever made me classless, whatever magic they stole and reworked into the classless status, some of that is still with me.’

Gwyn tilted his head while looking down the corridor, and then looked sidelong at Mosk.

‘I haven’t told anyone that.’

‘Oh,’ Mosk said. What was he supposed to say to that?

‘And…the rope at your wrist?’ Gwyn said. Mosk was shocked at how hesitant he sounded. Mosk looked down at it.

‘Do you want me to take it off?’

‘No,’ Gwyn said quickly. ‘No. Not that. Do you think it helps?’
‘Yeah,’ Mosk said, thinking back to the time that Eran had told him that Gwyn bottomed for Augus. He wondered if Gwyn understood it in a way none of the others did. ‘I didn’t know it would. But…I’m not like I used to be. It’s not normal.’

Gwyn was silent for a long time, and then finally said: ‘Mosk, you’re a seventh son of a seventh son, the last survivor of the Manytrees legacy and custodian for a forest that no longer exists. You travel with a party of fae who seek to do the impossible. Nothing about this is normal. But the rope on your wrist- Just because you don’t often see such things in public, doesn’t mean it’s unusual. Augus would tell you that it’s fine.’

Mosk didn’t know what to say. It felt like a blessing, somehow, even though it wasn’t.

‘Fenwrel told me that you cannot use the bow, and why,’ Gwyn said. ‘And I can see that your balance is affected by the torment you went through. But if you ever wish to pick it up again, I will help you.’

Mosk said nothing. He was scared to even shrug. He tried not to think about how he’d stared at the bow on the beach, and how Eran had protectively placed his paw over it. But he couldn’t stop the way his fingers curled, the way his palm felt like there was wood resting it. He could feel the string against his fingers.

‘You liked it, once,’ Gwyn said. ‘Didn’t you?’

Mosk wanted to take a step back, but it was the King.

Gwyn grimaced. ‘Truthfully, it’s no longer my favourite weapon either.’

‘What?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Gwyn said, smiling a little. ‘But come along. That’s a story for another day.’

It got easier as Mosk walked. They made it up another flight of stairs, into a grander corridor. The ship was enormous inside, Mosk could already tell it was a maze. Eventually though, past wooden corridors and rooms and portholes, past paintings and ornaments and crystals growing from the ground on one of the levels, they made it to the upper deck.

The rough winds hit him first, he stumbled into Gwyn’s side, who kept his hand at Mosk’s back, catching him. The noise of the sea, the crashing of the waves, and Mosk sucked down breath after breath of salt water mist, turning to look at the cabin that rose high above the decking, the masts, sails and topsails, and all the other things he didn’t know the names of. There were fae around them, too, standing and waiting to see what they’d do. Tiny ones that looked like trows, except they had giant drooping fins where there ears should be, and then taller fae like Uhina, and others still.

‘Your Majesty! Mosk!’ Mosk turned to see Julvia walking towards them, still covered in blood and grey sand, though it looked like she’d tried to sponge some of it away.

‘Julvia,’ Gwyn said calmly.

‘We’ve been told to wait here for Ondine,’ Julvia said.

‘And you’re well?’ Gwyn said.

‘Yes,’ Julvia said, smiling. ‘We seem so much safer now.’
Gwyn turned as a thin man approached them. His skin was a rich mid-brown, he wore a shirt that was ragged, like the winds and water of the sea had owned it for far longer than he had. At his neck, a string of shells that shone deep green and then gleamed red when the sun hit them at certain angles. At his wrists, thick metal bands decorated in mosaics of the same shell. The man walked to Gwyn and bowed briefly to him, and then stood, his milky eyes proud and hard.

'Halo, Tuanku, dan selamat datang di atas kapal.'

Mosk watched as Gwyn extended his hand, the other man shaking it firmly.

'Terima kasih,' Gwyn said.

'And now the common tongue,' the man said. 'I'm Awan, the First Mate of the Mantissa. Ondine will be along. She is making sure the way is clear. You have caught us at a troubled time upon our fair and fickle seas. But we will do what we can for you, Unseelie or not.'

'The gift of your hospitality is great.'

Awan's smile was bright and wild and broad. 'Yes, it is. Though, it will be wonderful to tell my children that we rescued the Dual-King! They'll be very excited. Anyway, you may use this ship as you like. Ondine will familiarise you with the lay of it herself. We will organise for your waterhorses to have saltvarra. It will make their stay here bearable.'

'It will help?'

'Saltvarra is only the start,' Awan said, nodding in a businesslike manner. 'We will also put a call out for seahorse shifters. They have a special magic to protect land-realm items from salt erosion. Especially useful for trading for sky-bound items, but it's possible to use this on fae too. Just rarely necessary.'

As Awan spoke, the creatures that looked like trows came over in a group. They seemed to ignore Awan's status and crowded around Gwyn, looking up at him. Gwyn looked down, and then hesitated, before signing something in a complex language that Mosk didn't understand.

One of the trows shook its head, and then signed, and Gwyn nodded quickly.

'Of course,' he said. 'My apologies.'

After that, they began signing to each other. Julvia moved closer to Mosk until their arms were brushing, one of her wings curving behind his back.

'Sea trows,' she said. 'I'm learning so many new things.'

'They like you,' Awan said to Gwyn, squinting at them with something like affection. 'Is this a gift of yours, Your Majesty? Shall we stop calling you the Dual-King and start calling you the Trow-Charmer?'

One of the sea trows turned and gave an obvious rude finger sign to Awan, and Awan barked out laughter and held up his hands, palms forward, as though he didn't mean anything by it. Mosk thought he had a cheekiness to him, even though he looked like the kind of person who would shout commands all day long and people would listen to him. He wondered if Eran would like him. Wondered what Eran would make of all of this.
He wanted to go to Eran. He opened to his mouth to ask someone, and then was distracted by the short woman walking towards them. She walked with a calm easiness on her ship and she wore a blouse of linen, the sleeves ripped off. Her pants were some kind of skin, but no land animal made a leather like that. Maybe shark or seal or fish, Mosk couldn't tell. She was so obviously Ondine, the same face as that on the lilac sails of the ship, blowing above them in the strong winds that even now sent them away from battle.

'Welcome to the Mantissa,' Ondine said, smiling warmly at Gwyn, then looking to Julvia and Mosk. 'It seems like you were desperate for some help, yes? Gwyn, how many favours do you owe me again?'

'My life now,' Gwyn said.

'Dumb,' she said, grinning. 'You're the only Unseelie King I know who's honourable enough to put that out there. But that's what we love about you, that's why I came.'

She walked forward and grasped his hands between hers, and Mosk knew that she could read his future doing that. Gwyn didn't look alarmed or upset, he returned the gesture with a smile on his face that made him look younger and wilder, even though he had the stubble now, and his skin was getting weathered from their travels.

'Still can't see anything?' he said to her.

'Never, with you,' she said. 'I like it almost.'

She stepped closer and wrapped her olive skinned arms around him, black hair blowing in the wind. When she stepped back, she reached up and touched Gwyn's stubble lightly, his hair, and then peered into his eyes. She didn't say anything, but something unspoken passed between them, and Mosk thought maybe she looked sad. It was hard to tell.

Ondine stepped up to Mosk next and held out her hands, he looked at them warily.

Did he want to know his future? He didn't even know if he had a future.

Her hands were small, her fingers delicate and short. Her nails were wild and ragged, like she chewed them. Her eyes were deep and dark and warm, and even though Chaley had never had dark eyes, it still made him think of her. He lifted his hands and placed his palms over hers automatically, lost in the feeling that he'd found someone he'd always known.

'Rumours have spread,' Ondine said, holding his palms in her own. Her hands were so, so warm. Almost feverishly hot. Mosk wondered if it was something to do with her being some kind of sea elemental, but he didn't know. 'So I know that you are Mosk Manytrees, seventh son of a seventh son, and quite like Gwyn, it turns out.'

'Like Gwyn?' Mosk said, confused. Gwyn turned, his eyebrows pulling together, and then he tilted his head.

'You can't read him?' Gwyn said thoughtfully.

'Not at all,' Ondine said, grinning at them both. She looked almost relieved for it, even though she was the one who offered to read them in greeting. But it was strange to know that the prophet of the seas couldn't see his future, and she didn't seem to be lying. Did it mean he had no future? But...no, she couldn't see Gwyn's either. And Gwyn definitely had a future. Or...?

'What does it mean?' Mosk said.
'I don't know,' Ondine said, her teeth bright in the sun, a lock of hair falling over one eye. 'I like to believe that it means I'm trying to divine the path of a world-changer. But aren't we all world-changers? So truthfully, I don't know. Maybe in another few thousand years I'll know? But I won't know today.'

*World-changer.* The word stuck in Mosk's head, his Mamatree had called him that once. He missed her too.

He swallowed and stepped back as Ondine moved to Julvia instead. The height difference between them was significant. Julvia was thin and willowy, but she was tall even without her large swan wings rising above her shoulders. Her white-blond cloud of hair blew wildly in the winds that never touched Ondine's in the same way - as though Ondine commanded them - but she seemed unbothered by the hair across her face. Her black eyes watched Ondine curiously, there was a slight smile around her mouth as she looked down at her. She had her hands out, palm up, before Ondine had even approached.

Ondine hesitated, as though she hadn't expected that.

'Oh, please,' Julvia said sincerely. 'You don't have to tell me what you see, but how comforting, to know that someone else might know what's coming in my future.'

'Comforting?' Ondine said, frowning at her slightly.

'We'll share the knowledge together, won't we?' Julvia said. 'That's a heavy burden to carry, and you still choose to greet people this way? How many refuse you?'

'Enough,' Ondine said soberly. She was watching Julvia like she was an unknown quantity, and in that moment Mosk was doing the same. He'd never really spent any time thinking about Julvia, or why she was there with them, but now he wondered. Why would a pacifist swan maiden want to come on this journey anyway? What was she looking for?

Ondine lifted her hands to place them on Julvia's, then paused, looking up at Julvia's face as though she could understand her, even though - as long as Julvia wasn't like Gwyn and Mosk - Ondine was about to read her future. But after a moment, she lowered her hands into Julvia's and their fingers curled around each other's, and Julvia smiled down at the contact between them.

Ondine stilled. Her eyes widened, and she stared ahead as though seeing nothing at all, her black eyebrows pulling together, her mouth going slack. Gwyn took half a step forwards, but he didn't say anything, and then he turned to Mosk. But Mosk couldn't look away. Had Ondine seen something terrible? Were they all going to die?

Ondine blinked up at Julvia, and a smile moved over her face.

'Ooh,' she said. 'Okay.'

'Okay?' Julvia said, like she was trying to comfort Ondine instead of asking a question.

'Yeah, you're...'

Ondine gazed at Julvia, blinking at her slowly. Her gaze already warm, a little too open, a little scared.

Mosk knew what he was seeing so quickly that he surprised himself. His heart beat harder, he wanted to run back down the stairs and find his way to Eran's room, even though he had no idea where Eran was.
'I hope you saw something nice,' Julvia said, as they kept hold of each other's hands.

Ondine's smile broadened, but she still looked bewildered.

Gwyn cleared his throat. 'Is everything all right?'

'Yeah,' Ondine said, sliding her fingers free reluctantly. 'Yes. Of course. It's nothing to do with you, Gwyn. Not everything is.'

Gwyn made a faint 'hmph' noise like he didn't quite believe it, but then he turned back to Awan and started conversing with him in that language from before, starting up some rapid fire conversation. Mosk walked closer to Julvia, and when she looked at him, she beamed.

'I liked having my future read,' Julvia said.

Ondine burst into laughter. 'I didn't tell you any of it!'

'Your face was nice,' Julvia said, turning to her with warm eyes. 'You were very kind about whatever you saw. And your hands are very warm. I felt like I'd made a friend. What a gift you have. But you're Ondine, and everything I've heard about you is still not the same as meeting you.'

'You're...something,' Ondine said. Then laughed, the sound rough and low. 'I don't know your name.'

'Julvia Dubna Vajat.'

'Oh, you're one of Innokenti's and Dubna's brood?' Ondine said. 'You're a Princess.'

'I am,' Julvia said.

'Welcome aboard, Princess Julvia.'

'Why, thank you,' Julvia said, curtseying smoothly, her head dipping forwards. 'You have a beautiful ship, Lady Ondine of the Seas.'

The boat rocked sharply, Mosk and Julvia stumbled. Gwyn reached out to catch Mosk by the arm automatically, and Ondine reached for Julvia, who steadied herself with her wings. They flared sharply, tucked back in, and then Julvia took Ondine's hand anyway, even though it was clear she didn't need help balancing herself. Ondine and Julvia both stared down at the contact. They slowly let go.

Mosk turned back to look at the sea and realised he didn't want to be up here. He wanted to see how Eran was. He felt less queasy, he felt about as much himself as he ever did, and Eran had been in true-form for so much of that fight and he wasn't good after being in true-form. He was never good afterwards, and Mosk didn't like watching Eran slip away, and he didn't want Eran to slip further away from him. He turned and didn't know who to ask, because he didn't know where Eran was, and he felt lost until Gwyn turned to him as though he realised Mosk needed something.

'I want to... Can I please see Eran?' Mosk said uneasily. He didn't like asking for anything, and he pressed his lips together. 'I don't know where he is.'

'One of the trows will show you,' Ondine said, smiling. 'And in the meantime, Gwyn, where do you wish us to take you? An around-the-world cruise, perhaps?'

'Somewhere safe,' Gwyn said, before laughing under his breath. Ondine joined him a moment later,
walking over to him and shoving him in the shoulder, having to reach up to do it.

'I meant somewhere real.'

'I want to know if the ice has reached the ocean, and I want to go to the Seelie Court.'

Ondine nodded. 'The ice has not yet reached the sea, though it's being monitored. It doesn't seem to like the ocean. As for the Seelie Court...' She sighed heavily.

'Tell me.'

'It will be slow. There are embargos, tolls and more from here to there. Normally I could get you there in two days or less. But Gwyn...the negotiations will not be easy. We will be held up. And your being King may or may not work in your favour, at each and every checkpoint we encounter.'

Gwyn reached up and dragged a hand through his hair, nodded, and then walked off towards the bow of the ship, Ondine turned and followed him after a last quick look at Julvia. They started talking shop and Awan walked off in the other direction, shouting orders in another language at some of the fae looking down from the cabin. Uhina went to Julvia, offering to show her to her rooms, and a sea trow approached Mosk, beckoning clearly, indicating that Mosk should follow it.

Mosk was led through the maze of the ship, though he seemed to get a better sense of it the second time around. It was so grand and beautiful. He'd not known the insides of boats could be like this. He knew that sea fae could control how buoyant they were, didn't need any ballast except the water they could draw up and into the ship with their own powers, but he didn't know it would be lavish inside. Were all large ships like this? Or was this specific to Ondine? Down one corridor, he passed tapestry after tapestry, but instead of thread, it seemed to be woven in fish scales. And when he walked down a flight of stairs, he noticed that the lacquer was inlaid with mother of pearl, which helped his feet grip the stairs better.

It was nicer than Oengus' tower. But it gave Mosk a bad feeling to be in a nice place. He'd lost every nice place he'd ever known. His home. The tower. The ship too? Eran would tell him that he didn't know the future, but Mosk was too scared to imagine anything other than ruin. It seemed to be the only thing coming.

The sea trow stopped before a closed wooden door. He turned and walked to the door opposite it, tapped on it, then pointed at Mosk, then back to the door.

'Is this where Eran is?' The trow shook its head and pointed more emphatically at Mosk. 'My room?'

A vigorous nod. Then, the sea trow turned and walked back to the first door it had stopped at, and without doing anything more than turning its hand like it was holding a door handle, it opened the door. It hadn't needed to reach up or touch the door or anything. Mosk watched as the sea trow nodded its head very briefly, then scampered away down the corridor, leaving Mosk there beneath a glowing lantern looking into a dim room.

He took a couple of small steps and then closed the door behind him. It creaked, and Mosk winced as it closed with a click that sounded too loud in the silence.

He turned back into the room and walked past the narrow entrance with its painted wooden wardrobe, then saw Eran propped up on a daybed by a huge aquarium set right into the wall. Fish swam past it in a way that suggested that it wasn't a proper aquarium, but a space in the ship that had seawater in it, lit by glowing shells. It was functional, decorative, it wasn't like anything Mosk
had seen before.

Eran looked wan, but he was awake, watching Mosk with a tired expression.

'I can go,' Mosk said automatically.

'Don't,' Eran said. 'I'm just...

He bent, threw up into a bucket provided. He retched several times more, and then reached for a small piece of something milky-yellow in a ceramic bowl of what looked like candy next to the daybed. He heated it in his fingers, a tiny wisp of smoke curling up, then put it in his mouth, closing his eyes and leaning back.

'Seasick?' Mosk said.

'It's awful,' Eran said from around whatever he was eating. Mosk thought it was maybe ginger from the smell. 'They say it will get better.'

'Especially aboveboard.'

'I can't,' Eran said weakly. 'I can't see it again. All that water. Not yet. It's weak, isn't it? Right now I can tell them that I can't walk up there, but I won't be able to say that in a couple of days. Less, even.'

Mosk walked past the bed that was made with sheets and blankets the colour of the sea. There was no fireplace or hearth in this room. The walls were decorated with shells and a tapestry depicting some underwater castle that looked too fantastic to be believed. The room was beautiful, but it was so at odds with Eran. Maybe later, Mosk could go looking for blankets that were fire colours. Would Eran even like that? He probably wouldn't like that. Fire colours didn't mean fire. And it wasn't like Mosk was going to make a fire for him.

'We have time now,' Mosk said, coming closer. Eran moved his legs, making room on the daybed, and after hesitating, Mosk sat down next to him. Eran looked so clammy, even his hair looked limp and Mosk didn't think it was from seawater. 'Can I get a healer for you? The boat would... I mean it's a big ship, there'd be a healer.'

'The healers are with Augus,' Eran said, opening his eyes and smiling crookedly. 'He needs them more. A healer might come back later. I don't know. I was cleared. Apparently Court status doesn't stop the shock of the sea. I should be fine tomorrow. But I still don't want to see it.'

Mosk wanted to reach out and take Eran's hand. He wanted to touch his shoulder. Instead, he folded his hands in his lap. He felt better just for being there, but he felt tense and strange, and searching for something to talk about, he found himself smiling a little.

'I have something to tell you,' he said.

'Oh?' Eran said. 'Are you okay?'

'Not that,' Mosk said, frowning. 'No, um. I'm pretty sure Ondine just fell in love at first sight.'

'Wait,' Eran said, blinking at him. Even the fire in his eyes looked more muted than usual, Mosk could tell because they'd started sparking up again. Eran pushed himself upright a bit more, then wiped at his mouth with his hand. 'Hang on, what?'

'Yeah,' Mosk said. He looked away, looked back again. 'I mean maybe I'm wrong, because I'm not
the best at reading people, but like- Ondine grasped all of our hands to like, read our prophecies, and-

'She can do that?' Eran said, eyes wide.

'Mmhm, you kind of have to let her, you're on her boat.'

'Shit,' Eran said, looking down at his own hands. 'I don't want to know my future.'

'She doesn't normally tell you, but anyway, I was saying that Ondine took Julvia's hands and then like, she just stopped, and you should've seen the look on her face. I'm pretty sure she just saw like, I don't know, maybe Julvia falling in love with her? Or maybe something with the two of them? But it was nice. It seems stupid now, but honestly if you'd been there, you would've noticed.'

'Wow,' Eran said. Mosk liked that Eran wasn't telling him it was stupid. He'd noticed that Eran liked hearing about people, hearing about their stories, and Eran was the first person Mosk thought to share this stuff with. It was good to realise that Eran didn't seem annoyed by it. Instead, Eran looked...well, still terrible, but also pleased. 'What did Julvia say?'

'She didn't realise, I think,' Mosk said. 'But she likes Ondine. It's really obvious. Julvia likes everyone. But she really likes Ondine.'

'That's nice. And we're not- Like we're not at risk of dying any time soon?' Eran said. 'Did you find out?'

'I think we're safe here for a little while. I think it's going to be our home for at least a couple of weeks, from what Gwyn and Ondine were saying.'

Eran groaned, his forehead furrowed, and Mosk lifted his hand to offer something, but pulled it back at the last minute. He was the wrong person to be doing this. He was always going to be the wrong person to be doing this.

'How do you deal with this all the time?' Eran said, eyes closed. 'Fuck.'

'What?' Mosk said, staring at him. 'I'm not- I mean-'

'You got used to it,' Eran said, eyes opening a crack, that gleam of orange creating a tiny glow on his thick, black lashes. 'But don't tell me you weren't dizzy, nauseous. It might be getting better, but I remember how it was. You couldn't walk in a straight line for more than five minutes for...a long time. And I treated you so badly.'

'Don't talk about that,' Mosk said, feeling awkward, turning to look behind him at the fish that were swimming in the ship. The glass panel was cold against his back. Did Eran like it? Or did he hate it? 'Shouldn't you be lying down?'

'I don't know,' Eran said. 'I feel like sitting makes the room spin less.'

Mosk nodded and fell silent again. He didn't feel like Eran had ever treated him that badly, even though Mosk had hated him for the longest time. Mosk hated everything and everyone for the longest time. It just seemed better that way, after Davix and Olphix. It was different now, Mosk resented it sometimes. He felt things again. He cared again. He didn't hate everything anymore. If he thought about that for too long, fear seeped into him. He could only lose things if he cared. He could lose Eran now. Before, he wouldn't have cared. Now, he couldn't make himself stop and he hated it.
It wasn't like he was useful. He was just sitting there. Mosk's shoulders stiffened.

'I wish it was someone better here, right now. Like your mother.'

Eran stared at him, then his eyes squeezed shut. He passed his fingers over them, and Mosk's gut curdled. He would always be like this. Always be mean, and then when he wasn't trying to be mean, he'd still be mean. But as he opened his mouth to take it back, Eran's hand dropped and he opened his eyes again, looking pained.

'By Kabiri, I wish she could've met you, though. She would have really liked you.'

'Me?' Mosk said, mouth dry.

'Yeah. She would've loved your hair and she would've made you so much food that you would have turned into a ball.'

Mosk laughed at the image, and Eran sat straighter, leaned in, until they were much closer and Mosk felt like maybe he should lean backwards, because otherwise he'd have to just stay in this weird tension which felt...good? Confusing?

'Would your Mamatree have liked me?' Eran said.

'Maybe,' Mosk said, looking down. 'I wasn't supposed to have anyone. They discouraged it.'

'Because they knew you would have left them eventually,' Eran said, his voice soft. 'Because of the debt.'

'Yeah,' Mosk said.

'So you weren't supposed to care about anyone except them.'

Mosk shrugged, and then looked sharply at Eran's fingers where they touched his forearm.

'You have a big heart, Mosk,' Eran said. 'I'm glad you've been able to protect it for this long.'

Mosk felt his face do something, some expression passing over that he knew was more a wince than anything. 'Shut up.'

'Hold still,' Eran said, his voice a command.

Mosk held his breath.

Lips touched his forehead, brushed briefly over his skin. Mosk learned that his forehead was sensitive, that Eran's lips were warm and dry, and just as he thought about leaning back and away, Eran withdrew. He leaned back against the wooden bench and then nudged Mosk's calf with his foot - using his uninjured leg. Then nudged it again.

'What?' Mosk said, bemused, annoyed. 'Stop it.'

Eran nudged him again, and Mosk looked down at Eran's bare feet, his toes stretching to nudge Mosk's calf again. It wasn't gentle, it was as annoying as Chaley could be when she was trying to get his attention. She used to throw gumnuts at him sometimes. And they hurt!

When Eran went to nudge him again, Mosk moved his calf out of the way.

Eran pouted.
'You're ridiculous,' Mosk said.

'It's all really surreal, isn't it?' Eran said. 'We were in the middle of war about five seconds ago. And now I'm here. But I like that you're here too. And you don't seem like you were injured?'

'I'm fine,' Mosk said. Small bruises and scratches. A lingering headache from Ash's compulsions and glamour, but the sea air had cleared most of it away.

'Are you upset that you're still alive?' Eran said.

Mosk kept looking at the fish swimming behind him. They were pretty and shiny, and he wondered if there were fae who could hear fish the way he used to be able to hear trees. In some ways, he was growing used to it, but that strangely made it hurt more when he thought of what he'd lost. He sighed and leaned his head back against the glass.

'Sometimes,' Mosk said. 'But I don't think I want to die. Like, I wouldn't mind very much if I died, but I also...don't want to.'

'Progress,' Eran said tiredly.

'I don't even know why I'm here most of the time,' Mosk said, reaching for some of the blanket wrapped around Eran, pulling some of that onto his thigh for that extra, small bit of warmth. 'I feel like a parasite. Like a mistletoe.'

'That's not true,' Eran said, pushing himself up, bending his legs so he could move closer, gasping at the pain before settling again. 'That's not true at all. You try so hard, Mosk. And you try so hard for me. I can see that. It's important.'

Mosk wanted to open his mouth and dismiss all of it, but with Eran so close, he couldn't help but think back to being in the cave, and Eran telling him that he was being good, and looking like he meant it. Mosk said nothing, because he wanted it to be true, even though he couldn't help but doubt. He closed his eyes. In the darkness behind his eyelids, he could feel the deep movements of the boat.

'I want to kiss you,' Eran said.

Mosk's eyes flew open in surprise. Eran looking at him so intently. Mosk wanted so badly in that moment to be able to say yes, but even as he thought about it, he could feel his skin crawling, and it wasn't the kind of thing he could ignore. Sometimes Eran did things he could ignore, or tune out, or...change into something else. But not this. The indecision he felt over it paralysed him.

'You can't?' Eran said.

Mosk shook his head. He wanted to apologise, but the words wouldn't come. Maybe he would look for fire coloured blankets. Could Eran even have a fire inside the boat? How would he do his fire rituals? Mosk's hands clenched into fists, his chapped lips remained un kissed, he felt lost.

'One day,' he whispered. 'Maybe one day.'

Eran was silent for a long time, and Mosk was tense in an agony of having to deal with himself, while sitting next to someone who made him feel warm in a good way. Sometimes he thought Eran was the one who made him feel things again, and Mosk hated that. But the more he thought about it, the more he realised that maybe he'd never felt some of these things so intensely, not ever. A green sapling unfurling its leaves for the first time, trembling and unprotected and waiting for the first thing to come eat the growth away.
'Stay with me until I fall asleep?' Eran said, his voice weaker, softer than before. When Mosk looked at him, he was pale once more, his eyeliner smoky from being smudged.

'You don't want to sleep on the bed?'

'Here's just fine,' Eran said. A small smile on his face, it lasted seconds before it vanished and he swiped at the sweat beading on his top lip.

'Okay,' Mosk said. 'I'll stay.'

He turned and watched the fish, wishing the inside of his head wasn't so loud, but glad that Eran was back in this form, talking to him, and not as upset or despairing as he’d been in the morning.

*

That night, after Eran had fallen asleep, Mosk walked through the corridors until he could find his own way out of the under-levels of the ship onto the main deck. The night sky was full of stars, the seas seemed calmer than before. Thin wisps of cloud covered a sleek crescent moon. The air smelled of salt and drying fish, and Mosk wished he had a coat to protect him from the cold breezes.

He stepped across the wood, beads of condensation sticking to his feet, making his way to the wooden railing. It was tall, came nearly up to his chest. He leaned into it and stared down into the oily black sea below. It was mesmerising emptiness, and he let it capture his thoughts for a long time before he looked to the horizon. There were twinkling lights there too. Beacons from boats in the distance, or maybe little towns on islands, Mosk didn't know. Above him, the sails billowed in the wind.

He was so far from home. He'd never been so far from home.

He didn't hate it like he thought he should. The sea had no trees, and all he heard was the rushing of water as it went to and fro, circling around the whole world like a heavy, fluid beast. He reached his hand out towards it through the wooden railing and felt a fine mist of spray on his fingers.

'Mamatre,' he whispered, 'look, it's the sea.'

He knew his mother had seen it, his father too. But none of his siblings had. Not Im and Shiel, the two oldest brothers who were inseparable and charming and aloof all at once; spruce and alder, towering above the rest of the family in spirit and strength. Not Chert or Ela or even Leaf, the storyweaver, the one who formally held the knowledge of the family. Not quiet Himshi, as small in stature as the dwarf Casuarina that grew from his hair. Not Mallem, who had hated Mosk and - as Mosk stared off at the lights on the horizon that looked like stars - had the right of it even if Mosk felt it was unfair and mean of him. Not even Chaley, who talked about how she was going to be a great explorer one day, with eucalyptus leaves in her hair, and the blossoms of the jarrah, with soft arms that held him so fiercely that he felt like she'd pull him into her whole body, where he could be safe from everything and everyone.

He reached down to his pocket – the trailing lead of rope wrapped around his wrist brushing his pants – only to remember that the bone wasn't there anymore. Still, his fingers felt around, and he touched the spiral of shell the verkhwin had given him. He frowned when instead of smoothness, he felt something rough against his fingertips that seemed to be attached to the shell.

He brought it out, staring in shock at the fine ridge of moss that was growing on the rough side opposite the spiral, it had crept over the letters. It was healthy green moss, and Mosk stepped back
from the railing, turning the shell in his fingers, frowning at it.

That definitely hadn't been there when the verkhwin gave it to him. He'd only received it the day before. How had the moss grown so fast?

He stroked his finger over it tenderly, wishing he could hear it whispering to him, thinking of how moss was so soft and good, even if it wasn't good for all trees. He thought of the long spires of seta growing upwards, terminating in capsules that would release spores to grow more moss, a carpet of the stuff. It would be beautiful.

The moss tickled the pad of his finger, shifting strangely, and then Mosk watched – mouth dry – as it sent up three frail seta, seconds later terminating in the capsules Mosk had imagined. The moss spread further along the shell.

Mosk's skin crawled.

That wasn't the verkhwin's magic. He didn't know much about verkhwin fae, maybe they could make things grow. But the moss had listened to Mosk's hopes for it, and now the shell was weighed down with moss, the spiral beneath pressing into his thumb. He swallowed thickly and placed his fingers on the wooden railing, staring at it hard. He didn't know the wood, he couldn't sense any spirit of any tree, knew he couldn't hear it. Even the moss didn't speak to him.

But beneath his index and middle finger, the wood sent up a tiny bump that became a node where a budding leaf began to form.

Mosk yanked his fingers back, then quickly scraped the node away.

All this time, he'd been convinced that they'd taken everything that made him an Aur dryad, and maybe they'd taken most of it, maybe they'd shattered him into so many pieces he didn't know if he'd ever be recognisable to himself again. But that was Aur dryad magic, and it hadn't even been hard.

He looked at his own hands silhouetted in the night sky, and then touched them to his chest after carefully placing the mossy shell back in his pocket. He staggered into the railing and squeezed his burning eyes shut, because it hurt. It hurt to think that he was the only one now. Not his Mamatreer or Papatreer, not his siblings, but only him. A mean heart and twisted into something he didn't understand anymore. What would his Mamatreer say to see him now? If Olphix hadn't killed her, the death of the Aur forest would have made her kill herself. He pressed a closed fist to his forehead and didn't want any of it, not the feelings, not the reminder he was an Aur dryad, not any of it.

The sea breathed roughly with him, slower and deeper and heavier, but it still talked a language that sounded like grief, tasted like tears. He wanted to throw himself into the water, but instead he forced his eyes open and stared down into the roiling black and his breathing evened to something steady. He wasn't dead yet, and he didn't want to die. So he'd have to just keep going. Maybe he'd get more of his powers back as time passed, maybe he wouldn't, but if he wasn't going to kill himself, he'd have to keep going anyway. No matter what came back.

He shivered as a breeze wrapped around him, then turned decisively to head back below deck.

He wanted to see Eran.

Chapter End Notes
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Holy crap, the end of book 1. As of now, book 2 is plotted, but I haven't started writing it yet. So I expect a hiatus of at least three months before book 2 starts. If you want to know exactly when it starts, then you can consider subscribing to the entire Ice Plague series (you don't have to subscribe to a single story! You can series subscribe!) Or alternatively come join me over at my Tumblr (not-poignant) and I'll definitely talk about it there. If you're desperate for other things to read in my style and don't know about it yet, I write fanfiction also at thespectaclesofthor.

In the meantime, there's been some lovely fanart by extremely talented/skilled people over here at the fae tales fanart tag on Tumblr, and ALSO the fae tales tag on Instagram.

A huge thank you to all the commenters (and MVP awards to all the regular commenters like holy shit), the people who leave kudos, the people who subscribe, who privately and publically bookmark, who lurk and are too shy or tired to say anything, the folks who come send me anons on Tumblr, or who basically find ways to either reach out or silently participate through hits. You're all super awesome people! :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!