Summary

“Dan had wished for someone peaceful because he was absolutely not peaceful. His mind never felt peaceful; it was a constant tempest of angst and worries and existential crises. He’d said bright clothes because he always wore black. Kind because he wasn’t always kind, he could be sarcastic and rude, on a bad day. Patient because, to love him, they would have to be patient. You needed a lot of patience to deal with him, he could be realistic about that.

It was, in reality, a person who (if they met) would not love Dan at all. A person that Dan could safely be in complete love with from afar, which was the whole point.”

Or: When he was eleven Dan wished for Phil to help with a family curse that there’s no hope of breaking. Fifteen years later he’s stationed in coastal Wales, working the late shift in a supermarket while secretly protecting a whole village from various supernatural beings. Everything is going fine(ish) until Phil, impossibly, shows up.

Notes

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This fic is for the amazing parentaladvisorybullshitcontent, who is just a delight and listened to me worry about this in many, many tumblr messages, and kept me writing even when I thought I couldn’t (entire sections of this only exist because of her) <3

Title from Fall Out Boy’s “Disloyal Order of Water Buffaloes.”
The first person to go missing, or the first missing person that anyone really pays attention to, is Delyth Evans. She’s seventeen, with an orange dip-dye and a Twenty One Pilots tattoo. *She’s the tear in my heart,* looping like a bracelet right around her wrist. It’s mentioned as one of her identifying features. Everyone thinks she’s gone to Cardiff (or even Swansea, as a last resort), as everyone always does when teenagers wander off from Pembroke, because Pembroke is so *dull,* so *sleepy,* why would anyone want to stay here. They put her photo up on the store noticeboard, her parents’ mobile numbers underneath, but there doesn’t seem to be a hugely urgent vibe about it.

Dan, who doesn’t have an urgent vibe about many things, walks home in the early hours of every morning to the sound of the trees talking; a steady murmuring that (over the past few days) has started to sound almost concerned, a slow current that builds like an oncoming storm. The elm outside his building, the one whose twigs scatter against the living room window, whispers through the glass, trying to get his attention. Dan, scrambling through his phrase book, says, “We talked about this before, I don’t understand you. I can’t speak Welsh, go slower.” The elm visibly huffs at him and carries on speaking Welsh regardless, each syllable a wind chime on its leaves, insistent, like this is information that Dan really needs to know.

Dan says, “Stop,” and, “Slow down,” to the elm and to every tree that speaks to him on his way back and forth to work, but they never do. If anything the pace quickens and becomes more difficult to understand. Welsh is like Elvish, a waterfall of syllables that sound like one continuous word, with no breaks. The elm loses patience and drags a leaf through Dan’s hair, messing up his fringe.

He tells PJ, during one of their Skype conversations (with his hand pressed to the back of his laptop, no need for an actual internet connection). “I think the trees are annoyed with me.”

“Already?” PJ says. “You’ve only been there two minutes.”

“It’s been two *months.* And they weren’t before. They were pretty polite at the start.” The oak tree at the end of the street had used to say *bore da* to him on his way back from work, extending its branches like arms, like it was curtseying. Dan, with terrible pronunciation and the grumpiness of someone who is very much not a morning person, would say it back. “I don’t know what changed.”

PJ says, “You should ask them.”

“They keep speaking *Welsh.* Even when I try and-”

“I thought you were learning Welsh,” PJ reminds him.

PJ is in Oslo, where everyone wants to go for their stationing. It’s the glamour spot; all ice fields and auroras, elves and gods, cold and graceful. Dan can picture PJ there, in perfectly co-ordinated knitwear, snowdrops freezing on his curls, charming valkyries from the sky. PJ probably learnt Norwegian the day that he arrived. Even now, on Skype, he’s wearing a jumper handmade for him by his downstairs neighbours and there’s a vase of freshly picked blåveis in the background behind him. PJ is the type of sentinel, no, the type of *person,* who gets given thank you presents constantly. Dan is not.

“I’m trying,” Dan says. The electric current through his palm is starting to ache. “I’m just not great at this.”
PJ, because he’s a good friend, says, “That’s not true,” and neglects to mention any of the times that he’s had to rescue Dan from Dan’s lack of planning, lack of motivation and general lacklusterness. “Ask the trees. Find out what’s wrong. They don’t normally get agitated like that. They’re meant to be calm.”

“They were when I got here.”

“You think it’s to do with that missing girl?”

“I don’t know. If it is, then they’re the only ones who seem bothered by it. Everyone else here is weirdly calm. They think she’s run off because it’s boring here.”

“Is it that bad?”

“It’s quiet.” Dan shrugs. That was the whole point of him being sent here in the first place; the quietness. “But not, like, to the point that you would run away.”

PJ says, “Hey, it would be ironic if you got deliberately sent to the quietest place so you wouldn’t have to deal with anything and then something huge happened.”

They both can’t hold the connection any longer. Dan can tell from the grimace on PJ’s face. It takes a lot of energy to keep it at this level. Dan just about manages to say, “Thanks Peej,” before PJ, and the internet, disappears.

He takes his phrasebook with him, on the next 1am stroll to work, illuminating the pages with light from his fingertips, word by word. He says, “Nos da,” to the oak tree, which unleashes a whole stream of bristling leaves. Dan says, “No,” and “Um, fuck, sorry, I can’t find the right page. What’s wrong, just tell me. I’m supposed to be looking after you.” He’s pretty sure that the tree laughs.

The first person to go missing is Delyth Evans and even if everyone pretends to be nonchalant about it their auras are muddy and clouded over. Dan, at work, stares at the syrupy gone-off pink around Louise’s head (it’s usually candy-bright, the same shade as her lipstick) and says, “One photo doesn’t seem enough, does it? Should we make copies?”

Louise says, “She’ll come back. She will have gone east, that’s all. People don’t go missing from around here, ever.”

“That doesn’t mean that no one ever will.”

Louise gives him a curious look. “You wouldn’t understand. You haven’t been here for long enough.”

PJ, worried again, says, “Really. They shouldn’t get that agitated.” And that should have been the first sign, really, that there was something bigger, something more wrong, but Dan never thought that he would be the one to end up with something on his stationing, not when he’d been sent to Wales because he was too “lethargic” for anywhere else.

Dan makes copies of Delyth’s photograph. He gives them to the trees, gently sellotapes her smiling face to their trunks and feels the anxiety splintering from every vein of their leaves.

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The worst thing about Wales, aside from the constant rain, the overwhelming sound of the sea and
the sing-song accents he still doesn’t understand, is the faeries. Dan hates faeries. Everyone does. They steal shiny things and they talk in rhymes and love nothing more than being chased across fields and fields of rolling Welsh hills like they’re purposely trying to make him fall in every ditch they come across. They don’t need to try very hard, as it happens.

“Not always true!” says the faerie, voice like a thousand wingbeats, on its tiptoes a few centimetres from Dan’s face. “Just when it’s you!”

Dan, sprawled inelegantly in the grass, mud already soaking into his jeans and coat, says, “Thanks. That’s very flattering.”

“It’s because you run at such a slow pace. It makes it funnier in the chase.”

Dan says, “I don’t run at a slow pace. And it’s not a fair chase when one of us can fly.”

The faerie considers this. “Anyone can fly, if they would only try.”

“That’s not - it doesn’t work like that. We talked about this the last time you stole something.”

“We had thought that our sentinel would possess a bit more magic, rather than being so -”

“Tragic?” Dan supplies. The faerie huffs, they hate when he finishes their rhymes for them. He tries to push himself up on his elbows, sighs at the huge splatters of dirt over his coat. “Sorry to disappoint.”

The faerie frowns. Or, at least, Dan thinks the faerie frowns. They’re not the most expressive of magical beings, surprisingly. He’s learnt that from being in Wales, where the entire countryside is apparently overrun with them. They’re grey and have pointed little faces that could be any age from 4-400, with wizened hands and feet. Their wings are sticky and transparent, like a dragonfly’s. They also all look completely identical and he’s wondered, many times, if it’s actually just one very busy faerie who has apparently made making Dan exercise its sole aim in life.

“We didn’t mean to make you mad. It’s just that we think you always look so-”


He reaches out, hopefully, to the tiny woolen sack that they’re holding, filled (as always) with the shiniest and prettiest items of jewellery from the shop on the main street which gets robbed, on average, four times a week. Not that the owner would ever know.

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“We didn’t mean to make you mad. It’s just that we think you always look so-”

“I can’t. You know that. And I’ll check that you haven’t kept any.” It’s always the same five items; a sapphire ring, a gold bracelet with linked emeralds, two loose opals and, finally, a ridiculous tiara with dotted with rubies and the word “cariad” embossed in looping silver hearts on the front. Dan secretly thinks that the faeries want to keep that one the most. “Please. I have work in an hour.”

He finally manages to get enough of a footing on the slippery grass to launch himself forward and snatch the bag from their hands. He stuffs it into his pocket and says, “Ha!”

“Oh no,” says the faerie. Dan gets the distinct impression that they’re humouring him. He’s pretty sure they have enough magic to not be chased down by a (very) unfit sentinel with limited abilities over the same set of fields at the same time every night. “You are a worthy foe.”
“There’s no need to be patronising,” Dan grumbles, closing his fist around the bag.

The faerie curtsies and the batting of their wings becomes a steady thrum as they prepare to fly away.

Dan says, “Wait,” and watches them float back down. “Do you know anything about- I just was wondering- the trees. They seem, um, on edge. Over the past week. Do you know anything?”

The faerie says, “We do not concern ourselves with the murmurings of trees,” in a grand tone that Dan hasn’t heard from them before. “But you would do well to listen to their pleas.”

“It’s just not normal, that’s all.”

“The sea,” the faerie says, suddenly, voice deep and like a rumble of thunder. “Is angry.”

Dan blinks. “Sorry?”

But the faerie is gone. They don’t like to talk much after the excitement of being chased is over. Dan stays where he is for a few moments, knees and elbows in wet mud, a magic bag of stolen jewellery clutched in one hand, before he finally pushes himself back up to standing.

He breaks back into the jewellery shop, something he’s done so often now that he knows the layout as well as his own flat and pours the bracelet, the ring, the opals and the awful tiara out of his pocket, arranging them in their display cases, exactly where they should be.

He’s late for work.

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Dan’s in charge of produce, getting all the nighttime deliveries of fruit and vegetables ready to be bought when the store opens in the morning. By the time he’s finished with them everything is devoid of any bruises or imperfections that they may have had on receipt, his aisle looks like a photograph from a magazine (if there was a magazine that would print photographs of the fruit and veg aisle in a local Tesco). It calms him, taking each individual apple or stem of broccoli, casting his hand over it until it looks perfect. Every item ends up being a work of art.

Louise, stunned, thinks that they have a new supplier. She never notices that the delivery looks a little different when it arrives. But she also never notices the nest of coblynau in the stockroom (Dan does, obviously. They’re fairly easy to manage, as long as he gives one of them his phone. They love Crossy Road).

“Did you put up more photos of Delyth?” Mark asks. He covers the early evening shift, carrying crates from delivery lorries to stockroom, and always leaves Dan a flask of still hot coffee to carry him through the night shift. “I saw a few on the trees, on the way in.”

Dan says, “I just think that it should be taken a bit more seriously, that’s all.”

Mark swipes his clock-out card. “I know it seems weird, to people who aren’t from here but, seriously, she’s just caught the train somewhere more exciting and not told anyone. I used to dream about doing that all the time. It can get pretty claustrophobic.”

Dan thinks Pembroke is the very opposite of claustrophobic. For someone who has grown up in cities, buildings and people right on top of each other, he finds that the open fields, the coastline, the cottages all an equal distance apart, make too much space. He’s not used to being able to see the night sky without streetlights reflecting into it.
“But it’s nice,” Mark adds. “It’s nice that you’re helping. I mean, her parents will appreciate it, I’m sure.

Mark, on an average day, is one of only four people that Dan speaks to. They are (in order): PJ, then a faerie, then Louise, and then finally Mark. The average can go up to five, if he has to speak to a tree, or even to six, if he has to make conversation with the waitress in the coffee shop. Six is the absolute maximum.

The waitress touching his hand as she gives him his change, or Mark clapping his shoulder, is the only physical human contact that he’ll have all week. Sometimes he just stands awkwardly by Mark’s locker, as they swap over shifts, to make sure that Mark doesn’t forget to say bye Dan and pat his upper arm. Sometimes he’ll deliberately struggle to catch the coins, so the waitress has to press it into his palm.

“But I don’t want you to worry when there’s no reason. She’ll come back in a week or something. The city isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“No,” Dan says. “It’s not.” He leans next to Mark’s locker as Mark retrieves his shoulder bag. “I’m probably going to leave the posters up though.”

“I kinda thought you would.” Mark reaches out and taps Dan’s shoulder. “Bye Dan. Take it easy tonight.”

Dan always does. He sets himself up in front of the fruit section and spends four minutes on each box of blueberries, until they’re each the ideal shade and size, as shiny and reflective as a navy marble.

Mark’s aura is scarlet, bright and exuberant, exactly the same colour as the hoodie he always wears. He has black hair and, when they’d first met, Dan had mentally crossed off the first item of The List and prepared himself for some kind of signal, but there was none. Mark’s eyes are one colour and he isn’t peaceful, he’s loud to the point that he can do the store intercom messages without the intercom. When they’d first met he’d frowned at Dan and said you okay there? because Dan was holding his breath and mentally running through a list that he’d memorised fifteen years ago. He’d exhaled as he looked into the acorn brown of Mark’s eyes and said I’m fine.

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Being a sentinel is a lot like being a town’s personal police officer. Except no one ever notices and you never get any thanks. Does Louise ever notice that all her attempted shoplifters trip over invisible string at the front door? That she calls for spillages and clean-ups that are always, somehow, already done by the time that someone gets there? Probably not.

“If you’re doing this for the gratitude then you’re in the wrong job,” PJ says. Easy for him to say, the blåveis on the table behind him have multiplied, and he’s wearing a freshly knitted new scarf. “You know that we’re supposed to stay unseen.”

“It’s not really a job though, is it?”

Dan’s pretty good at the staying unseen part of it. It comes naturally. Even when you’re 6’2 (and horribly, awkwardly, aware of the fact), with a curse mark on your left wrist (not that anyone knows about that, really, besides the faeries. He can get away with a quiet hey that’s a cool tattoo), he finds it very easy to disappear in a crowded room, or to have people’s gaze move right over him.

He passes his days quietly, does his rounds from 11pm-1am, and then works 2am-6am, walks there...
as the sun is setting and walks home in the misty inbetweeness of the dawn. The hours in between would, for anyone else, be lonely, Dan supposes, but he’s never been a lonely person. Not really. He walks a lot, looking out across the coast. Living by the sea after spending the first 20 plus years of his life in the middle of a city takes some getting used to. It had surprised him at first, just how loud the sea could be, like it was constantly shouting for his attention.

“Any mermaids?” PJ says, enviously, not for the first time.

“No mermaids,” Dan replies. He’s always wanted to see a mermaid. “Just faeries. An abundance of faeries.”

PJ ponders this. “A sparkle of faeries?”

“Nope. They’re not really that sparkly. They’re actually really grey.”

“Grey?” PJ looks disappointed. “You mean Disney lied to me? Again? I wanted, like, chubby ladies in pastel dresses with wands.”

“They don’t have wands,” Dan says. “And they steal stuff constantly.” He swaps his hands over, left to right, on the back of his computer. “I put more posters up. I tried to learn more Welsh. They said, the sea is angry.” He tries to mimic the faerie’s strange, suddenly deep voice. “It sounds like it’s always angry here.”

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The second person is Gwyn Rhys, and no one takes that entirely seriously either because apparently he’d been threatening to do it for a while, to disappear. He’d been in the town’s male voice choir (another thing about Wales, they love a choir) but there was some kind of power struggle between him and one of the other tenors over who was going to sing the solo in Cwm Rhondda and he’d said I’m going to where I’m appreciated and so, apparently, he had.

Louise adds him to the noticeboard.

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“The sea,” says the faerie, “Is angry.”

Dan, usual time usual location, mud splattered over his knees, says, “The sea? Did they fall into in the sea, is that what you mean?”

He doubts it, people here worship the sea, stay at a polite distance from the coast at all times, paint pictures and take photos, like they’re trying to pamper its ego.

“That’s not what we mean.”

Dan waits for the next sentence, the rhyme. It doesn’t come. He holds his hand out for the sack. Sapphire ring, emerald bracelet, two opals and a ruby tiara. Tonight hadn’t been a great chase. The faerie had been waiting, had seemed to fly slowly, like they were waiting for Dan to catch up.

“You have a curse mark,” the faerie observes. “Which makes us think your past is dark.”

In the motion of reaching out, Dan’s sleeve has ridden up, revealing the circular mark on his wrist. It’s as crude and smudged as a badly done tattoo, a single circle with a vertical line through the centre. He blinks down at it, surprised that they’d never noticed it before. “Yes. And no. To the dark past. That makes me sound interesting but I’m not.”
The faerie looks interested. They place their small gnarled hand right onto the mark. Their skin feels as smooth as velvet. Dan stays kneeling on the grass, humouring them, until finally they shiver and pull back.

Dan says, “So, about the-”

“There’s a lot of sadness in your soul,” says the faerie, still looking at his wrist. “And for that we will return what we stole.” They drop the bag back into Dan’s hand.

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“Maybe,” PJ says, “You should go and check it out?”

Dan is in the tearooms that are perched in the centre of the harbour, looking straight out from between two mountains. It’s busy with walkers from the coastal path; too many auras and emotions in one place, an entire kaleidoscope of unique colours. It’s draining. He prods at the float of whipped cream on top of his coffee. “You mean the sea?”

“Everything’s telling you to.”

The trees, having finally got the message to slow down, are saying mòr and cefnfor, quiet bass notes of great urgency, whispered with flickering leaves and the sound of far off thunder, a noise that follows Dan right the way to work. Sea and Ocean.

“I don’t go near the sea,” Dan says. “They’re weird about it here.”

“Weird how?” PJ frowns. “What about that island, the one you said you can catch a boat to? They could have caught a boat over and got stuck there, both of them.”

The island is called Skomer, and is full of puffins and, apparently, half of the world’s population of Manx shearwaters. Dan likes to watch them, taking off en mass just as he’s walking back to his flat, huge moving cloud formations of birds. His father could speak to birds, had a whole garden full of robins and sparrows that he would feed right from his hand, but Dan hadn’t ended up with that particular talent. He hadn’t ended up with any particular talent at all, except being able to run a pretty good internet connection through his hand and turning any item of clothing black. Priorities.

There’s a boat to Skomer Island every Friday afternoon and Sunday morning, no more, no less, and the magic radiates off it with every movement of the waves, a shimmering film of silver that no one else can see. Dan has never seen anything give off so much and doesn’t want to go anywhere near it.

“Dan-”

“Don’t say it’s my job. I know that it is. I just don’t think it’s that simple.”

“It makes sense.”

“It doesn’t. There’s nothing on that island apart from birds and one cottage that no one lives in. People only go out there to take photos. And everyone knows when the boats are, no one would get stuck out there.”

PJ pauses and says, “Do you get a bad vibe from it?”

Dan sighs. “The worst of bad vibes.”
“You could ask for help, I mean, they said that if it got too much we could—”

“It’s not too much,” Dan says, resisting the urge to add it isn’t fair. PJ, with his Fair Isle knits and vases of Norwegian flowers, would love an island with its own aura. He’d swim out to Skomer himself. “I just, I had a routine going, and everything was fine.”

“Fine and lonely.”

“I’m not lonely,” Dan retorts, instantly. The word triggers something in him and he adds, “The faerie saw my mark yesterday.”

PJ is silent for such a long time that Dan thinks he’s broken the signal. When he speaks, it’s gentle. “We said for you to hide that. It freaks some of them out.”

“It didn’t freak them out. They put their hand on it and said I have a lot of sadness in my soul.”

PJ, helplessly, says, “Dan.”

Dan says, “I know, right?” aiming for a light joking tone and ending up with something completely the opposite.

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He walks down the coastal path at 11:30, wondering if the faeries are missing him, if it’s no fun stealing things if he’s not there to chase for it back. Or if they even steal anything at all when he’s not there. It’s cold and he’s only wearing a light coat (his winter jacket had, sadly, caught on fire during his attempt to magic it clean) with a scarf and gloves that his mother had knitted for his brother, but had somehow ended up with him.

(The scarf and gloves are sage green, to match his brother’s aura. He’d taken them in a sudden burst of sentimentality before leaving home. You can’t see your own aura, not even in a mirror, and it wasn’t really good manners to ask other people about it, but his mother liked to give them the chance to look at their colours, on their hands and looped around their necks.

Not Dan though. He tended to return gifts unopened, had no curiosity about it until he’d asked PJ one day, while drunk, was somehow desperate to know it’s not black, is it? I feel like it’s black but I don’t want to be and PJ, mystified, said but all you wear is black and no, no, it’s not black, it’s- )

The path is lined either side with heather that dances and bows in the breeze. Dan grazes his hand across the purple waves of it and climbs over the stile that leads to the beach. There’s a whole host of signs that he illuminates with his hand, saying variations on Danger, Turn Back, Unsafe Terrain. He keeps his hand in front of him as the path continues to drop downwards, until the grass beneath his feet becomes sand and pebbles.

The air on the beach feels different, it crackles and rumbles, sings like a far off choir. Something in the air screams and Dan thinks it would be just his luck to end up with a cyhyraeth. He knows that there’s some here, there always are at the sea but he’s never actually seen one. Yet. The scream turns into a howl that reverbs off the rocks.

A girl’s voice shouts, “Help!”

Dan, startled, slips on the pebbles.

“Please help me!”
Dan regains his balance and yells, “Delyth?”

“Please!”

There’s a cave, just a few metres to his left, and an echo in her voice. Dan runs there, sliding all over the sand in his impractical Converse, almost on the verge of skating.

“Quickly!”

The inside of the cave is curved like a shell, jagged edges where the rock has fallen away. Dan has to step down slightly, then again onto a ledge that drops into water. He stumbles and puts his hand to the wall, instantly cutting the side of his palm. Pieces of rockface sparkle like stars in a blanket of grey. He shouts, “Delyth? You don’t know me but I’m-”

“I’m over here!”

The voice is from his right and much deeper than before. Dan knows before he’s even turned around that it’s going to be a morgen and could pinch himself for being so stupid.

The morgen is perched on one of the furthest out rocks, hair right down to her elbows and as luminescent as the silvery cave around her. She’s beautiful in an intimidating way, her face is too perfect, all the features too carefully selected, attractive to the point that it’s almost unattractive. She could be a sculpture, a painting, a figurehead on the front of a ship. She takes one look at Dan and huffs with disappointment, blowing an entire wave of white-blonde hair from her forehead.

“The sentinel,” she says, every letter a sigh.

Dan pulls himself, with no real grace, up onto the rock facing her, reluctant to actually go into the water. “We haven’t been properly introduced.”

“I hear things. News travels. Are you not chasing faeries tonight?”

“That’s not all I do.”

She laughs. It sounds like a seagull squawking. “I hope not. You’d be missing everything.”

Dan says, “Everything?”

She shrugs.

“I wanted to ask you something. While you’re here.” Dan leans forward, pushes his sleeves up. “There’s two people who have gone missing, from the-”

The morgen rolls her eyes. “Why would I concern myself with that?”

“I’m sorry,” Dan says, because she genuinely looks upset by this. “I meant to. I just, I’m not very good at the whole- I only got sent here because I was terrible and they thought it would be peaceful.”
“Oh!” she half-laughs, half-squawks again. “Oh dear. It’s not peaceful. Not at all.”

Dan leans right forward. “Is there something in the sea? Something on the island?”

She looks down at where he’s perched, looks right at his wrist. “What did someone as young as you do to get cursed?”

Dan says, “Nothing, it’s a family thing.”

“Oh. Those are the worse, aren’t they? The unjustness of it all.”

“I suppose.”

The morgen leans forward. “Tell me about it.”

Dan says, “I would prefer-”

“You’re asking for something from me, aren’t you?”

Dan sighs.

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The rules, when it came to it, were simple. His father’s father’s father’s father pissed off some witch somewhere along the way and so now every man in his family has to write down all the details of their one true love in a ceremony when they’re eleven. If you ever meet that person you cannot pursue a relationship with them. Because, death. For both of you.

(Eleven, for most Howells, was too young to even think about it. His brother, years later, had written down all sorts of things, blonde, 5 foot 11, a cheerleader who is also a scientist, but his father, losing patience, said, “No, they’ll know. You have to be realistic.”

Dan (even then) had been overflowing with something, a soul that was too much for his heart to take. He would have no problems thinking of someone).

You’re supposed to get told at some point in your eleventh year but Dan’s mother, ever practical, had done it on the morning of his birthday, while he was still in his pyjamas.

Dan, startled, said, “But what about you and Dad?”

“We love each other,” his mother replied, automatically.

“But just not-”

“You need to learn, Dan. Sometimes it’s easier. You’ll meet someone that you’ll like very much, and it will be very easy to-” she stopped, like there was no possible way to end that sentence fairly.

Dan had taken it seriously, because his mother had stressed that it was important to take it seriously and also Dan was, and is, an incredibly serious person. To the point of being melancholy, at times.

Dan had thought about it and so had written:

*Black Hair*

*Eyes that are three colours*
He’d written peaceful because he was absolutely not peaceful. His mind never felt peaceful; it was a constant tempest of angst and worries and existential crises. He’d said bright clothes because he always wore black. Kind because he wasn’t always kind, he could be sarcastic and rude, on a bad day. Patient because, to love him, they would have to be patient. You needed a lot of patience to deal with him, he could be realistic about that.

It was, in reality, a person who (if they met) would not love Dan at all. A person that Dan could safely be in complete love with from afar, which was the whole point.

“Oh Dan,” his mother said. “She sounds lovely.”

It was days, weeks, years later (ten years, to be exact), when he had said, “Mum, I wasn’t thinking of a she. Not at all.”

Sometimes he thought he saw Him in the supermarket, at bars, in lectures. Someone with one or two of the main attributes, but nothing complete, and Dan would think, *okay, maybe two is enough. I can work with that,* and would fall into something that he would, just as quickly, fall back out off, bruises on his heart that faded incredibly quickly because it was hard, attempting to love someone else when you’d been in love with a person you’d dreamt up since you were eleven. A person that was perfect enough to be impossible.

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“Is it?” Dan says. He’d grown accepting of it, somewhere along the way., but that was easy when you were twenty-six and actually pretty content in your own company. It would be worse, later, looking back on sixty years or so of maybes. The absence of love, of a person who couldn’t exist, of a person he had to stay away from, was now just a slow burn that, every so often, became a deep longing that shivered right down to his wrist.

“It is,” the morgen tells him. “How do you break it?”

“All curses can be broken.”

“Oh, I don’t think this one can.”

“Have you asked?”

Dan says, “No,” shortly. It’s getting increasingly uncomfortable, being sat on this rock. His trainers can’t find purchase on the slipperiness of the surface and he’s reduced to sitting Ariel-style, with one leg trapped under him. “If there was then someone would have found it by now, wouldn’t they?”

She huffs. “I suppose. But, still, the lack of-”
“I know. Can we please just not talk about me for a second?”

“You’re the sentinel. I never understood that. All that help but no real thank you. No one ever knows you’re there. Standing on the outside and watching. Why would you decide to do that?”

“I’m from a long line of them. Better ones. They all get stationed in Bulgaria and Iceland, you know, places that are full of magic. They sent me here because they said it would be quiet. And I don’t mind it, no one knowing you’re there. Being on the outside.”

Dan is, he knows, a contradiction in many ways. He’s dramatic, but hates being the centre of attention. He dislikes most people, and yet spends his time helping an entire town's worth of them. His heart is dark and cold, but also full of yearning, feelings that have nowhere to go.

The morgen, staring at him, says, “I’m sorry if I made you sad.”

“It’s fine. I’m really not sad.”

“The sea isn’t angry,” she says. “But something in it is.”

Dan blinks. She looks impassive. “Something like what?”

“Something dangerous. We don’t like to go near it.”

“Is it taking people?” Dan asks, hesitantly. The word *taking* echoes on the walls around them. Taking implies not coming back. “Is that what’s happening?”

There are two more screams from outside, screams of something not human. The sound mixes with the wind and makes Dan shudder.

The morgen, watching him, says, “Cyhyraeth.”

“I guessed. Aren’t they supposed to only be heard before shipwrecks?”

“Not just shipwrecks. Just anything that’s about to go wrong.”

“Oh,” Dan says. “Okay then.”

“You shouldn’t stay here any longer. It gets dangerous.”

Dan gets the feeling that he didn’t manage this conversation as best he could have. The morgen lowers herself into the water and is gone.

The cyhyraeth outside seem to be multiplying and, judging by the volume of the screaming, are circling the entire shoreline. He’d read somewhere, when he first got stationed, that when you get close enough they start screaming your name, which isn’t something that he entirely wants to hear. He pulls the scarf right up around his ears, covering his mouth, and walks out.

There are, he would estimate, about ten of them. He’s seen a banshee before, with PJ, and had thought it had been a great idea to yell back at them (it hadn’t been); they’d been all black cloaks and yellow shining eyes. Cyhyraeth look like fragile old women with flowing white hair, their skin paper thin with the blue of their veins showing, and a death metal roar of a voice that he feels right in his teeth. They’re impossible to fight and impossible to reason with, especially someone with his weak level of ability, so the best option is, honestly, to run away.

Dan breaks into a sprint just as one of them swoops into his eyeline and starts plucking at his scarf, dislodging it on the left side. It unloops into a sage green banner, his brother’s aura unfurling
behind him as he runs.

The cyhyraeth rumbles *Dan, Dan* and it’s as unsettling as he’d expected, to be running from your own name. She says *Dan, roi’r gorau i redeg, roi’r gorau i chwilio*, and repeats *Dan* over and over, the other nine joining in until it’s an entire screech of *Dan* bouncing off the mountainside.

He trips somewhere when trying to run back up the path, just in time for one of them to fasten a hand around his ankle. Dan attempts to kick out with his free leg but it has no impact. He pulls one glove off and raises his bare palm, manages to say, “Golau”, through clenched teeth. The light it emits is so weak that the cyhyraeth almost looks pitying, like a grandmother saying, *well, it’s okay, you tried your best*, like his grandmother watching him trying to cast healing charms.

He shouldn’t really think about his grandmother right now. He looks the cyhyraeth right in her milky blue eyes and says, “Please.”

She says, “Dan. Roi’r gorau i chwilio.”

“I don’t *understand* you.” Dan feels like he could cry. He’s lost his scarf, blown right off his shoulders as he ran up the hill. The damp ground beneath him is sinking right into his thin jacket. His trainers are soaked through. “I didn’t mean to disturb you, I’m just trying to find something.”

“Sentinel.”

“That’s right, that’s me.”

She says, “Dan,” and points back to the sea. “Dan.”

“I’m sorry. I mean–” He can’t think of the Welsh. And I’m sorry had been the first thing he’d learnt, thinking it was a phrase that he’d need to use a lot. “I only wanted to–”

She lets go of his ankle, and floats back up, still in a kneeling position. She says, “Mynd.”

Dan knows that one and doesn’t need telling twice. He jumps to his feet, scarf and one glove down, and sprints clumsily back up the coastal path, breath coming in short stabbing sobs, like he’s been crying (*is he crying?* He wipes at his cheeks to make sure but there’s only dirt there).

He slips and falls somewhere at the top, the roars of the waves and the trees (*saying pergyl over and over, danger, danger*) in his ears, all of the cyhyraeth in the sky shrieking and screaming. He lies there, cheek pressed to the mud and wonders why he ever complained about the faeries.

There’s a steady thump-thump of something approaching. Dan doesn’t want to look to see what it is, scrunches his eyes closed. There’s a nudge at his side, gentle and enquiring, then a second, more insistent. Dan sighs, rolls onto his back and opens his eyes.

When he sees it first, thinks that it’s a gwyllgi; a huge black dog, almost knee height, that apparently haunts lonely roads at night. He’s expecting the glowing red eyes, the breath of fire, lies back in the grass to prepare for this, but the dog (huge and black) just pushes its face into the crook of Dan’s neck and snuffles.

It’s also, he notices, carrying his scarf and one glove.

Dan pats one hand to the dog’s side. Its fur is thick and somehow perfectly straight. Dan says, “Hello there,” and sniffs. “Sorry, I’m just having a bit of a crisis at the moment.”

The dog drops the scarf and glove onto Dan’s chest.
Dan says, “Oh, thanks,” and pulls at the dog’s velvety ears. “You didn’t go down to the beach for these, did you? You shouldn’t go there. I don’t think anyone should.”

The dog tilts its head to one side like it knows exactly what Dan’s talking about and nudges at his side again.

Dan says, “I saw a morgen tonight. I need to tell PJ.”

The dog bumps its nose into Dan’s cheek, insistently.

“I’m fine,” Dan says. “I’m fine.” He pats the dog’s head. “Who do you belong to?”

Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t answer.

***

The dog follows him all the way to work, right on his heels. When they get close enough it stops and sits, looking up at Dan appealingly.

“I can’t take you in,” Dan says, apologetically. “And I also can’t have a pet. Just, can you wait here?”

He tries to tie the dog to a post with his scarf but the dog is having none of it. It sits obediently until Dan, giving up, says, “I’ll be right back, I’ll send someone out.”

Inside, he catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror - jacket covered in mud, specks of it in his hair, smudged on his cheeks. Mark, at his locker, says, “What the fuck happened to you?” and stares at the puddle of water forming around Dan’s trainers. Black dots of genuine concern flicker over his aura, which is sweet, Dan supposes. “Did you fall in the river and also simultaneously into a pile of mud?”

Dan says, “Kind of. Hey, there’s a dog outside, it followed me to work and I don’t know what to do with it. Can we bring it in here?”

Mark’s face lights up at the mere mention of the word *dog* and says, “Sure. I’ll go and bring it in the stockroom. Someone will be missing it.”

Louise, walking into the room as Mark leaves, says, “What happened?”

Her aura is back to the colour of candy floss, a happy cheerful pink that radiates affection. Dan wants to wrap himself in it. He says, “Nothing. I just fell.”

Louise says, “I wanted you to train the new starter, but it can wait for another day. And don’t say that you can’t train them because you’re useless and bad with people. I know that’s not true.” As Dan opens his mouth she adds, “And don’t ask if someone else can do it. You’re the only late shift.”

Dan says, “Someone else wants to work 2-6?”

“I know, shocking right? I was lucky to find you and now I’ve ended up with two. At least you’ll have company.”

“I was fine without company.”

Mark, coming back in, says, “Dan, there’s no dog. It must have run off.”
Louise says, “What dog?”

Mark claps his hand to Dan’s shoulder. “Sorry. I looked everywhere.”

Dan says, “It doesn’t matter. Is the new starter here now?”

“He just got here, he’s in the second staff room. You’re late. And also damp and covered in mud.” Louise raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re-”

“I’m fine. You want me to go and meet him?”

“And just show him the ropes tonight. He’ll work the other half of the store eventually so I promise you won’t need to see him unless you want to. His name’s Phil. Be nice.”

Dan walks to the second staff room without even tidying himself up. To do so would cause suspicion, now both Mark and Louise have seen him. His hair is curling, the mud splatters on his face almost look like freckles. He’s still only wearing one glove, the other stuffed into his pocket.

He throws the door open and feels such an instant ache in his wrist that he wants to cradle it to his chest.

***

“If he shows up,” his mother said, very seriously, “You must turn the other way and not speak to him. It will be hard but that’s what you have to do.”

“I will,” Dan replied. “I promise I will.”

***

Phil has black hair. His eyes are green, blue and yellow all at once. He’s wearing a shirt with corgis on it, carrying his bright red store t-shirt under one arm. When he smiles he pushes his tongue right against his teeth. Dan feels like something is squeezing his heart, fluttering as fast as a faerie’s wing, a feeling that travels through his chest right down to his wrist, where the mark tingles.

Phil says, “Hi! Are you Dan?”

Dan says, “Yes.” The word is an effort to say.

His aura, when Dan can bear to look at it, is ocean blue. The exact shade of the sea when it meets the coast in the early hours of the morning, the sun hitting it just right. It’s glowing and beautiful, the kind of colour that leaves spots in your vision.

“You work the night shift?” Phil says. His eyes are darting all over Dan’s face, like he’s checking for something, or being too polite to mention the state of Dan’s entire person right now. “Me too, soon. I just thought I’m a night person and I’ve just moved here and it sort of made sense.”

Dan can’t speak. Even looking at him hurts. *How are you real?* he thinks. *You’re not supposed to be real. You’re supposed to be too PERFECT to be real.* Please don’t be peaceful, please don’t be patient, please don’t be kind.

Phil, both kindly and patiently, says, “Are you okay? We don’t have to start training straight away. I could come back tomorrow, if you wanted.”

Dan says, “No, it’s fine, tonight is fine. Just let me sort all of this out first.” He vaguely waves hand over himself, all of this, and does an awkward half-jog to the staff bathroom.
He washes the mud from his face and tries to charm his hair back into some kind of order but his hands are shaking too much, he only succeeds in turning the curls into ringlets. He wants to cast a mute spell on his throat and then scream as loud as he can.

Phil, when he returns to the main room, smiles at him. “That’s better.”

They collect the produce from the stockroom. Phil doesn’t hear, or at least ignores, the scattering footsteps of the coblynau as they realise Dan isn’t alone, running to hide in the darkest corners. Dan drops his phone to the ground and slides it under one of the pallets of lettuce while Phil stands, frowning, at the stack of vegetables.

All of the fruit is bruised. Dan gives the nearest apple an apologetic pat. “Louise said you’re doing the other half, which is all the dried stuff, and the fresh things for the bakery, but that delivery comes later.”

“The bakery?” Phil’s face brightens. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea for me to be in charge of cakes and stuff. I’ll probably end up eating half of it.” He laughs a little, at himself. “Being in charge of fruit and veg is fine.”

His accent is Northern, but softened, like he’s spend a lot of time living elsewhere. He uses his hands a lot when he speaks, fluttering all around his face, and his mannerisms are exaggerated, but in an endearing way. When Dan asks him to roll up out the boxes of cereal he clasps both his fists to his cheeks and says, “Oh, cereal’s probably another thing I shouldn’t be in charge of.”

Phil talks a lot. Dan doesn’t talk very much. He wants Phil to love him and also to never want to spend time with him again. He doesn’t trust any of his words to come out right.

Phil, suddenly, says, “Where are you from? You’re not from here, are you?”

“Reading,” Dan says and, because it’s polite, “You’re not from here either.”

“I’m from Rawtenstall. It’s in Lancashire.” Phil looks at Dan with great interest. “When did you end up here?”

“Two months ago.”

“How did you end up here?”

Dan considers the real answer (Well Phil, I’m the bottom rung of a very long family ladder of sentinels, that’s when someone with abilities takes on the responsibility of protecting countries from magical beings. Except I just got a little town in Wales because I’m rubbish. Hey, and also, people are going missing and the coast is fucking terrifying. That’s pretty much it so far).

Dan says, “No real reason.”

Phil waits for Dan to add something on. He stares right into Dan’s eyes for two seconds before blinking himself away and saying, “Oh. It’s just, it’s a bit far to move if you-”

“No real reason,” Dan repeats.

“But,” PJ said. “If he does show up. It’s easy to say that you won’t speak to him or look at him or
whatever, but what if he does show up? How can you stay away from someone who’s perfect for you? That you wished for?”

They were in a bar, just before PJ left for Norway, shopping bags full of winter clothes and sensible walking shoes (PJ), and a collected assortment of oversized black sweaters (Dan). Dan, confidently, said, “I would just avoid him.”

“But you literally wrote all of his attributes in a list of things that you love. How could you possibly avoid that?”

Dan said, “PJ. I would die. He would die. It happened, once, to my Dad’s great-uncle. Everyone still talks about it. And, also, he’s not going to show up. There’s no way someone like that is real. And if they are, then there’s no way that they’d be interested in me. So, there we go.”

***

“It was nice to meet you,” Phil says, outside. He’s wearing a bright red jacket over his bright corgi shirt. “It’ll be good to have someone else there. I thought I’d be by myself.”

“We’re opposite ends of the shop.”

“The shop is tiny,” Phil points out.

“I work best by myself.”

“I like having someone to talk to,” Phil says, softly.

He shivers in the cold and Dan, without even realising he’s doing it, unloops his scarf and ties it around Phil’s neck. His tricolour eyes are even more impossible up close. Dan, fake casual, says, “It’s always cold here. You need to buy a scarf.”

Phil, for the first time tonight, is lost for words. Dan’s wrist aches.

“Okay, so I’ll see you tomorrow?” Dan says. He wants to pat Phil’s shoulder, like Mark does to him, but he doesn’t trust himself to pull his hand away.

“You’ll see me tomorrow,” Phil agrees.

Dan looks out for the dog all the way home, listens for the thump of it’s footsteps but hears nothing except the trees rustling bore da in the early morning light.

He says, “Bore da,” to the oak tree and the elm, and sleeps holding his cursed wrist to his cursed heart.

***

Roi’r gorau i redeg means stop running, rhoi’r gorau i chwilio means stop looking. Both yelled into his ear as he sprinted up a beach, slipping all over the pebbles.

Dan, bizarrely, means under. They might not have been shouting his name at all.

PJ’s kitchen is full of thank you flowers. Dan can barely see him. He says, “A mermaid, a few banshees and something in the sea?” He sounds almost envious.

“And something else.”
“What?”

“He’s here.”


“I know, right?” Dan hasn’t cried, but he feels like he has. He has the kind of exhausted feeling that you only get after you’ve been sobbing for three hours straight.

PJ says, “What’s he like?”

“Peej,” Dan says. “He’s perfect. It’s not fair.”

***

The faerie is half-hearted. They only steal one opal that they throw into the air as soon as Dan gets to them. He catches it easily and looks down at them, fluttering on the top of the grass stalks, and says, “Is everything okay?”

The faerie says, “No,” without a rhyme, and flies away, with all the buzzing drowsiness of a bumblebee.

***

Phil is late for work and breathless when he arrives, like he’s sprinted there, flushes of red high on his cheeks. He says, “Sorry, sorry, I lost track of time.”

Dan, already halfway through offloading the first pallets, says, “That’s okay. Just get started when you’re ready.”

Phil watches him. “You were serious.”

“About?”

“About the working opposite ends of the shop and not speaking to each other.” Phil sounds sad about this, his aura darkens like a shadow has passed over the sun.

Dan can’t speak to him. Dan definitely can’t spend hours a night in the same enclosed area as him. Speaking to Phil means ticking more and more things off a list that he made when he was eleven; it means falling in love with him more and more, and how can Dan deal with that, really. The loneliness was easier when there was no potential for something, when there was no almost or close but not close enough.

“I didn’t say we wouldn’t speak to each other. We can speak to each other here, in the stockroom.”

Where it can be accidental and fleeting, like it never happened at all.

***

When he gets home the elm is scattering its branches all across his window. When Dan goes closer it says, yfory, slow and carefully enunciated. Tomorrow.

“Dan,” PJ says. “Maybe you should ask for help or something.”

Dan says, “I can’t ask for help when I don’t know what’s going on. And it could be nothing.” PJ raises his eyebrows. “I know, I know it’s not nothing. It could be though, right? It’s just two
people, and they could have just gone to the city, like everyone’s saying.”

“You believe that?” PJ asks. “Really?”

Dan looks at his window. The elm has spread its branches out so, pressed to the glass, they almost form a hand shape, with long, spindly fingers. He says, “No, I don’t.”

***

The cyhyraeth are screaming so loud that Dan’s amazed that no one else can hear them. Or, maybe they can and that’s what all the locals mean when they say that the sea sounds ddig today. The shrieks crash and break against each other like waves and, as he walks down the coastal path they yell daeth yn ŵl over and over.

He walks right out until his toes are almost at the edge, centimetres from the tide hitting them. The cyhyraeth, thankfully, stay in the air, like a flock of completely terrifying giant birds. A caterwaul of cyhyraeths. They seem aware that he’s there but completely uninterested, agitated by something else. There’s one scream that sounds different, too clear and too human-like. It rings amongst the wailing like the chiming of a bell, lost and scared.

He follows the sound all the way back to the cave where he’d seen the morgen, into the stone shell, and down into the ankle deep pool before the floor dips into actual ocean. On the other side of the water, on a small ledge of stone just above the surface, is a little girl. Dan would guess probably about eight or nine, wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown that are soaked through. Her hair is in a neat waterfall plait and she blinks at the sight of him, her mouth clamping shut.

Dan instantly kneels, self-conscious of his height, and says, “Hello.”

She says, “Helo.”

Right. Welsh. Dan can do the greetings at least. He points to himself, “Rwy’n Dan. Beth yw dy enw?”

She wrinkles her nose at his pronunciation and says, “I’m Angharad Williams.”

Dan thanks all the gods and faeries possible that she can speak English. “Well, hello Angharad Williams.” He bows. She curtsies. “What are you doing here by yourself?”

“I followed the singing.”

“Singing?”

“Yes. It was too loud for me to sleep.”

“What type of singing?”

“Not nice singing.”

Dan remembers the morgen’s seagull squawk of a laugh and nods. He holds his hand out. “I need to take you home. It’s late.” He has no idea how to get her home or what to tell her parents but he can deal with that later, he supposes. “Can you get over from there?” He looks at the expanse of water. “How did you get over there?”

Her bottom lip wobbles. “I can’t move.”

“Why?” Dan, resigned to the fact that he’s going to have to go in the water, takes a step forward.
“Are you hurt?”

“I’ll disturb it.”

Dan says, “It?” and finally looks down at her feet. She’s not standing on a ledge. There is no ledge. It looks more like an incredibly thick tree branch that’s also breathing. The end of it, the point, is curled around her left ankle. It’s obviously the tail of something, leading down into the water, something huge.

_Dan_ the cyhyraeth said. _Under._

Dan runs through his very limited selection of attack spells. They were basic in English and pathetic in Welsh. The most damage he can do is an electric shock that causes about the same pain level as a bee sting. Nothing that would make a thing of this size even flinch. (PJ can shoot entire balls of fire, glowing and pulsing, from his hands).

He tries to keep his voice level. “What is it?”

“I didn’t see it.” Her voice is starting to quaver. “Not properly.”

“Okay.” Dan swallows. “Okay.” If he had PJ’s telekinesis skills he could just float her over to him. If he had PJ’s attack skills then he could defend them both. If he could levitate like PJ can then he could walk straight to her. If he had PJ here, just at his side, then he would feel calmer. “We can-” he stops. “Or you could- Can you-”

Angharad, having held firm for so long, finally starts crying.

“Oh, no, please don’t cry,” Dan says, lamely. Easy to say when you’re not the one being held two inches above the water by some unseen mythical beast. “We’ll do something. _I’ll_ do something. Keep talking to me, do you like to sing, do you like singing? Is that why you walked down here?”

“No,” Angharad sniffs. “I was going to tell them to be quiet, I hate singing. I play the piano. It’s my favourite thing.”

Dan says, “You do? Me too.” He doesn’t have a piano here, even though he specifically asked his mother to help him find a flat with one. She thinks the piano is a pointless skill that he learnt when he should have been focusing on building up his abilities.

He can see her point now.

He, softly, whispers, “golau,” and illuminates the water in an attempt to try and see what’s under the inky darkness. Angharad makes a tiny squeaking noise.

“What’s your favourite music Angharad? What do you like to play?”

She doesn’t say anything. Her eyes, as round as pennies, are watching Dan cast his hand over the surface.

Whatever it is, it’s big. And furry. The weakness of the light doesn’t reach to the bottom but what he _can_ see is, possibly, its back, curved against the wall to his right. He frowns. If it’s back is pushed to the wall at his side, then the front of it must be-

Oh.

She’s not looking at his hand. She’s looking over his shoulder.
“Angharad,” Dan whispers. “Don’t make a sound.” He’s still kneeling, leant over the water. “Not one single sound.” He’s aware of something breathing just to his right, the breath has a whistle like it’s being cast through teeth.

Angharad’s bottom lip is wobbling, her whole chin is wobbling.

“I’m going to stand up,” Dan tells her, and does so with deliberate slowness. “Can you swim?”

“I’m not jumping in the water,” she says, voice so high pitched that it could probably shatter the stalactites above them. “I’m not.”

Whatever is behind him shifts, an undeniable sound of claws skittering across rocks.

Dan says, “Please try and be quiet.” His hand is still thrown out in front of him, the light fading as he tries to focus on not making any sudden movements. He could shock it, he thinks, just the tail, and then maybe she could jump to him, or he could jump to her, or maybe PJ would suddenly fly in and say hey, need some help, or maybe he’ll turn around and this thing will just be a giant guinea pig and they can all laugh about it.

None of that matters, in the end, because the thing, the something, moves a little more, and must hit the light somehow, or make itself more visible, because there’s the scritch of a claw on stone and then the heavy sigh of a creature moving its considerable weight to one side, and then Angharad screams, louder than all the cyhyraeth in the sky.

Dan has a split second of complete silence, like he’s frozen time somehow. Maybe he has. His brother can do that for hours. Dan only ever managed two seconds, barely enough to save a cup of tea from spilling. Nowhere near enough time to save anything else.

He says, “Angharad, stay-” and then everything explodes back into being. The thing moves, snatches at its tail and Angharad instantly falls into the water.

Dan jumps straight in after her, followed by the heavy crash of something far far bigger jumping in behind him. He does a clumsy over-arm stroke to where she’s keeping herself afloat against the wall, as fast as he can possibly go while being weighed down by his coat.

She says, “Dan!” panicked and reaching out.

“Stay there,” he says. “I’m nearly there. You’re doing really well.”

She tries to extend her arm further.

He says, “I’m nearly there. I prom-”

And then she’s gone.

Dan stops, treading water, spins left to right to left, but can’t see her. He drops under the water, throwing his hand out but just casting light off the cave walls. There’s nothing. He breaks the surface again and shouts, “Angharad?” Her name bounces around him. “Angharad?”

He is, suddenly, not treading water anymore. His feet are resting on something almost mosslike, before it pushes up and throws him forward, chest hitting the rock that the morgen usually sits on. Something loops around his ankle and then moves.

It pulls him under once, then lets go. Dan manages three kicks back to the cave entrance before it grabs at him again, pulls him under and holds him there for one, two, three seconds. Dan holds his
breath. It lets go. He swims fast enough to get a hand up onto the ledge.

The black dog blinks down at him.

Dan manages a “What?” and gets pulled back under again. The dog latches onto his coat sleeve and pulls, but isn’t any match for whatever’s in the water. Dan flails his legs and manages to connect with something that flinches and causes the grip to weaken. He pushes up. The dog keeps pulling at his sleeve.

When the tail loops back around his ankle Dan gets a hand to it and manages, mouth full of water, to choke out, “Trydan.” The shock he emits is probably the strongest he’s ever managed, even the dog whimpers. The thing roars in pain and lets go.

The dog, finally with no resistance, pulls Dan back onto the stone. The water is as calm as if nothing had happened. You could skim a pebble across the top of it. There’s no sign of any life at all. The dog howls, desperately, and licks at Dan’s hands, both clenched into fists.

When he jumps back in the dog, for a second, growls like it’s telling him not to. There’s nothing there. The ocean is calm; there’s no morgens, no terrifying sea creatures with tails. No girls. No missing people. His lungs start to hurt. He says, “Angharad,” one more time. I’ll do something.

He pulls himself back from the sea and half-crawls back up the rock. He’s crying, and only now realises. He says, “No, no, she was there, she was right there, I saw her. She was there.”

He fists his hand in the dog’s fur and sobs until the sound almost chokes in his throat. The dog licks the tears away and whines like it’s crying too.

Eventually it follows Dan to work, bumping its nose against Dan’s hand with every step, and Dan has to charm himself dry in the staff room, removing the salt water from his coat and from his cheeks before he can bear to go out and have Phil see him.

The third is Angharad Williams; she’s nine, has auburn hair twirled into a plait that any morgen would be proud of, and Dan watches her disappear right before his eyes.

***

Phil is subdued and as quiet as Dan’s ever heard him. He’s grown used to Phil’s constant noise (humming to himself, knocking things over) and the silence that he asked for is now completely unwelcome. His wrist aches. His head aches. His ribs, where he bruised them on the rocks, ache. His lungs ache from gasping for air. His palms sting from the current of electricity. His heart aches most of all.

Phil, suddenly, says, “Dan, are you okay?”

“Me?” Dan almost laughs. “Yeah, I guess.”

Phil’s face makes all manner of complicated expressions, like he’s saying something but Dan can’t hear it, like he’s saying things in his head.

“I’m fine. Just tired.”

“It’s not your fault,” Phil says, all in a rush. “I mean, whatever’s making you tired. It’s not your fault.”

It’s an odd thing to say. Dan looks at him, properly, for maybe the second time. He tries not to look
directly at Phil very much. He looks tired too, his aura and his eyes are the sea in a storm. “It might be, you don’t know that.”

“You shouldn’t have come in today,” Phil says, with too much emotion. “I mean, if you’re tired. You shouldn’t come in if you’re tired.”

“I’m sure Louise would love that excuse.”

“Do you-” Phil starts and stops.

“Do I what?”

“Live by yourself?”

Dan says, “I’m sorry?”

“Is there someone else there? To make sure that you’re…………not tired anymore.” Phil’s expression (always exaggerated, all his feelings always right there on show) is concerned. Both his hands are stuffed into his pockets like they might, of their own free will, try and do something stupid like hug Dan. Dan wants them to.

Dan says, “I’m always tired. That would be an impossible job.”

Phil looks pained. “Dan.”

“And also, yes, to the living on my own. I told you, I-”


Dan shakes his head. No, you couldn’t just. No, please don’t finish that sentence. No, because whatever it is I’ll say yes to it, I know I will.

The dog follows him home, exactly three steps behind him. The oak tree whispers bore da and touches one overhanging branch to the mess of Dan’s hair.

He stops at the door to his building, suddenly comforted by the sight of it. It’s neat and four floors and Victorian, with bay windows that are too thin and cracks in every corner of the ceiling, and it hasn’t felt like home yet but it does now, almost. He touches his hand to the flaking paint of the front door.

The dog whines.

Dan looks down. “Are you coming in with me then?”

The dog wags its tail, just once.

Dan says, “Okay,” and lets them both inside.

The flat has no real sign of his personality, all the furniture came with it and he hasn’t bought any extras because why would he. It’s owned by a very sweet elderly lady who was planning to rent the flat out to other sweet elderly ladies and so had decorated with this in mind, all clashing florals and pastels, intertwining leaves all over the flocked wallpaper.

The dog stands politely in the middle of the living room as though asking permission to explore.
Dan sits down and puts his head in his hands. Tomorrow, he supposes, there’ll be another photo on the board. Lots of photos. Maybe her parents are already looking for her, with all her brothers and sisters (because she’s bound to have lots of those, Welsh families always do); her piano standing silently in the corner of a room (Dan pictures a pretty white piano, perfect for a little girl with a waterfall plait to sit at. Playing Mozart’s lullabies or something equally light and lovely). He starts to shiver, the aftereffects of diving in the sea finally kicking in, and then starts to cry. He’s not a pretty crier, it’s all gulping for air and hiccuping sobs, wiping his eyes and nose on his sleeve.

“Sorry,” he tells the dog, who has put its head in Dan’s lap, staring up at him. “I’m sorry. It’s just I could have helped her, if I was better at this. I have a friend, we grew up together and he- He would have done it. I’m just useless and now she’s gone and there’s something there and I’m not equipped to deal with that. I knew I wouldn’t be. This was a stupid thing to agree to do but they said I had to, that the piano isn’t a proper- Sorry. You don’t understand any of this.”

The dog, oddly, looks like it does.

He doesn’t sleep very well. The dog stays curled up on the rose printed rug next to his bed while Dan lies underneath a bluebell duvet and tries not to cry again.

In the morning the dog is gone and there are muddy pawprints all over the wooden flooring of his living room.

***

The noticeboard is full of Angharad when he gets to work. At least twenty photos. Angharad at school, on holiday, at Pembroke Harbour, in Pembroke Castle. There are three of her playing the piano.

Louise is worried and her aura is completely drained of colour. Even Mark, at his locker, looks like the dimmer switch has been used. He says, “Hey, maybe you were right to worry.”

Dan says, “I was hoping that I wouldn’t be.”

Mark puts his hand to Dan’s shoulder, same as always. “Shoulda listened to you at the start, I guess. You can put posters over all the trees you want.”

Phil looks tired when he arrives. He’s wearing a bright green University of York hoodie and Dan’s scarf, and there are shadows under his eyes and haloed around his head. He stares at Mark’s hand on Dan and frowns.

“Hi Phil,” Mark says. “I was just telling Dan that we should put out more posters.”

Phil says, “That’s a good idea,” and his voice is all scratches.


As soon as the door is closed Phil says, “Are you okay? Did you sleep last night?”

“Yeah, I was fine. It was just a busy day, that was all.”

Phil says, “They’ll find her. The little girl. I’m sure they will.” He pulls his work shirt from his bag and wrings it in his hands. “She’ll be okay. They’re surprisingly brave, kids.”
He doesn’t say oh she must have wandered off or maybe she just wanted an adventure and got lost like everyone else has done. Dan makes eye contact with him, something he’s been both trying not to do and also constantly doing. “Do you think so?”

Phil smiles, weakly. “I know so.”

***

Black Hair - Check
Eyes that are three colours - Check
Peaceful - Check
Kind - Check
Wears bright clothes and has a bright aura too - Check
Patient - Check
Cares about me - Check?
Likes me exactly the way I am - ??

Dan thinks. Likes me exactly the way I am was a weird thing for an eleven-year-old to write, all things considered, but it had meant something to him. He’s not an easy person to like, not all the time, even PJ can get exasperated by the way Dan speaks about himself, his procrastination, the way he downplays and is needlessly sarcastic about things he loves, or the way he has to trail after PJ at parties and gatherings to avoid speaking to anyone. There’s sometimes a minuscule twitch in PJ’s eyelid that Dan is the direct cause of.

He would know if Phil didn’t like him, he thinks, but Phil doesn’t seem to dislike anyone. Phil smiles so wide that his eyes close. He covers his mouth with his hand when he laughs. He sneaks marshmallows from their stock and does the world’s most obvious guilty face when Louise wonders why things are missing. He has revived all of the plants in the office, plants that were dead as soon as Dan got here.

The only person, the only thing, that Phil frowns at is Dan. But it’s not annoyed, it’s concerned. His eyes track all over the dark circles, the tiny bruises and cuts. He huffs disbelievingly when Dan says, “No, I’m fine,” in answer to questions.

Eleven-year-old Dan had written that last one in hope. It really meant please like me, I hope they like me because he was a boy with no friends and no social skills, just magic ones. Twenty-six-year-old Dan wants it to mean please don’t like me, if you like me then this just gets more difficult, it’s easier if there’s no possibility there.

Phil’s aura, when Dan walks into a room, lightens and sparkles, as though there’s a sunset going on just above it, like an artist is mixing just the right shade to paint the colour around them both. Dan wants to touch his hand to it, run his fingers right through it because, in a different time maybe, his heart would be singing with the fact that Phil likes him, because he does like him, Dan can tell, and in a different time he could curl his fingers right into Phil’s hair, through his aura, and say, “hey, I like you too, or I like you back. How could he not. How could anyone not like Phil. Everyone does, but out of everyone Dan is the only one who wished for him, wrote it all down in a list and watched his father set light to it in their back garden on the evening of his eleventh birthday (when most eleven-year-olds would probably be having parties).

Dan had watched the paper burn (kind was the last word to go, if he remembers correctly), listened to his father say this was very brave Dan, I don’t think anyone’s ever done it on their actual birthday before, and felt the panging deep loss of something he hadn’t found yet. A flame in his soul that formed a just off-centre circle on his wrist (oh his father said, there it is. And there it was).
He goes back to the tearooms. There are violet ribbons tied in perfect bows along the fences on the way, around the railings and bottom of lampposts. Dan stops at each one and presses his hand to the knots, making them secure. It’s Angharad’s favourite colour, so everyone knows that she’s being looked for. Louise had placed a huge rosette in that exact shade in the shop’s front window.

Phil is inside, drinking hot chocolate from a mug so big it’s almost a bowl, an entire mountain range of cream on the top, dotted with chocolate drops. He’s staring at it adoringly, the same expression that he turns to Dan when he sees him come through the door.

“Dan!” Phil says, and waves even though they’re maybe two feet from each other. “Hi!”

Dan orders and takes the seat opposite, turning his legs to the side so there’s no possible chance of accidentally bumping Phil under the table. He says, “How can you even drink all of that?”

“Easy” Phil smiles, tip of his tongue against his front teeth. “I sent it back once because there weren’t enough chocolate drops.”

Dan’s black coffee arrives in a solid white cup that looks incredibly boring now. Phil scoops some whipped cream from the top of his and dumps it right in the centre.

“Are you still tired?” Phil says, softly. “I know I’m asking you this all the time but-”

“I’m still tired,” Dan replies, honestly. The proof is on his face, there’s no point in trying to claim otherwise. “I always am. There’s just some things I need to sort out.”

Phil stirs the cream into Dan’s coffee. “Can I help with anything?”

“No. It’s for me to do, on my own.”

“You do a lot of things on your own,” Phil observes, trying to be casual. The crashing waves of his aura give him away.

Dan says, “Why are you here?” but his tone is wondering rather than accusing.

“I wanted a coffee.”

“You know what I mean.”

Phil looks at him. Dan hadn’t even thought that it was possible to have eyes that are three colours at once but, there they are. He says, “Because it’s quiet and nothing happens.”

“That’s why you moved here?”

“It was suggested to me on a list.” Phil shrugs. “I like the ocean and I like the countryside. I like that it has its own castle.”

“Everywhere in Wales has its own castle. If you wanted quiet then-”

“I liked the look of it,” Phil says. “It looked peaceful. But I haven’t been here long enough to see if that’s true or not.”

This should be the part where Dan says yeah sure it’s really peaceful, the most peaceful it’s possible to be but Phil is raising one eyebrow and tilting his head to one side sympathetically, and he looks tired too, except Dan never asked him about it.
Phil sighs. “I guess it depends though, doesn’t it.”

“That’s why I moved here,” Dan says. “Because it was quiet and apparently I couldn’t get into trouble or do anything wrong here.”

“Do you usually get into trouble and do things wrong?”

“Not intentionally.”

“What do you do? When you’re not in the shop?”

“I come here and get coffee.”

“Maybe,” Phil says, cautiously, “You could come here and get coffee with me sometimes.”

The sentence stays in the air. Dan can almost see it with an aura of its own, red for danger or yellow, maybe, for hope and possibility. Dan doesn’t really go in for hope and possibility, he’s not a person that either of those things happen to. He clutches his hand around his coffee cup and says, “I’m not sure that-”

“No, it’s okay.” Phil isn’t looking at Dan, he’s looking around Dan’s head. Dan reaches up to self-consciously flatten his curls. “I get it. You work best on your own, you said that.”


“All the best people are.” Phil shrugs.

They finish their coffee in silence. Phil prods at his explosion of whipped cream with a spoon but it never gets any smaller. The chocolate drops seem to multiply. The waitress, coming to collect Dan’s empty cup, looks confused.

When Dan says, “I’ll see you later,” Phil mumbles something in reply and Dan walks the long way out, the back door that means you have to cross in front of the row of windows at the tea room’s front. He tries to look back in at Phil’s table but he does. Of course he does, it’s the whole reason he walked this way.

Phil is still delicately eating his cream, neat spoonful by neat spoonful.

***

He goes back to the cave, in some hope of finding Angharad but instead just finds the morgen, perched in her usual spot. She looks disappointed to see him.

“You were singing,” Dan says, accusingly. “Two nights ago. You shouldn’t be making people come near the sea.”

She frowns. “I don’t sing. I can’t sing. You’re confusing us with the others.”

“There was a little girl here, she fell under the water and I couldn’t find her. Could you try, please?”

She leans over to him and touches her hand to his cheek. It’s freezing cold and clammy. Dan resists the urge to flinch away. “I can try. There are other things here at present, things bigger than I am. I prefer to stay out of their way.”

“I just need to know if she’s there or…..”
“If she’s not there anymore,” the morgen supplies. She suddenly drops her hand and latches it around Dan’s wrist, around his mark. Dan jumps. “Oh dear. You are a sad one. I knew you were.” Tears blink into her eyes, a single perfect drop slides down her cheek. “How can you carry so much with you?”

Dan gently pulls his hand free. “You said there was something dangerous here. Something that you don’t like to go near.”

“An afanc,” she says. “A big one. Too much for us. Too much for one sentinel, by himself.” Dan says, “An afanc?” That hadn’t been on the list of Welsh mythical creatures that his father had given him. “I don’t know what that is.”

“You don’t need to. You could never do anything to stop it, not with all of that gloominess in your heart.”

Dan can’t even argue with that one. There’s plenty of gloominess in his heart. “It lives in the ocean but comes to the shore to hunt? Is that it?”

“To hunt? No, not to hunt. To gather.”

“To gather?”

“You shouldn’t stay here any longer,” the morgen says, as she had last time. “It gets dangerous.” Dan, seeing Angharad’s hand stretched out towards him, says, “I can cope with dangerous.”

“Can you? Or does it not matter when you’re already cursed?”

The cyhyraeth outside start a steady chant of perygl, perygl, the bass of it trembles the stones under Dan’s feet and ripples across the top of the water. The morgen watches, nonchalantly.

“It’s not coming here,” she says. “It’s gone to the harbour.”

***

Outside work, shivering in the dawn air.

Phil says, “I got you something,” and holds out a black carrier bag. “You gave me yours and I like it so I thought I’d get you a replacement.”

It’s a scarf, in a soft dove grey. Dan, without meaning to, says, “Why grey?”

“It reminds me of you.”

Grey is never a colour that Dan would say reflects him, definitely not this light shade. It’s almost silver, like it’s sparkling. He says, “This reminds you of me?”, his voice is wondering and trembling. It’s just a scarf Dan, he tries to tell himself. It’s just a-


Phil tuts at the way Dan has tied the scarf and tightens it. His knuckles brush against the hinge of Dan’s jaw and Dan flinches into the touch.

Phil jumps. “Sorry, are my hands cold?”
They’re not. Phil is as glowing and warm as if he’s made up with pieces of the sun. Dan says, “A little. It’s okay. You didn’t have to get me a scarf.”

“I did,” Phil says. “Because you gave me yours. You can’t walk around here without one, you’ll freeze.” He takes his hands away from the knot of Dan’s scarf but still holds them up, like he’s framing Dan’s face with his fingertips.

Dan swallows. “Thank you.”

Phil grins, tongue at his teeth. “You’re welcome. Just, promise me that you’ll wear it. On your walks.”

Dan pushes his chin right down into the softness of the wool and mumbles, “I promise.”

***

The fourth person is Jack Morgan and he, apparently, fell from his fishing boat in the harbour and hasn’t been seen since. The apparently is because everyone who comes in to look at his photo says no, but he was always so careful, he was such a good swimmer, he would never have fallen off the boat, never, polite whispering. Rather like a morgen saying it’s not here, it’s gone to the harbour.

Dan is starting to feel like all of these people are tests that he’s failing, pass marks that he’s just missing. Being too late to the harbour. Reaching for a tiny hand across a pool of water. Saying I’m nearly there when he wasn’t.

“An afanc,” PJ says, still surrounded by wildflowers and cards that say takk!!, “Is a lake monster. It can look like a giant crocodile or a beaver-”

Dan says, “A beaver?”

“-And is sometimes said to be a demon. It preys on anyone foolish enough to go into its lake. It can cause massive flooding. They drown people. Dan, you have to ask for help. Seriously. Write to the council.”

“It doesn’t sound right. It lives in the sea, not a lake. And it had a tail. And the morgen said that it’s gathering, not-”

“Not drowning people? Well, that’s fine then.”

“It’s not flooding anything either,” Dan says. “I asked her if it was hunting and she said no, it was gathering. Maybe there are different kinds.”

“Maybe,” PJ says, on the last thread of his patience. “You’re already distracted and you should be asking for help instead of trying to do all of this by yourself.”

“I’m not already distracted,” Dan protests, but it’s weak. PJ raises an eyebrow. “I can do it.”

PJ clears his throat. “No one believes in me more than you-” because PJ has always liked to give Dan the motivational speeches that he doesn’t really get at home. Dan appreciates the gesture but they make him feel as awkward as if his own father was saying it. “And I know that you could, theoretically, do this by-”

“Stop,” Dan says. “Please. I haven’t decided, I haven’t- I don’t even have a plan.”

“If it goes to five,” PJ says, insistently. “If it goes to five then you need to write to the council. I
mean it. And you *are* distracted.”

(Yesterday, at work, Dan had rolled his sleeves up, out of habit, and reached for one of the pallets of cherries when he heard a sharp intake of breath beside him. Phil, stood at his side, staring at his wrist.

“Oh,” Dan said, practised in a lie he said all the time. “That’s just a tattoo.”

“A tattoo,” Phil said. His eyes are wide and unblinking.

“Just a tattoo.” Dan pulled his sleeves back down, tugged until they covered his knuckles.

“I didn’t know.” Phil said, still staring at the space where the mark is. “I didn’t know that you had one. What does it mean?”

Dan blinked. “What?”

“It looks like it means something.” Phil finally dragged his eyes away, back to Dan. “It looks like the type of tattoo you’d get to represent something.”

Dan didn’t have a lie prepared for this part. People normally didn’t ask anything further. He looked down at the mark himself (he doesn’t usually. It’s enough just knowing that it’s there), and said, “It represents me.”

“You’re distracted,” PJ repeats. “And that’s okay, that’s understandable, but if there’s five, then you need to do something, okay?”

“There won’t be five,” Dan says. “There just won’t.”

***

The fifth person is Rhiannon Griffiths and Dan stares at her face, glowing with happiness, for ten minutes before he realises that she’s the waitress from the tea rooms. Her aura had been chocolate brown and she used to call Dan *fy annwyl*, even though he never said more than two words to her and always sat in the corner (and so didn’t deserve to be called *my dear* by anyone). Sometimes she’d give him a sad look, like she couldn’t work out why he was always by himself. Sometimes she was the sixth person he’d speak to in a day and while she’d been taken wherever it is that they’re being taken Dan had been back in the morgen’s cave, splashing around in the water and trying to attract the thing to him.

“It’s not going to work with you,” the morgen said, lazily. “You have abilities. They’ll sense it.”

“My abilities are limited at best,” Dan told her.

Limited at best was a polite way to put it. The notice board is getting full.

***

“We’re having a night out,” Louise says. “Sunday. I’m updating your rota and giving you plenty of notice, so you can’t say that you’re busy like you always do.”

She’s caught both of them in the staff room; Mark on his way out, Dan on his way in. Dan instantly says, “I’m busy.”

“You can’t be.”
“I am.”

“Doing what? You don’t do anything.”


Louise says, “Cancel them. You’re coming out with us.” She turns to Phil as he trips through the door. “We need a night out, things have been weird. Phil, Sunday. I’ve changed your rota.”

Phil, caught off guard literally and emotionally, says, “Dan, are you going?”

Mark laughs, not unkindly. Louise claps her hands and says, “Well, that’s settled.”

“It’s not, I didn’t agree to anything,” Dan tries. “I said I was busy.”

“So you’re not going?” Phil asks, as if Dan is the only other person in the room. His aura gets spots of yellow. Hope and possibility. Little darts of sunshine like the golden flecks in Phil’s eyes.

Dan sighs. “I’m going.”

“Well,” Louise says. “I should have just got Phil to ask you in the first place.”

They meet at the Royal George, which is the type of old man’s pub that Dan hates. All the wooden surfaces are sticky and the barman frowns at Mark when he (loud and American) tries to order an equally loud and American beer which apparently hasn’t made its way to Wales yet. Dan always struggles to order drinks here, they’re not great with mixers, so he nurses the same pint of thick Welsh beer (“no,” the barman said. “It’s ale”) for an hour.

Phil returns from the bar with a drink the colour of Miami waves and Dan, without meaning to, says, “how did you get that?” Even the barman gives it a surprised look, as though he’s not entirely sure where it came from or who had made it.

It’s not the happiest of work nights out. Mark tries his best because Mark is just that type of person, like a kindergarten teacher desperately trying to make sure that every child is equally happy. Or Dan’s mother on family holidays, saying we’re having a good time, aren’t we?

It’s a relentless stream of charming earnestness that Dan, flicking at the little chain of Welsh flags hanging beside their table, watches Louise and Phil try and keep up with.

Phil is sat next to him, leaning more and more into his space, every gesture with his arms knocking his elbow gently against Dan’s. The mysterious ocean blue cocktails keep reappearing. Dan tries one. It tastes like sunshine. Phil, delighted, says, “You like it!” as happily as if he’d made it himself.

Louise raises her eyebrows and winks secretly. Mark does too, but his wink is broadcast to the entire town and accompanied by a thumbs up. Dan blushes.

Phil’s aura has so much yellow, so much hope, that is almost hurts to look at.

On the walk home, Louise and Mark long left behind, Phil says, “Your tattoo,” almost accusingly, “Is not a tattoo.” His voice is more Northern than ever, blurred with alcohol in the most wonderful way. “You lied.”
Dan, trying to be casual, says, “Of course it’s a tattoo, what else would it be?”

“You know.” Phil jabs a finger in the general vicinity of Dan’s face. “Why do you always-” His voice trails off.

Dan doesn’t want him to finish that sentence. “Do you live near here? Are we close?”

“I live in the street behind you,” Phil says, sadly.

Dan says, “You don’t, I would have known.”

“Why would you have known?”

“Because-” Dan thinks because there’s no possible way that you could have been that close to me without me knowing about it, there’s just no way. “Because we leave work at the same time and walk in different directions. You don’t come this way.”

“I don’t go straight home after work.”

Dan frowns at him. “We finish work at 6am, where would you possibly go?”

“Where do you go before work?”


“That’s not true,” Phil says, exasperated. “I know that’s not true.”

They’ve reached the street behind Dan’s, a little cobbled road that winds up into the mountains, a terrace of tiny one bed houses painted in pastels. Exactly the type of place he would imagine Phil living. The third house down has a box of plants on every window sill, hanging baskets either side of the door, beautiful blooming flowers that shouldn’t be able to survive in the Welsh weather.

“Your house?” Dan nods to it.

Phil says, “Yes,” and, “Where will you go now?”

It’s 12:40. He could, quickly, do his rounds of the coast and the harbour. He says, “Home. Where else would I go?”

Phil’s face does several very complicated things before he says, “You could come in. If you wanted to.”

Dan thinks yes and only if I never have to leave, only if I can stay with you, but he says, “I can’t. I should get home.”

Phil, probably because he’s feeling brave with drink, repeats, “You could come in.”

Dan shakes his head. Phil was supposed to be a person who would not love Dan at all. A person that Dan could safely be in complete love with from afar, with no possibility or chance of ever ever being with. That was the whole point. He feels like he could grab Phil by the shoulders and say no, no, you’re not supposed to say things like this, it makes it worse.

Phil takes half a step forward. “Dan, I-”

“No,” Dan says. “No, nope, I have to- You’re fine from here, right?”
It’s approximately twenty steps to the front door. Phil pushes his bottom lip out and says, “No.”

“Phil.”

“Just to the door,” Phil says, still pouting slightly. “Just to there and you can leave.”

Dan, helplessly, walks the twenty steps with him, Phil weaving all over the cobbles. The hanging baskets are filled with orchids, heliconias and hibiscus - tropical flowers that look like they’re receiving at least twenty hours of sunlight a day. Dan blinks at the hibiscus and says, “How are you keeping these alive?”

Phil says, “Just sunlight and water. That’s all.”

There’s a selection of pink pumerias, which Dan is pretty sure only grows in Hawaii, but he can’t think about that much right now because Phil, on his doorstep, is pulling insistently at Dan’s shirt sleeve.

“I said just to the door, Phil.” Dan does not detach himself from Phil’s grip.

“I said you could come in if you wanted to but I meant you should come in because I want you to.”

“I can’t.”

Phil starts to look unsure. “You don’t-”

“I do. Whatever the question was going to be, I do, but I can’t.”

Phil curls his hand right around Dan’s wrist, on the mark, and says, “Why?”

“It’s hard to explain.” Dan finally pulls his hand free and stumbles two steps back onto the street. “I would try, but it’s difficult. You should drink some water and go to bed. Sleep it off.”

Phil, bemused, says, “No, I can’t sleep it off, you don’t understand, I-”

“The beer. I meant you should sleep off the beer.”

“Oh.” Phil deflates, his shoulders slump and his aura seems to contract around his entire body. “I can do that.”

“I’m going home,” Dan tells him.

Phil steps up onto the street. “Okay. Be careful.”

Dan says, “What?”

Phil presses his mouth to the pad of his thumb, then leans forward and presses his thumb right onto the curve of Dan’s bottom lip. “Nothing.”

Dan wishes that his ability to freeze time lasted longer than two seconds, that he could stop at this exact moment for hours, but Phil is already pulling his hand back and stepping down onto his doorstep. Phil, with his impossible eyes and his impossible flowers. Dan says, “Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow,” in a daze.

Phil stays on the doorstep right until Dan reaches the end of the street. When Dan turns back he waves, just once.
Dan doesn’t wave back until Phil has gone into his house and closed the door.

***

“Grey looks nice on you,” the morgen says.

Dan looks down at the scarf, Phil’s scarf, around his neck and says, “Thanks. It was a present.”

“Oh!” she says, clapping her hands together. “From who? You blushed!”

The sudden explosion of personality makes Dan jump. “Someone at work.”

She raises her eyebrow. “Just a someone.”

“Just a someone,” Dan repeats.

The water bubbles and ripples, much more movement in it than usual. The morgen is on edge, shifting around on her rock and wringing her hands, but also incredibly chatty, far more personable than usual. Dan wonders if this is because of the *gloominess in your heart*. She says, “You’re not giving up on this, are you?”

“Oh! It’s taking people. Five people, actually. People that I should have been protecting but couldn’t because I’m the worst sentinel there’s ever been.”

The morgen doesn’t look entirely sympathetic and also doesn’t try to reassure him. “Then ask for help.”

“But that’s admitting that I’m in over my head.”

“You are,” she says, not unreasonably.

***

He doesn’t see Phil at work. He’s aware that he’s there, can hear things being knocked over and Phil’s soft voice chiding himself, but he doesn’t see him in actual reality. Dan is aware that this is what he’d wanted in the first place but the lack of Phil is a physical ache behind his ribs that he can’t shift.

He sits with the night’s delivery of clementines and makes each one the most perfect shade of orange that he can, removing all bumps and bruises. It distracts him from looking at the notice board, at six smiling faces that, to him, are saying *why didn’t you help us Dan, why weren’t you at the harbour, why didn’t you reach my hand* - a series of whispers along the shop’s air conditioning system.

***

The following evening the elm tree starts scattering its branches, opening them wide across Dan’s window, like someone pressing their palm to the glass. It says *yr harbwr, perygl, yr harbwr, bellach*, over and over, slow enough for Dan to follow. The harbour, danger, the harbour, now.

Dan pulls on his scarf, Adrian’s gloves and his still mud splattered coat and leaves.

The elm says *peryhus, dim digon*, dangerous, not enough, and ruffles.

Dan says, “That’s optimistic, thank you,” but it follows him all the way down the coastal path. Dim digon, dim digon. Not enough, not enough.
At the harbour the boats are empty. There are two solitary lights in the tearooms, and the castle illuminated behind, but nothing else.

Dan almost wonders if the tree was lying until he watches the row of boats nearest to him bump into the air. Not by much, just a few inches, but each boat, one by one, into the air and then down. Like something is swimming underneath it. It goes to the end of the row and then back.

A lone cyhyraeth, in the sky above, shrieks.

Dan walks down to the jetty and to the start of the row. This close he can see the tail, trailing along behind the body that he can’t make out, tapping against each boat.

When it turns to come back Dan sees one huge (and unblinking) yellow eye, before it dips again, continuing to swim back and forth, just here, up and down.

Dan pushes his hands into his coat pockets and says, “Think, Dan. Think.”

He knows what the brave thing to do would be, what PJ would do. He would let himself be taken to wherever the five are, let the afanc drag him all the way there, and he would save everyone. And he’d have great hair and be wearing immaculate matching knitwear while he did so. Dan isn’t PJ. Dan isn’t particularly brave and, so far, he’s failed pretty miserably in saving anyone.

Dan steps into the first boat, The Ceridwen, a tiny white motor cruiser that jolts with every movement from the creature below it. Dan wonders if this is what happened to Jack Morgan, if he just got gently bumped into the sea. The afanc, as if knowing that he’s there, bangs its tail on the side.

Dan isn’t particularly brave and he hasn’t really made up his mind to change this fact, not fully, before he sees something on the dock. The dog. He’d missed it, oddly, which can only serve to prove just how lonely he actually is. It’s far away and watching, looking directly at Dan.

“What are you doing?”

Dan jumps.

One of the other waitresses from the tea rooms is on the jetty. She frowns at him. “Is this your boat?”

Dan says, “Yes,” not convincingly. “What are you doing here so late?”

“You’re asking me that?” She sniffs and folds her arms. “We’re leaving the lights on for Rhiannon, so she can find her way back.”

Dan looks up at the tearooms. “Of course.”

“We’re keeping an eye out for anything suspicious.”

The afanc bumps the underneath of the boat, so hard that Dan has to struggle to keep his balance. “Sea’s choppy today,” he attempts, but you shouldn’t really try and comment on the sea with someone from Pembroke.

She says, “No, it’s not, it’s clear. What was that?”

Dan says, “Look, I need you to- What’s your name?”

“Ffion.”
“FFion, you need to go back to the tearooms, please. Wait with the light on, and I promise that I-”

There’s a huge crash, the sound of something raising itself from the water. Dan spins and finally, finally, sees it. The afanc. It looks, exactly like PJ had said, like a huge beaver, of the demonic variety, with a long snout and yellow eyes. Its teeth are huge, its fur is slick and black, and it has four giant paws with equally giant claws.

It holds itself in the air for a second, two seconds, three, before Dan realises that he has, somehow, stopped time again. He turns to Ffion, whose mouth is open in a silent oh and is just lifting his hand, just starting to move, when the afanc smashes down into the right side of The Ceridwen.

Ffion screams.

Dan throws himself to the left side. The boat rocks, but doesn’t topple over. He shouts, “Ffion, you have to-”

She says, “It’s this side, it’s come over this-”

The afanc jumps again and crashes down - half onto the jetty and half onto the front of the boat. The wooden slats splinter and the boat, with no chance of staying afloat, tips itself forward, pitching Dan straight into the freezing cold water. Ffion’s screaming, from behind him, abruptly stops as he drops under the surface, and starts again as soon as he bursts up, gasping for air.

The jetty is gone. In the inky blackness Dan can’t see Ffion, but he can hear her. He kicks his legs. The afanc is circling, making the water choppy and swirling. When he shouts her name his voice barely works. He’s hit his head somewhere, maybe on the boat, and it’s bleeding, running rivets down from his hairline. He yells, “Ffion! Where are you? I’ll swim to you, I can’t-”

She just keeps screaming.

The tail of the afanc wraps once around his waist and then moves away. It’s moving in a figure-8, one perfect circle around Dan and then down to where he can finally see Ffion, moving around her and then back to Dan.

“Swim to one of the other boats,” he shouts to her. “Follow me.”

She tries, he can see that she tries, but then stops like something is holding her back. “I can’t! It’s on my ankle.”

Dan thinks not again, this cannot be happening again, and turns to swim to her, one arm out ready to pull her towards him.

She reaches back and then is, just as suddenly, pulled away.

Dan tries to swim after her, overarm to overarm, but the afanc, latched around her ankle, is far too fast. She shouts, “Help me,” over and over. “Please.”

Dan watches the ripples in the water as it moves across the bay, out into the brief expanse of ocean that separates the harbour and the island, and then crosses to, of course, Skomer. It was never going to be anywhere else.

***

He manages to pull himself into one of the other, intact boats, and tries to check himself over. None of the charms work, he can’t dry or heal himself because his hands are shaking too much.
Eventually he has to drop back into the sea and swim the few strokes back to the other jetty, pulling himself onto dry land. They’d been so close. He should have told her the other way.

Six. Six tests failed. He slaps himself on the forehead, just once, and then presses his fist to his blood smeared temple. The walk back up the coastal path takes a while on his unsteady legs, his jeans and coat soaked right through. His scarf and gloves have both disappeared.

He’s nearing the tearooms, the lights for Rhiannon to find her way home, when someone shouts his name.

It’s Phil.

Dan blinks and frowns. “What are you doing out here?”

Phil says, “Walking. I was just walking,” but he’s out of breath, like he’s been running instead.

“At 1 in the morning?”

“What are you doing?”

Dan can’t think of an excuse. He’s too agitated, too upset. He can’t imagine what he looks like and so just stares at Phil, as though his entire appearance will answer the question.

Phil, softly, says, “That’s a nasty bruise on your forehead.” His hand, on a course for Dan’s temple, hovers in mid air. Dan almost leans forward to meet it.

“I fell,” he says.

“You fall a lot, Dan. You’re almost as clumsy as me.”

“I don’t think anyone is that-” Dan stops, words dying in his throat as Phil touches a fingertip, lightly, to the area just above his eyebrow. He freezes in place, like every single muscle in his body is just vibrating in that one spot under Phil’s index finger.

“That’s a really bad bruise,” Phil says. He cups his hand up to hold back Dan’s fringe. “How did you fall to hurt yourself there?”

Dan’s heart aches with want, he wants to put his hands on Phil’s waist, he wants to lean forward and rest his head right in the crook of Phil’s neck, has to press right back on his heels to stop himself from doing so. He says, “I lost your scarf.”

“That’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Dan says. Phil has, so far, been too polite to mention the fact that Dan is soaked, drowned rat levels of soaked. He’s starting to shiver now, huge drips of water caught in every curl on his hair and sitting on the fabric of his coat. “I liked that scarf. It was from you.”

Phil, fingertips still at Dan’s hairline, says, “I’ll make you another one.”

“You made it?”

Phil says, “Yeah,” like this is obvious and then makes a surprised noise as Dan (because he’s cold and lonely and failed another test, another person gone) gives in and rocks forward, looping his arms around Phil’s back and pressing his face onto Phil’s shoulder.

Dan says, “I’m sorry,” as Phil’s hands flail around his head, at a loss at what to do, before settling
between Dan’s shoulder blades.

“You fell in the sea?” Phil asks, after a second, clenching the waterlogged material of Dan’s jacket in his fist.

There’s no point in lying about that one. Dan says, “Yes, I did.”

“How?”

“Because I’m useless at everything.”

Phil runs one flattened palm up and down Dan’s spine. “How so?”

Dan turns his face so that his nose brushes Phil’s neck. Phil trembles, Dan feels it travel from his toes right up to his hair. He says, “It’s hard to explain,” and feels every breath, every letter, land right on Phil’s skin.

Phil swallows, audibly. “Try me.”

Dan has the sudden realisation that this has, maybe, crossed the line into something. He wants to touch the pads of his fingers to Phil’s freckles, unzip Phil’s coat so he can push his hands, push himself inside; he wants, he wants, he wants.

He pulls his arms back to his sides and steps away. Phil half-steps with him and then stops. “I need to dry off before we go to work.”

Phil still has his hands outstretched as though he’s holding Dan’s shadow between them. He blinks. “What?”

“We’ve only got an hour or so before-”

“You can’t go to work,” Phil says. “You can’t seriously go to work. You fell in the sea. You’ll catch pneumonia. You’re shaking. I felt it.”

The shaking hadn’t been just from the cold. Phil probably knows that. Dan says, “I can dry off, I just need to go home, or somewhere quiet, and it’s fine. I’ll meet you there.”

Phil says, “No,” and again, “No”. He drops his hands and looks back up at the tearooms. “We can go in there.”

“I’ll be fine on my own.”

“You’re not fine on your own,” Phil exclaims. His aura sparks like a flash of lightning. “It’s quiet enough in there, right? I won’t come in with you, you can do whatever you need, but you’re not going anywhere by yourself.”

“I’m always by myself, it’s-”

“Only because you won’t let me-”

“Okay,” Dan says. “Okay. We’ll go in the tearooms. It’s fine.”

The lights for Rhiannon are all pink; tealights and candles and fairy lights draped around the windows. They reflect off Angharad’s violet ribbons with a pastel sheen that floats over everything. The candles are strawberry scented and the smell hits Dan right on his cheeks as Phil expertly and with no effort clicks the lock open. Dan wants to ask how he knows how to do that,
if he’s done that before, how it’s even possible that someone who is so terrible at trying to secretly
sample the contents of the candy aisle can break into a building with only a twist of his wrist. All
the things about Phil that he doesn’t know. Phil says, “If you’re not back in ten minutes I’ll come
in.”

Dan says, “Fine” again and enters. Phil closes the door behind him. He hesitates only to cast a
charm over the candles, making their flames permanent, ensuring that the fairy lights never burn
out, before he heads to the staff only room.

It’s a mistake. Ffion’s belongings are scattered on the little centre table; a gossip magazine, a half-
drunk cup of coffee, her phone and her coat, thrown over the back of the chair. Why hadn’t she put
it on to come down to the pier? Had she been that worried about him that she’d rushed all the way
down the path to check without grabbing her coat?

The coat is a powder blue mac that Louise would love, little stripes at the cuffs and in the hood.
It’s pretty and obviously selected by someone who likes pastels (like her phone case and the
cheerful lilac of her mug). Dan can’t look at it, at any of it. It feels almost accusatory. He casts an
awful drying charm that makes his hair fluffy and takes everything from soaked through to slightly
damp. He leaves all of Ffion’s things exactly where they are and uses the rest of his ten minutes to
stand with his forehead leant against the tearoom notice board, trying very hard to breathe.

When he comes back outside Phil says, “Oh!” and floats his hand over Dan’s head. “Your hair.”

Dan says, “Don’t,” and desperately tries to flatten it.

“No.” Phil bats his hands away, catches at his wrists. “I like it like that.”

Dan says, “Don’t,” again, either at the hair or at Phil’s thumbs on his pulse points, heartbeat
fluttering lightly under his skin. Phil only needs to move his hand a centimetre to the left and his
thumb would be pressed right on Dan’s mark. “I couldn’t-” He means to say I couldn’t get it any
better but he means, honestly, that he couldn’t. Couldn’t save any of them.

Phil says, “I should have jumped in after you.”

“You shouldn’t go home on your own, after work. You should-”

“I can’t. I told you.”

Phil has mud at his temples. Dan isn’t sure how he hadn’t noticed that before. It’s also scattered
over his knuckles and caught on his jawline. When Phil frowns the green in his eyes get brighter.

“I know you are, Dan. But that’s okay. It really is.”

***
Outside work, at the end of a shift where Dan hadn’t cleared the bruises from anything and left entire shelves of sad and pale fruit, Phil bounces from one foot to the other and says, “So, do you still want-”


He can give himself one thing, he reasons with himself as they walk back, Phil pointing out things that Dan’s already seen, landmarks that Dan already knows, because Phil is nervous and apparently being nervous turns him into a tour guide. One thing. One night (or one morning, really). Just to see inside Phil’s house, to see where Phil goes when he’s not at the other side of a store to Dan, to see Phil’s belongings and all of the things that he likes. It’ll make it worse, some inner voice chides from his head. It’ll make it worse. You’ll love him more and you already love him past the point of rationality, don’t you? Past the point of breathing. Go home.

Phil says, “That’s the castle,” and gestures in the general direction of the river bank.


Phil laughs. “Don’t- don’t make fun of me, I’m just- I can’t stop talking when I’m- you know.”

Dan says, “Tired?”

“No.” Phil looks amused and not amused at the same time. “You know I’m not. I’m nervous.”

They reach Phil’s cobbled street, the explosion of impossible tropical flowers around his door. Dan touches his fingers to the out-of-place pumerias and looks at Phil, hovering uncertainly on his own doorstep. “I’m not changing my mind,” he says. “If that’s what you’re waiting for.” He should be changing his mind, he should be saying actually, I feel much better now, I might just go home, but he doesn’t feel better. Not by any means.

Phil looks at him. “I’m glad. You probably don’t want me to say that, for whatever reason, but I’m glad. That you’re not changing your mind.”

Dan says, “Phil,” but it’s not helpless and reproaching like last time. It comes out full of longing, a tone that makes Phil falter with his house keys. “You were right. I shouldn’t have gone home on my own.”

Phil huffs and finally opens his door. “Um, sorry about the plants.”

Dan, stepping in after him, says, “What?” and then, “What?”

Phil’s hall and living room (and kitchen from what Dan can see) are full of flower pots. Tulips, alpinias, lilies, daisies, and chrysanthemums. Huge peach dahlias winding up the staircase. All perfectly in bloom and as bright as if they were in a meadow. Phil waves his arm over them. “I know they’re a lot, but I-”

“Sunlight and water?” Dan says. “You said, just sunlight and water.”

“Yep. That’s all.”

“That.” Dan stops, stares at the lotus flowers dotted around the living room door frame. “That can’t be possible.”

Phil says, “I like plants,” and then, “I like- I like to look after things. I like them to know that they’re cared for.”
Dan pretends to be incredibly interested in the lotus, tries to ignore Phil’s shuffling feet coming closer. He attempts to not hear Phil say, “Dan,” very softly, but he hears it, of course he hears it, he feels it. Phil, right next to him, brushes their little fingers together.

“Where should I sleep?” Dan asks, voice shrill. Phil hooks his finger around Dan’s. “I can sleep anywhere, I mean, the sofa will be fine, it’s-”

Phil says, “You don’t have to-”

“Please,” Dan says. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

“I just-” Phil begins. “I’ll just get you some stuff to sleep in, and some blankets for the sofa. It’s not that comfy but it should be okay. For a night.”

Dan is about to say thanks, has just about managed the “Tha-”, when Phil pulls him forward by their interlinked little fingers and grazes his lips right along Dan’s left cheekbone, as fleeting as a faerie wingbeat. The “Tha-” turns into, “Phil,” as Phil moves to the right side. Phil sighs, a puff of air that lands right on the patch of red blushing its way onto Dan’s cheek. He presses their foreheads together and then nudges his nose to Dan’s just once (it feels like a kiss. Like an actual kiss).

Dan whispers, “I can’t.”

“You keep saying that,” Phil mumbles back but he steps away. “I’m sorry. You keep saying it and I keep- You don’t understand how much I-”

Dan stands with his eyes half closed for a second and then says, “Blankets. I’ll get the blankets.”

The t-shirt Phil gives him is the brightest shade of red that Dan has ever seen and the blankets are squares of green and blue and yellow. They all smell of Phil. Dan wonders how to smuggle it home with him, either the t-shirt or the blankets or all of them at once, a huge bundle of Phil that he could keep without anyone knowing.

The red doesn’t suit him. It’s almost the same colour as the polo shirts they have to wear in the shop and it’s a terrible shade that makes all the flushed patches on his skin stand out.

Phil says, “Goodnight Dan,” and stands awkwardly in the living room doorway, waiting for Dan to be safely under the blankets before he turns the light off.

Dan has wondered a lot, over the years, about what the curse actually entails. What’s the point where it becomes actual pursual of a relationship or not just- not just a hand cupping someone’s face, a thumb on a bottom lip. When is it not just those things? Why he can’t he just have that, just once?

Phil, slightly strangled sounding, like Dan is robbing him of air, says, “Dan.”

Dan, having apparently crossed the room just to touch Phil’s cheek, says, “I just want-”


Dan isn’t quite sure that Phil’s ready for whatever he wants. Or maybe Phil is ready and that’s another issue entirely. He says, “I’m sorry. This wasn’t a fair thing to do. It’s just been a hard night, that’s all.”

Phil whispers, “Where do you go? At night, when you’re out walking before work?”
“Nowhere.”

Phil says, “Liar,” on a sharp exhale of breath with no real heat behind it.

“I know.”

“I worry about you. That’s all.”

“Me?” Dan blinks. His thumb is now running along Phil’s cheekbone, back and forth. “Why?”

Phil looks astonished. “Why? You go out walking by yourself, you come to work with bruises and cuts, you jump in the sea with no regard for your own-”

“I fell,” Dan says. “I said that I fell.”

“But you-”

Dan drops his hand, slowly, skims Phil’s neck and shoulders on the way. “I fell. That’s what happened. I was walking and I fell.”

Phil, exasperated, says, “Fine. If that’s what you say happened, then that’s what we’ll go with.”

They’re still standing very close to each other. Phil’s aura has peaks of white in it, like the tops of waves, twisting and turning. It probably means that he’s nervous. Dan wonders what his looks like, whatever colour it is (he had, all those years ago, stopped PJ on d no, no, it’s not black, it’s- and said something ridiculously pathetic, like no I want him to be the one to tell me, because he’d been drunk and expecting PJ to laugh. PJ had not laughed).

It’s not fair, Dan thinks, not for the first time. It’s just not fair.

Phil licks his lips. The white in his aura shifts and dances. “Can I-”

Dan says, or announces really into the sudden silence of the room, “I’m going to sleep now. Thank you for letting me stay.”

Phil’s aura softens with disappointment. “Oh, that’s no problem. You know that.”

(“Oh Dan,” his mother had said, pointing at cares about me. She didn’t finish the thought, whatever it had been. What a nice thing to write? What a lovely thing to wish for from someone? There’s plenty of people who care about you here? And maybe there were but no one had ever broken into somewhere just so he could get dry. No one’s aura had ever exploded into technicolour at the sight of him. No one had ever looked at him, soaked through, and said I should have jumped in after you, like there was no way he’d even consider anything else. You can. Whatever you want).

Dan leans forward as Phil leans forward, as off balance as if they’re on the deck of a ship, and plants a kiss (very precisely) to the corner of Phil’s mouth, as close as it’s possible to be without actually touching his lips. Phil gasps (a gorgeously astonished little sound). Dan had only intended one, just the one, but he adds two more - one underneath each three colour eye. Gently, so Phil knows he means them.

When he leans back Phil still leans forward so Dan has to say, “I just wanted to. I don’t get to- I don’t really do much that I want to. I- It’s mixed messages, I know, I’m sorry, and I would try to explain, but-”

“Slight mixed messages, yes.” Phil sounds dazed.
“I like you.”

Phil smiles, cautiously, a slow unveiling across his face. “I like you.”

“No, I like you.”

“I like you too.” Phil waits. Dan looks at the floor. Phil’s smile fades as slowly as it arrived, Dan gets to watch every second of it disappear. Phil, finally, says, “But?”

“But,” Dan agrees.

Phil eyes flick down to Dan’s mark, visible now that he has no sleeves to pull over it, and says, “I understand.”

Dan goes back to the sofa. Phil waits until he’s safely under the blankets before saying, “Night, Dan,” and switching the light off.

***

Dan doesn’t wait for Phil to get up before he leaves. It’s a cowardly thing to do and he’s well aware but he’s not sure if he could cope with sleep rumpled and soft Phil. He leaves a note (the note doesn’t say what it should say, which is I’m leaving because I love you and I’m cursed to not be able to do anything about that fact. But know that I do. I wished for you because you were supposed to be impossible. It actually says thnks for letting me stay i ate some of your cereal).

The dog appears behind him as he’s striding home and howls like its heart is breaking. Dan stops and says, “What? What is it?”, tries to get close enough to pet it but the dog (for the first time) keeps backing away from him. Dan kneels down and stretches out his arms. The dog turns and runs in the opposite direction.

He phones his mother, who sounds as startled as ever to hear his voice. She always answers the phone with, “Oh my goodness, Dan,” like his very existence is a surprise to her.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s me.”

His mother says, “Well, how are you?”

“I’ve, um, been better, I guess.”

She doesn’t ask him to elaborate because they’re not really that kind of family. She says, “Oh,” and accepts it as the fact that it is.

“I had a question about the curse.”

“Our curse?”

“No, Mum, another random family’s curse.”

“I see you still use sarcasm as a defensive mechanism, Daniel.”

“Mum.”

She sighs. “What do you want to know?”

“You said that the provision was that you can’t pursue a relationship with them, otherwise death, right?”
“That’s right,” his mother says, warily. “Where is this-”

“But what does it mean by pursue a relationship? Like, what’s the point where it becomes a relationship? What if I just want to spend all my time with him and just be with him and not really do anything if we’re not allowed to but-?”

“Dan,” she interrupts. “Are you trying to say that-”

“No, this is hypothetical. Completely hypothetical.”

She doesn’t believe him, he can tell. “Well, it would mean to sort of, chase someone, I suppose. To actively seek them out and make your feelings clear. To tell them that you like them.”

Dan’s heart sinks. “What if you accidentally tell them that?”

“Then I would untell them.”

“But what if it was true? What if you want them to know it?”

“Dan, you remember when we talked about this on your birthday and how I said that it means death, for both of you and-”

“Can you break it?”

There’s a very long silence. Dan is clutching his phone hard enough to break it, tight enough for the screen to shatter. By the time his mother says, “It’s impossible. There is a way, but it’s impossible. No one’s ever done it,” his hand is starting to ache. “If you, hypothetically, told them that you like them then you need to unsay it.”

Dan says, “Okay.”

“It’ll be difficult but it’s for the best,” she says. “Hypothetically.”

Dan hangs up without saying goodbye and throws his phone in a perfect arch at the daisy print wall in front of him. It explodes like a firework, into several perfect pieces that he just about manages to charm back together into something that no longer resembles an iphone. Rather, like, he supposes the shattered debris of his heart. Sections that no repairing charm will be able to get right again.

“That’s dramatic,” says PJ, but his face is full of sympathy. “I’m sorry Dan.”

“So am I.”

“But you have to do it.”

Dan nods.

PJ waits for a second, watching him, or watching the space around his head. Auras don’t carry well through Skype (PJ’s is the faintest line of green when it’s a beautiful jade in real life) but PJ is frowning at Dan’s like he can see it clearly. He finally mumbles something that he looks like he immediately regrets saying.

Dan says, “What?”

PJ says, “Did he say it back?” then, “I’m sorry,” at whatever he sees on Dan’s face.
“No, it’s fine, it’s- Yes, he did. He said it back.”

“Well that’s even worse.”

Dan, watching the gradual glow of Phil’s smile in his mind, says, “It wasn’t. It didn’t feel worse. It felt-”

“Dan, don’t torture yourself about this.”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know,” PJ says. “I know it’s not.”

***

Ffion apparently had many photos to choose from, all sorts of selfies and artistic shots that are obviously taken by someone who loves her. Dan feels a stab of envy as he arranges them on the second board. Ffion’s boyfriend, the photographer, is stood beside him saying, “No, she hated that one. She was really picky. I had to try every filter and every angle, and she used to have to give them all her second opinion before I posted anything.” Dan wonders why he’s already talking about her in past tense, why you would give up on someone you love so easily, but then here he is, about to give up on Phil, about to give up on his own hopeless chances.

Ffion’s boyfriend suddenly starts crying, sad little noises that he tries to cover with his hand, and Dan uselessly pats at his shoulder. “What’s happening here?” he says. “All of these people? What’s happening?”

(“It was huge,” he told PJ, after the Phil part of the conversation. “The afanc. It was huge. And it’s definitely taking them to Skomer. But the morgen said, not to drown or anything, she said that it’s gathering them.”

“There?” PJ frowned. “On the island? It’s gathering them all there?”

“I don’t know what for. But I don’t really want to wait for it either.”

PJ said, “Dan,” as the start of a warning.

“Six people, PJ. Six. I’m supposed to be protecting them.”

“Don’t go there on your own. Promise me you won’t.”

“I knew it would be there. I felt the magic, I told you.”

“I see you dodging the question.”

“I can’t promise it,” Dan said. “Because that’s exactly what I’m going to do”).

He’s in the staffroom when Phil gets to work, standing by his locker in his usual pose (except Mark isn’t there to finish his side of the scene. Dan feels like one half of a bookend, missing its partner). Phil looks, unfairly, sleep rumpled and soft and wearing his glasses, and it’s every bit as heart shattering as Dan expected. Phil says, “Oh, here you are.”

Dan says, “Here I am.”

“You left,” Phil says, but not accusingly. It’s more just an observation. “I thought you would.”
Dan has to look away from him, turning and unturning the key fob on his locker. “Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know. But I was just kind of expecting it. I wish you’d stayed though. I was going to make breakfast.”

Dan clicks the lock open and clicks it back closed.

“Dan,” Phil says, as if he’s been spending the entire walk to work building up to saying this. “About what you said, last night, about what we said, I—”

“Oh.” Dan laughs. Or possibly sobs. It sounds like a sob to him. “That. I know. I was so tired, I don’t even know what I was saying.” Phil stops speaking. Dan clicks the lock. “It was just a really long night, wasn’t it? And I don’t think I’ve ever been that tired before. I have no idea what I was—”

Phil says, “Would you look at me and not the—”

“Nope. I can’t.”

“You can’t look at me?”

“I didn’t know what I was saying,” Dan repeats, slowly. “It was late and I was tired and we were in your house and—”

“This isn’t true. I know this isn’t true.”

“-and I didn’t mean it.” Dan finally looks at him. Phil’s face, as always a complete projection of his emotions, is pale and his eyes (every colour magnified behind his lenses) are wide. Dan’s never wanted to touch someone more. He says, “I didn’t mean it.”

Phil’s mouth forms a hundred different words before he says, “You didn’t.”

Dan says, “I’m sorry.”

Phil says, “I don’t know why you’re saying this.”

“I wanted you to know.”

Phil looks at him and Dan doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the way Phil looks at him, never wants to get used to it. Phil looks at Dan like he never wants to stop, like he’s seeing something new in Dan every time that’s amazing and fascinating and Dan, under his gaze, could hold his hands up and say it’s just me, I’m nothing special, but Phil would probably just say you ARE because he’s Phil. Dan dreamt him up. He’s perfect.

“I meant it,” Phil says. “If we’re, you know, admitting stuff. I meant it.”

“If you knew me you wouldn’t—”


Mark takes this moment to burst through the door, still midway through whatever conversation he’d been having with one of the van drivers (Mark is loud enough that he can continue a talk while the other person is outside the building). He says, “Hey guys!” and then, “Am I interrupting something?”

Dan says, “No, not at all,” and watches Phil quietly take his work shirt from his locker and leave.
“What the fuck happened?” Mark asks and Dan’s is about to give an honest answer before he sees that Mark is pointing to his hand. The lock, cradled in his palm, has broken into tiny pieces.

***

The faerie, accusingly, says, “Where have you been? It’s been so long since we’ve seen—”

They haven’t stolen anything. Dan had sort of stumbled across them while he was walking across the hilltops. The faerie looks genuinely pleased to see him, fluttering right up to his face. Dan says, “I’ve been busy. You have to know what’s going on.”

“The missing,” the faerie nods. “The ones that they’re all dismissing.”

“No.” Dan shakes his head. “Not anymore, they were at first, but not anymore. Everyone notices now.”

The faerie says, “Be careful.”

“I am,” Dan says. “You don’t all need to worry about me.”

“All? There’s just me. I’m the only one you’ll ever see.”

Dan thinks I knew it! and says, “Oh. Where are the others?”

“They all left. And here I am, bereft. Or I was, before you. You don’t realise the good that you do.”

Dan says, “Thanks.”

The faerie nods and floats closer to his ear. “I only go on the stealing spree so that you would chase me.”

“I thought so.”

They laugh and, with a steady thrum of wings, fly away.

Dan looks over at Skomer; a twenty minute boat ride from the harbour and half hidden behind its silver mist of magic. He’s never seen so much in one place, not even on the once or twice that he’d gone to the council building with PJ to get their stationings. At the council the mist had been thin, like you could easily walk through it. Skomer glows like it’s beneath a dome. He shouldn’t go there. It’s stupid to go there; cursed and by himself, with the power to freeze time for two seconds and cause tiny electric shocks.

At the council, when PJ got Oslo and Dan was handed Pembroke almost apologetically (“this is best for you Daniel, nothing ever happens there”), they’d had to sit and listen to a whole talk on the importance of sentinels. How important you were. It’s not a job where you get much gratitude and no one will ever know, or is ever supposed to know, what you do for them but this (hand smack right on Pembroke, then on Oslo), this is your town, these are your people. You need to look after them. PJ had nodded, studiously, because that was PJ (and PJ loves gratitude, loves the thanks), and Dan hadn’t done anything because the thought of people being reliant on him was terrifying.

But. This is your town. These are your people. You, the only charm you ever really focused on learning was to ensure you always had wi-fi. You, with a cursed heart and a sad soul and a questionable work ethic most of the time. Sitting for hours clearing the bruises from fruit. You, looked an afanc right in the eye and then told the person you love that you didn’t mean it, any of it,
just so you could save them without them knowing. Is that brave? Are you brave?

***

“You remember,” he tells PJ, walking to work. “What they said, when we went to-

“They said that you can ask for help if you need it, Dan. That’s what they said.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Dan. This is big. I haven’t had to deal with anything like that. No one has to deal with that on their first stationing. What are you even writing in your updates?”

Dan’s updates are the same entry, copied and pasted. Chased a faerie. They stole a ring, a bracelet, two opals and a tiara.

They didn’t even want any of them, they only wanted him to chase them. The attention. To have a conversation with someone across the same set of hills. If the faerie was the fourth person he’d speak to on an average day then what was he to them? The only person they would speak to?

“You don’t think I can do it.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that you don’t have the abilities to-

“That’s the same thing Peej.”

Phil is stood outside the shop. He looks up at Dan, walking towards him, and for a second, seems to forget everything he’s said yesterday. He smiles. His aura lights up. His tongue is pressed to his teeth.

Dan sees the exact moment that he remembers. It’s somewhere in between lifting his hand to wave and opening his mouth to say hi. Phil stops smiling and waving and speaking and just nods instead.

Dan says, “I’m at work. I have to go.”

“Phone me,” PJ says. “Phone me before you-

Dan hangs up. He says, “What’s up? It’s freezing out here.”

Phil says, “Oh, that reminds me. I made you another scarf.” He opens his bag and unfurls a scroll of thick knit grey. “It’s bigger than the other one because it’s getting closer to winter and I thought- I didn’t want you to be cold.”

Dan takes it and says, “Phil, I-”

“The door’s locked. That’s why I’m stood out here.”


“I already did that,” Phil says. “And I tried to look through the staff room window. And I shouted into the stockroom. He’s not there.”

“That- He’s always here. He’s never missed work once, not in the whole time that I’ve been here.”

Mark works early evenings. He jogs around the harbour and then jogs to work. He meets Dan at his locker. He pats Dan’s upper arm. He used to be the final person that Dan would speak to in his
average day. “But, we would hear him, if he was there. We’d hear him.”

“Yeah,” Phil says. “We would.”

Mark jogs around the harbour and then jogs to work. Around the harbour and then to work. *Around the harbour.*

“I need to go,” Dan tells Phil. His voice is all over the place. “Will you phone Louise and say that we couldn’t get in?”

“Where will you go?”

Dan is still clutching the scarf in his hands. The scarf that Phil *made* for him. He twirls it round his wrists. It’s softer than the last one, with more silver in it. It looks like Phil took more effort over it, made sure that it was perfect, brighter than the last one. “He always goes for a run before work. He asked me to come with him once but I don’t run, so….”

“You think he’s lost track of time?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to walk down to the harbour and see.”

“I’ll walk with you.” Phil’s eyes flicker all over Dan’s face. “If that’s okay.”

“It’s okay.” Dan finally winds the scarf around his neck. “Let me just text Louise first.”

The text says *mark not here probs still out running going to check dnt worry dan* and Phil says, “Saying don’t worry usually has the opposite effect. Are you worried?”

They walk. Phil swings his arms at his sides and Dan folds his, just to keep out of the way of any non-accidental knuckle brushing. “People are going missing.”

“You think Mark has?”

“I don’t know.” Dan for some reason feels the need to add. “I should have gone running with him. It wasn’t just the once, that he asked. He used to ask all the time”.

They reach the coastal path, still dotted with Angharad’s violet ribbons. Phil touches one and says, “Why haven’t these blown away do you think?”

Dan says, “Magic,” shortly and Phil, oddly, flinches. “Or really good knots, I don’t know. Where is he?”

There’s no Mark on the path, no Mark on the harbour, no Mark *around* the harbour, no Mark anywhere. One of the waitresses in the restaurants down the front (interrupted in the middle of closing up) remembers seeing him run past because everyone remembers seeing Mark (he wears a very tight vest to run in, it’s understandable) but, she says, he usually loops around and comes back. But he didn’t. If she did then she didn’t see him.

The place Mark usually loops around is right at the furthest left point of the harbour, right past the rows of cafes and shops, a stretch of empty concrete that gradually runs down into the sea, usually where the lifeboats release from. Dan stops at the top and looks in, expecting to see a tail, or yellow eyes.

“You think he fell?” Phil asks.

“He couldn’t of,” Dan says. “He runs this route every day and you can’t fall, really, can you?
You’d just run straight into the sea and why would he do that?”

Phil doesn’t say *maybe he lost track of time and he literally just arrived at work* or *maybe he went home from a nap and forgot to set an alarm*. He looks into the water like he’s searching for something and says, “What do we do?”

“I don’t know.” Dan looks down into the sea, looks back up the harbour like Mark is going to appear from nowhere, shouting *hi* and not really needing to shout it really because they’d be able to hear him from an ocean away. “I really don’t know.”

What happens, in the end, is that Louise drives down with the spare key and lets them in, and then has to help them carry the deliveries from the parked up lorries to the store room. Louise carries three crates to every one that he and Phil manage to drag along the ground and, when they’re done, she says, “This isn’t like him at all. He’d better have a good excuse.”

She leaves while Dan is passing his phone to the head of the coblynau. They’re sort of cute, in a chubby faced gnome way, and they never usually talk, ever, but this one suddenly, in a voice like a rock rolling down a mountainside, says, “Un arall.”

“Yes,” Dan replies. “Another one.”

The coblynau frowns. “Saesneg?”

“Please.”

Their English is faltering and slow. “You should be careful. You should not go there.”

“I don’t see what else I can do.”

“Do not go alone.”

“There’s no one to take with me.”

The coblynau says, “No,” and shakes their head. “The other. Take the other.”

Dan says, “The other *what*?”

“Y ci.” The coblynau is suddenly impatient, bored of the conversation and already retreating back to the shadowy corner where they live. “Y ci.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Dan whispers after them. “I don’t know what any of this means.”

When he leaves Phil is sat, cross legged, in the cake aisle, a box of red velvet in his lap. Dan raises his hand to him, from the other side of the shop. Phil waves back like he hasn’t seen Dan for hours.

It hurts Dan to look at him; an emotional twinge in his soul and a physical twinge right on his curse mark, like there’s an elastic between the two of them that someone just keeps pulling on, as tight as a piano string, right on the verge of snapping. Dan presses his palm to each of the apples, makes their green brighter, their shapes rounder. They’re the best ones that he’s done in this entire time, so beyond perfect that they don’t look real.

He says, “Phil?”

Phil, almost too quickly, like he’s been sat there the entire time waiting for Dan to speak to him, says, “Yes?”
“I’m going to take leave. Friday through to Monday. If that’s okay.”

There’s a long pause, long enough that Dan turns to glance at him. Phil is staring down at the box of red velvet.

Dan says, “Phil?”

“What?”

“I thought I’d just have a few days off. That’s all.”

“Are you going anywhere?”

“Nowhere in particular.”

Phil says, “So, somewhere?”

“I just need to do something, that’s all.”

***

The seventh person is Mark Fischbach. His aura was scarlet red and it was a colour as beaming and comforting as he was. He knew that Dan waited purposely by his locker so he always made sure to say *bye Dan* and pat his shoulder. He said *take it easy tonight* like he meant it because he did mean it, was the type of person who never said things he didn’t mean. When they’d met Dan had, for seven seconds exactly, thought that he was the one, the one from The List, but it turned out that Mark was only maybe four things from The List and that had always been enough for Dan in the past, enough to work with and enough to pretend, but Mark wasn’t the sort of person you could pretend with. You can’t pretend with someone so completely and utterly *genuine*. He would always “accidentally” leave Dan a flask of coffee for the night shift and called him *sport* and *buddy* like he was Dan’s American uncle. Mark’s photo, on the board, smiling as if to say, *hey, pal, don’t worry about me! Everything’s fine!*

It’s not fine. Not by any means. Louise stands in front of his photo and can’t say anything. Her aura is almost non-existent, Dan’s never seen anyone’s turn quite so pale (but then, he can’t see his).

“Louise,” he says. His voice sounds like it’s been dragged through a hedge backwards, a twig caught on every word. “It’ll be okay.”

Louise says, “*How?*” like a whipcrack. “How can it be?”

“It just will. Trust me, it will.”

Her face softens. “That’s a kind thing to say Dan, but- Where is he? I keep thinking I can hear him, is that silly? He was always so loud.” Her expression goes past soft into crumpling. “I’d give anything to hear him bursting back through the doors again. And I always used to tell him to keep his voice down and-”

Louise cries like a film star. Perfect single tears falling from her lashes and not running her mascara. When Dan touches her shoulder she wails and throws both her arms around him.

“You were right,” she sobs. “From the very beginning, you were right. We should have made more copies, we should have-”

“You can’t think like that now,” Dan says, awkwardly patting her hair. Her ringlets bounce under
his hand. “There’s no point in thinking like that. It just matters about getting him back.”

“Getting him back?” she sniffs. “Getting him back from where?”

“I don’t know. That was a weird thing to say, I’m sorry. Forget I said anything.”

Louise pulls back to make eye contact. “Phil said you’re taking the weekend off.”

“There’s some things I need to do.”

“Don’t you go disappearing on me. I couldn’t take that.”

Dan, at a loss of what else to say, can only tell her, “I won’t. I’ll be back here on Tuesday. I promise.”

***

There are four ways to kill an afanc, PJ says. He also says that they’re all utterly stupid and this plan is stupid and Dan, by association, is being completely stupid and also reckless and PJ has half a mind to fly back from Oslo and tell him so to his face because he needs to tell the council and just step back and let them deal with it and, please, doesn’t Dan see how crazy this is? An afanc, Dan. An afanc.

“I know, PJ, I know.”

“So, what, you’re going to take the boat there on Friday and stay there until Sunday?”

“There’s a cottage,” Dan says. “I can stay there.”

“And somewhere within those three days you’re going to kill the afanc. Just like that.”

“And save everyone.” That’s the important part. Dan’s trying not to think about the actual killing of something that he’s looked into the eyes of. “They’re there. It’s holding them there. I know it is.”

“And you’re just going to-”

“The four ways. Just tell me.”

PJ says, “Okay. They are - setting fire to it, electrocuting it, beheading it-”

Dan says, “No, no, no to that one.”

“-and also drowning it.”

“Drowning?”

“Must be a mammal. It looks like a beaver right? It probably needs to breathe or something.”

“I could trap it somewhere.”

“Sure. It’ll be easy.”

Dan says, “PJ, you can’t talk me out of this. It’s my place, I signed that oath, we both signed that oath, and you said-”

“And YOU said that it was a waste of time and that if anything happened you’d just let someone
else take care of it.”

“That was wrong. That was the wrong thing to say, it was a spineless thing to say and I shouldn’t have said it.”

“I still think-”

“I looked at her!” Dan exclaims. “I looked at her, PJ. She was right there and I just needed to reach further and she was gone. And the other one, Ffion, she was shouting at me to help her, and I-”

“Dan-”

“And Mark, Peej, Mark. He was the fourth person I would speak to, every day, and now he’s gone, somewhere, and I need to get him back.”

The Skype connection falters. Dan’s hands are shaking, he can’t keep it as steady as he once could, and PJ flickers slightly before he, finally, clears his throat and says, “Electrocuting or drowning are the most feasible. You know that. You would just need to trap it underwater, for the drowning, or, you can shock it, you can still do that, right? The shocking?”


“You can hold an internet connection though.”

“Sure. I can Wi-Fi it to death.”

PJ shrugs. “Maybe. Or maybe the trapping would be better. Also, it says that it hoards its food, like a beaver. So it probably is just keeping them all somewhere until it’s hungry.”

Dan tries very hard not to think of Delyth, missing for the longest. “At least they’re being kept. That’s the main thing.”

***

Dan looks up y ci in his phrasebook. It means the dog. Take the other, the coblynau had said. Take the dog. Dan isn’t sure how. The dog seems to have a mind of its own, it appears and disappears at will, and the night that Mark’s photo had gone on the board it had been sat outside his house when he got home.

Dan said, “Oh, hi there,” and pulled lightly at its ears. “You’re coming in again?”

It did. For a dog, it has impeccable manners and will only do things when invited to. When Dan had sat in the middle of the living room because he couldn’t quite make it to the sofa it had lain next to him and nudged at his knee with its nose until Dan said, “Okay,” and so it had clambered into his lap.

“I don’t know what to do,” Dan told it. “Actually, no, I know what to do but I’m scared to do it. I’m not a brave person. There’s literally nothing brave about me, Pembroke was unlucky to get me, anyone else would have done this by now.”

The dog grumbles.

“It’s true.”

***
He tries some things, just little tests of his abilities. He manages to start his microwave and blow the bulbs on all the lamps in the living room. He gets the coffee table to hover precariously one inch off the ground. He stops time for four seconds. The elm tree looks like it’s leaning further against his window, watching his progress. When he manages to lift the table it taps two of its branches together in what he hopes is applause.

He shows PJ, when he’s just back from buying his boat tickets, windswept and cold, and managing to get the table to a steadier three inches. It’s fine, it’s going to be fine.

PJ says, “That’s a nice scarf.”

Dan pulls at the comforting knot of it at his neck. “Phil made it for me.”

PJ runs his eyes over it and says, “Dan,” slowly, as the prelude to something.

Dan frowns. “What?”

PJ says, “It’s a nice colour. That’s all.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty calming.” Dan frowns at PJ for a few seconds more. “I bought the tickets, for the boat and the cottage. For Friday.”

PJ watches the table tilt in the air. “You said that the gnome told you there was another one that you should take with you.”

“He’s a coblynau, not a gnome. They set up little mines. And he meant the dog, I think.”

PJ looks at the scarf again. “Dan, I’m gonna say something that sounds crazy but hear me out, okay?”

“No, actually, he said the dog, so it’s the dog. I just don’t know what use it’ll be and I don’t want it to get hurt or anything, so-”

“The scarf’s the same colour as your aura.”

Dan says what or at least he tries to. The word doesn’t quite make it out.

PJ says, “Exactly the same. You wouldn’t be able to match it that well unless-”

“Coincidence.”

“He made it.”

Dan had asked Why grey and Phil, without missing a beat had said, it reminds me of you. That exact colour. Soft grey with a touch of silver, like a clear night sky. Dan pulls the scarf up until he can effectively bury his face in it and says, “Is this really what it looks like?”

“Yes,” PJ half-whispers. “It calms me down to look at it sometimes. When you get angry it goes darker and when you’re happy the silver gets brighter and like there’s little stars in it.”

Dan thinks that his aura is probably full of stars when he sees Phil. Entire constellations. He says, “Coincidence. It has to be.”

“Does it? Why?”

“I can’t think about this now, PJ. I can’t think about him now. If I think about him then I won’t
think about anything else.”

“The flowers. You said that he had a load of ridiculous tropical flowers that shouldn’t.”

Dan says, “I can’t. I have my last shift with him tomorrow before I have to go to Skomer, and it might be the last shift ever, you don’t know, and I can’t do it thinking that he has magic too. I can’t. I just- I just want to spend it with him, okay, to know that he’s there and that he’s safe and that I love him and then- I’m probably going to ask to be stationed somewhere else because I just, I can’t be around him. It hurts, it hurts too much. This stupid fucking curse, I didn’t even do anything to deserve it and I have to leave with him thinking that I don’t like him. It’s not fair.”

“Your mother said there was a way to break it.”

“But it’s impossible. That’s what she said.”

PJ says, “Dan, he’ll know that you like him. You’re not as much of a closed book as you think you are.”

“I just want-” Dan stops. “It’s a waste of time talking about it.”

His mother hadn’t phoned him (again, not that sort of family) but had sent a polite did you do it? I know it must have been hard with a xxx in a separate message because she’d probably forgotten them the first time around. Dan replied and said yes i need you to do something for me please. She’d responded straight away, which had surprised him, but maybe she’d felt sad for him somehow. Yes, darling, anything.

***

At work he opens his locker and takes out the little parcel that his mother had charmed over this morning. It’s her main, and best, ability - all the things that he felt homesick for at uni sent straight over to him, cups of hot chocolate the way she makes them, jumpers when it got cold and she knew he would have forgotten all his warm clothing because her other strongest ability was making knitwear.

He hands the parcel to Phil, who smiles cautiously. “For me?”

“For you.”

Phil tears open the paper and pulls out a long cashmere scarf. Dan can see how soft it is. It’s ocean blue, the exact shade of the sea meeting the coast, the exact colour of the blue in Phil’s eyes, bright and gorgeous. He’d described it as best he could but had mostly fallen over his words (“it’s just perfect, Mum, like you never want to stop looking at it”).

Phil is speechless. When he smiles it’s with such joy that Dan doubts that he’s ever made anyone happy before, any other smile he’s seen just seems faded. Phil runs the scarf through his fingers in a reverential way and finally says, “Thank you Dan.”

Dan feels suddenly awkward. “That’s okay.”

“This isn’t a goodbye present, is it?”

Dan, honestly, says, “I don’t know. I might move soon, away from Pembroke.”

Phil says, “Because of me.”
“No, no, not because of you, it’s-”

“You know why I made the grey scarf,” Phil says, slowly. “I know why you made me this blue one. I’ve never seen it but my mum describes it to me all the time. Everyone says it’s a nice colour, but I-”

“It’s better than nice,” Dan says. “It’s beautiful.”

“So is yours, Dan. I couldn’t do it justice, what it really looks like. You should see it.”

“I have seen it. You’ve shown it to me.” Dan shakes his head. “I should have known. The flowers. Sunlight and water.”

“Sunlight and water,” Phil repeats. “And also a lot of magic.” He ties the scarf around his neck and cups his hands together, steps a little closer to Dan. When Dan looks down into the space between Phil’s palms there’s a glowing, burning orb, casting yellow light to the ceiling. Phil smiles, beaming, his tongue to his teeth, and says, “Sunlight.”

“I knew it.” Dan looks up and Phil is suddenly much closer than he expected.

Phil says, “You don’t have to say that you like me. You don’t have to say anything. But, can I just-just there, can I-” he kisses Dan’s dimple, right side, leans in with the sun still cradled between them. “And here too, just here,” he presses his mouth to the underside of Dan’s jaw, which is easy because Dan, apparently, has turned his head up to give him better access. He brings his hands to Phil’s shoulders and pushes him, gently, not too far, away.

“You have a curse mark,” Phil says, flatly. “I haven’t seen one exactly like it, but, it’s not a good mark, is it?”

“It’s a family thing,” Dan says. “It’s not personal to just me.”

Phil doesn’t ask what it is. He’s moved his hands so that one is flat on Dan’s chest, his palm is still warm.

Dan says, “Are you stationed here? Is that why you’re here?”

Phil huffs. “Yes. But I’m not a sentinel. That’s what you are, isn’t it? Coming into work with all your bruises and jumping in the sea.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I’m a mediator,” Phil says. “We all are, the Lesters, and I just picked here because it seemed quiet. But then you were here, so it wasn’t.”

Dan says, “Of course you’re a mediator, of course.” He’s met a few, there’s an aunt somewhere in his family tree that was, and a few friends at school, and Dan had always been envious of them. Spending your time caring for local wildlife and plants seemed much more rewarding than stopping tiny robberies. All the mediators he’s encountered have been very similar; peaceful and gentle, never getting involved in anything and easy to forget about. But not Phil, how could anyone forget about Phil?

“Can I help with anything? Is this where you’re going tomorrow? To do something with the missing people?”

It’s a lot of questions. Dan has to shake his head and Phil’s hand is suddenly higher, his thumb a
sunbeam against Dan’s collarbone. Dan says, “Things are going on. You can’t help, I don’t want you to help, I don’t want you in danger in any way-”

Phil says, “Danger?” and, “I know that- Everything’s on edge and scared. The trees.”

“You can hear the trees?”

“Of course I can. I just wish they wouldn’t speak Welsh so much, which is ridiculous I know because we’re in Wales but they always go too fast for me and I can’t follow.”

Dan says, “I’ll be back on Tuesday. I promise I will. But then I’m going to ask to change my stationing. I have to.”

Phil repeats, “Because of me.”

Dan, not really able to lie anymore, says, “Because of you.”

***

(He’d had to stay on Skype with his mother for a long time, longer than they’ve spoken in years, while she cast ocean blue thread from her fingers and looped them into a scarf. They’re both terrible at small talk so he just sat and watched while she worked until, out of nowhere, she said, “You know, you’re the first one in a while who's actually met their person.”

Dan said, “Oh?”

“It doesn’t normally happen. That you get someone who is a complete replica of your list.” She didn’t look at him, just down at her hands. “Your father and I have been talking about it, and what I told you, about unsaying it.”

“Right.”

“That must have been hard, Dan.”

Dan just hummed in agreement, not really able to say anything.

“His aura is really beautiful, you don’t see many with-”

“Mum,” he said. “Please.”

“Your father thinks that you could still say it, but he’d have to not understand it. You know, in a language he doesn’t speak.”)

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They leave work, both wearing their scarves. Dan says, “So, that’s what you do, after work. You do your rounds and make sure everything is cared for?”

“Yes.” Phil looks down at his feet. “I like caring for things. I wish that I could-” Dan clears his throat. Phil stops and gives him a helpless look. “Sorry, I know you don’t like me saying stuff like that.”

“It’s not that I don’t like it Phil, I-”

Phil says, “Can I hug you?”
Dan says, “Yes,” directly after the *can I* and so ends up with an arm full of Phil, his cheek against the blue of his scarf. He turns his face so his mouth is next to Phil’s ear and says, slowly and deliberately, “Rwy’n dy garu di.”

Phil whispers, “What did you say?”

“Just something I wanted to tell you.”

“Will you tell me what the mark is?”

Dan thinks. He’d like to, he’d *love* to, but what would it achieve? Phil would want to solve it, to find the impossible cure, to come up with a million different ways that they could be together halfway but not completely and Dan doesn’t want that. Halfway would be the worst thing of all. He says, “No, I can’t.”

“Okay.” Phil runs his hand over Dan’s hair and then down his scarf, tugging at the fringing at the end. “I’m going to let go now Dan, otherwise I won’t be able to and we’ll be here all day, so—” He gently disengages himself. He sighs. Dan sighs. “Say it again, what you said, so I can remember it.”

Dan says, “Rwy’n dy garu di.” He knows the pronunciation is right because the trees taught him, listened to him practice when he should, really, have been working on other things but this seemed very important.

Phil says, “Rwy’n dy garu di to you too, Dan.”

Dan leaves. He can’t look back at him, he can’t. The string between them feels so tight that he can’t believe it’s not real, he can feel the tug of it. His footsteps are slow, feet dragging along the ground. He turns around. Phil hasn’t walked anywhere, he’s still stood in exactly the same spot, like Dan has frozen him there, in his blue scarf and his red jacket, colour clashing horribly but brightly. When he sees Dan looking back he smiles. He’s standing under a street light that sparkles gold through his aura.

Dan thinks that if that’s the last time that he’s going to see him then that’s okay. Well, it’s not, but he can accept this being his last glimpse of Phil. Smiling and bright and wearing his aura wrapped around his neck. Dan smiles and walks away.

***

“He’s a mediator,” he tells PJ on Friday morning, packing his bag for Skomer. He’s not big on weaponry, his family have never used them and never needed to, but his mother had given him a little kit when he’d left, just small things, enough that he could get himself out of harm’s way, if he needed to. “It makes perfect sense.”

PJ, who is on edge and so not in the mood to talk about Phil, says, “So, what’s the plan? You stay there tonight and do it tomorrow?”

“I get settled tonight,” Dan says. “Work out where it is, where the base is, and then I’ll do it tomorrow. When I’m ready. Or, like, able to pretend to be ready.”

“You’ll call me,” PJ says. “As soon as you’re back, you’ll call me. If I don’t hear anything I’m coming over there, I mean it.”

“I’ll call you. On Sunday. I promise.”
PJ says, “Dan. Be careful.”

Dan stops packing and looks at PJ, who is now resolutely not looking at his webcam. The laptop, balanced on Dan’s palm, wobbles. “I will be.”

PJ won’t let him break the connection. They keep it up for so long that they both end up with headaches and aching palms, the thin green line of PJ’s aura slowly draining of colour as he repeats, “Be careful,” and Dan repeats, “I promise.”

***

The guy who runs the boat is called Aneurin (they spend an awkward ten minutes with him patiently saying, “No, A-nye-rin,” and Dan continuing to get it wrong). His accent sounds like he’s singing and Dan catches one word in every four.

Aneurin (who is ginger and freckled and maybe a few years older than Dan) finally says, “I don’t normally leave people out there. Don’t feel good about it.” He gives Dan’s suitcase a wary look. “You don’t have much in the way of equipment. For camping and that.”

“I’m not camping,” Dan says. “There’s the cottage.”

Aneurin says, “Oh. Oh no. No, no, no.”

“No, to the cottage or the fact that I’m not camping?”

“Cottage is locked up,” says Aneurin. “You can’t get in there.”

Dan thinks well, I probably can. “I can make do.”

“What you going there for anyway?” He gives Dan a (not unappreciating) look up and down. Dan is wearing skinny jeans and sneakers, his light jacket and the scarf. Aneurin frowns. “It gets cold there. In the-”

“I’m taking photos of the Manx shearwaters,” Dan says, exactly as prepared.

“I have a spare coat.” Aneurin produces a huge orange puffball monstrosity from the front of the boat. “It’ll be warmer.” When Dan hesitates he wrinkles his freckled nose and says, “Please. I’ll feel better if you have it,” and Dan is sort of powerless to do anything other than put it on.

They’re just about to pull away from the pier when there’s the scrambling noise of paws on wood and then the dog, bouncing straight into the boat and landing at Dan’s feet. Aneurin says, “Oh, helo ci! Bach da!” and pats the dog’s head. “Does he belong to you?”

Dan thinks that he belongs to the dog, not the other way around, but says, “Yes. He does.”

“Then you’ll have company! And you nearly forgot him.”

“I did.” Dan drops his hand down and lets the dog press its nose into his palm. Aneurin shuffles to the front of the boat and starts the engine. “Hello. I should have known that you’d turn up.” The dog wags its tail, smacking against the wooden floor of the boat. “You’re coming with me?”

Dan thinks that he belongs to the dog, not the other way around, but says, “Yes. He does.”

“The dog huffs as if to say well, yes, obviously, and curls up underneath the bench seat that Dan is sitting on, its head resting on Dan’s foot.

The mist around Skomer gets denser the closer they get, so heavy and overcast that Dan can’t see. He has to pull up the hood of the jacket and probably looks like one of the tangerines he used to
magic the bruises out of. He feels breathless, the magic in the fog wraps around his wrists, his ankles (the dog grumbles), tries to push his hood down to tangle itself in his hair. Aneurin, happily whistling to himself, carries on regardless.

Dan has to take steady inhales and exhales, deep in and deep out. The morgen is in the water beside the boat. He can see her mane of hair and her frowning expression. When they hit the crest of a wave she raises out of the water and shakes her head at him.

There’s too much magic in the air. When they reach Skomer he has to hop onto a little pier and when Aneurin reaches out to steady him it flares off little currents that make him grab his hand away and say something that Dan thinks is a joking comment about there being sparks between them, but he misses it. The dog positions itself possessively at Dan’s side so Aneurin can’t say anything further and, awkwardly, says, “Okay, thank you,” feeling almost drunk on the feel of so much, flickering against the fabric of his coat.

Aneurin passes the little bag and then another bag with what looks like an old blanket and a few camping supplies. He says, “more spares. They’ll be useful. There’s a radio in there, if you want, if you need help or anything. Do you know how to use it?”

Dan says, “I can work it out, I’m sure,” because there’s so much magic in the air that he thinks he could power a hundred radios, but Aneurin still insists on gently showing him how to navigate the different channels, which one belongs to the boat station and, “you don’t even really need to say anything just say, come and get me, and I will.”

Dan knows when he’s being flirted with and this would all have been very flattering, in the days before Phil, so he politely listens while the dog, completely unimpressed by this turn of events, runs in continuous circles around his legs, occasionally stopping to bump its head into Dan’s knees.

“Oh,” Aneurin says. “Someone wants to get going.”

“I think he does.” Dan holds up the bag. “Thanks for these. It’s really nice of you.”

“I meant it. Just radio over, any time. I can be here in ten minutes.”

The dog barks and takes off a pace up the path that leads to the cottage. Dan says, “I’ll be fine. It’ll be okay, I should-” he gestures to the dog’s black tail, fast disappearing over the hill.

Aneurin pats his arm, like Mark used to, and Dan almost falters under it. He says “Bye Dan. Take it easy tonight” and it’s Mark’s voice. Dan starts to say something but then Aneurin says, “I’ll be back on Sunday,” back to sing-song, and then steps back into the boat.

Dan tries to run after the dog but it’s impossible. It’s like wading through ankle deep sand, this fog, catching along the grass and rolling in waves down off the hillside to the sea. He has to stop and sit for a second. The dog comes trotting back, all of its previous energy apparently gone. It slumps down beside him with a sigh.

Dan strokes his hand through his fur. “Okay dog. We’re here.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Dan leans back to look down at the dog. “Sorry?”

“What are you **doing**?”

The morgen is at the pier, or on the rocks beside the pier, still shaking her head at him. Dan
manages to walk back down towards her as she starts the cycle again, “What do you think you’re doing? What are you doing?”

“What I’m supposed to do.” Dan lowers himself to the ground, just a little higher than her on the shore below. “You didn’t need to follow me.”

“I did,” she says. “I’ve gotten quite attached to you.”

“Oh.” He’s blindsided by the compliment. She looks at him. “I- thank you.”

“It lives in a cave on the opposite side of the island so that it can’t be seen from shore. It goes collecting from midnight until maybe three o’clock. It could keep them in the cave so that would be the time to try and rescue them, but it would come back. You would need to get rid of it first.”

“I read about how to do that,” Dan tells her. “I know how.”

“It doesn’t like sunlight,” she says, voice already slightly bored. “It needs to breathe, it can’t stay underwater for long. It doesn’t like bright things, fire and such.”

“That’s all useful.” Dan nods. “It really is, thank-

She rises halfway from the water and kisses his cheek. It’s ice cold and leaves an odd consistency behind (like he’s had a starfish stuck to his face) but he appreciates it so he graces her with his most dimple filled smile. She says, “You both be careful. You could be reckless, having him with you, but I knew he wouldn’t let you come alone.”

Dan says, “What?” and looks behind him. There’s just the dog, head tilted to one side. When he turns back the morgen is gone.

The cottage should be easy to break into but his hands are sluggish and slow. The mist is not a good omen. Dan’s charms are not the quickest anyway, but factoring this into the mix means they’ll be far too laboured to cause any damage. It takes a full twenty minutes to break into the simplest, most weatherbeaten, lock he’s ever seen. The dog, next to him, whines.

The cottage is three rooms; all tiny in size, like a doll’s house. Dan is too big for the space, he realises instantly. It’s a kitchen, a bathroom, and a living room/bedroom, all very basically furnished and tidy, and also freezing. There’s a rug on the wooden floor for the dog to sleep on, and four blankets on the sofa, which he adds Aneurin’s offering to. The kitchen has a little stove and a kettle and he unpacks the food from his bag (the food PJ had told him to take. Left to his own devices he would have forgotten).

The windows and door, blessedly, keep the mist out. Dan watches it press against the glass, like handprints, and tells the dog, “Don’t tell anyone, but I may have overestimated my abilities here.”

The dog huffs.

“I didn’t bring you any food. I’ve just got, like, human food, I wasn’t expecting- I didn’t know you were planning on coming along. But we can share? I’m sure I can make you something dog friendly.”

The dog turns around on the spot a few times and then settles itself on the rug.

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They eat dry toast and drink coffee. Dan didn’t know that dogs drink coffee but this one’s eyes
light up at the sight of him boiling the kettle and then laps up two saucers of it. Dan kneels next to it and opens up his bag. There’s a small dagger, two batons, a bow and seven arrows ("Mum,” he’d said, swallowing down all Katniss fantasies. “Are you actually being serious?") and also two hunting knives. “Just for safety,” his mother had said, closing the case and patting the top. “You won’t need them, with your abilities, but—”

It’s getting dark outside, but silvery so. “Hey,” Dan says to the dog. “That’s the colour of my scarf. It’s the colour of my aura, actually. I didn’t ever want to know what colour it was until someone in particular told me and then, well I guess PJ still kind of did, but Phil did, really, and that’s what’s important. I never thought it would be grey, I thought it would be black. Because- the morgen, the girl down on the rocks, well she’s a mermaid technically but they don’t like being called that here, but she said, I have a lot of gloominess in my heart. And I mean, that’s true, I just always thought it would be around my head too.” The dog shuffles over and puts its head in Dan’s lap. “Phil’s aura,” he tells it. “Is the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen. It sometimes hurt my eyes to look at it but only because I didn’t want to not look at it. Or at him. I tried not to look at him but I couldn’t stop.”

He puts on the clementine marshmallow coat and, with the dog at his heels, walks down the path to the other side of the island. Pembroke, from across the sea, is a postcard picture of twinkling lights and boats. He can see Rhiannon’s pink candles, the little dots of violet up the coastal path. His town, his people. Are you brave, Dan, can you do this?

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He gets into the rhythm of walking through the mist, pushing his legs through it like he’s wading through reeds. The dog bounces along at his side, having no such trouble. Dan says, “I’m glad you’re here. But don’t get hurt or anything. Don’t wait around for me. Aneurin will come back for you.” The dog bumps its head into Dan’s knee, as if insulted. “I mean it. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

The mist is almost thicker on the opposite side of the island, as heavy as molasses in the air. The cave that the morgen mentioned is down a path and then across a pebbled beach. The path is cut neatly into the cliffside, with solid steps that are far easier to get down than the one on the mainland. Dan keeps a hold on the dog’s back, keeping them both steady, until they hit pebbles.

He looks forward, hand cupped over his eyes to keep the mist out, and says, “Okay then, what now?” The dog makes an agitated sound in its throat and bumps Dan’s knee again. Dan pats its head and says, “It’s okay, come on.”

They walk across the beach towards the cave. The dog keeps whimpering and sighing before it finally come to a complete stop. Dan nearly trips over it and says, “What? What is it?” because he keeps thinking that the dog can reply to him, somehow. “Have you seen something?”

The dog throws back its head and howls.

There’s the slow rumble of something answering, a howl that takes a long time to arrive, a tornado building into a hurricane that finally hits, echoing right around the beach. Every stone under Dan’s feet tremble. A part of the cliff face moves, as if waking itself up from sleep, but, of course, it’s not the cliff face at all.

Dan kneels and uses one arm to sweep the dog behind him, out of harm’s way, and starts to slowly creep forward. The dog keeps trying to follow him. He keeps one arm thrown out to his side, pushing the dog backwards, the other held in front of him, the first tingling sparks of electricity at his fingertips.
The afanc notices him. Dan regrets the bright orange coat immediately. It watches, lazily, as Dan takes a few more steps, stumbling over rocks, before it heaves itself up onto its legs and just regards Dan for a second. The dog barks, Dan gives it one final shove back, and shoots the first tiny, pathetic little cobweb of electricity into the afanc’s snout.

It’s nowhere near big enough to have caused any pain but the afanc roars with annoyance and slaps at him with a clawed paw, sending him into the side of the cliff face. Dan shouts in shock more than pain, is aware of having cut his arm through Aneurin’s jacket. The dog howls. Dan can’t find purchase on the rocks in his lightweight sneakers and slips, falling down to his knees just as the afanc swats him again, claws slicing through the air where his head would have been.

Dan, teeth chattering, says, “Trydan,” with as much conviction as he can muster and sends a (quite impressive actually) ball of blue electricity out of his palm and into the soft fur of the afanc’s right hind leg. Ridiculous, that the word for electricity should be trydan, like he’s giving himself a pep talk every time. Try, Dan.

The afanc throws its huge head back and shrieks. Dan covers his ears. Where’s the dog, he can’t see the dog. When the afanc swings back to face him he sends another shock, which lands directly on its snout. It doesn’t react, in fact it takes two steps towards Dan.

Dan’s hands hurt. He’s not up to another shock so he pulls one of the hunting knives out of his coat and into his fist. When the afanc breathes its breath ruffles right through his hair. He shudders. It takes another step. He holds his hand up, ready to try, at least. Try, Dan. That’s the main thing. The knife is tiny, lost in the size of his hand, and there’s no possible way that it could-

The afanc shrieks again and spins back around. Its tail, flailing behind, hits Dan square in the side of his face. He has to blink spots from his vision before he sees the dog, teeth sunk deeply into the afanc’s back leg. The afanc has its leg raised, shaking and shaking, like it’s trying to swat away an annoying fly. The dog is trying to cling on but Dan can see what’s about to happen before it actually does.

The afanc roars in annoyance and finally flings the dog aside. Dan watches it hit the rocks, just as he’s pulling himself into a standing position. He raises both his palms and yells, “Trydan!” as loud as he can possibly muster, like he’s a cyhyraeth trying to warn of a shipwreck, and shoots an entire wave of electricity, blue and sparking in the air, straight into the afanc’s face as it’s turning back to him.

It swats at him once more and then, suddenly, heaves itself back into the water. Dan shouts, “No, no,” and falls down the rocks to try and get to it before it disappears. He’s not quick enough. The afanc sinks back into the sea and is gone.

Dan says, “No,” once more and then, remembering, “No, no;” as he skids back up to the dog. He slips over twice, banging his knees and his elbows, and he’s bleeding from his forehead and also on his arm, but the dog, the dog, isn’t moving at all.

Dan says, “No, please;” and then regrets not giving it a name, a name that he could throw his head back and shout. “Come on. You’re fine. I’m here.” When he picks the dog up it whimpers, which is a good sign, surely that’s a good sign. He unzips his coat, one handed, and tries his best to wrap it around both of them at once. “You’re fine. You’re okay. We both are. Come on boy. Just to the cottage, that’s all.”

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He makes it somehow, stumbling and tripping over the mist tendrils at his ankles, and wraps the
dog in Aneurin’s blanket, making it as comfortable as possible on the corner of the sofa. “You shouldn't have come,” he tells it, tears suddenly pricking at his eyes. “Now you’re hurt because of me.”

He goes into the kitchen, still talking, starts to fill the kettle. “You didn’t need to try and help, people shouldn’t help me, I’m useless, I can’t do anything. It should have been be on my own, if I get hurt that it doesn’t matter, if I don’t come back then it doesn’t matter, I don’t-”


Dan drops the kettle and all of its contents onto the kitchen floor. A pool of water starts to spread under his feet. He takes two steps, backwards, so he can see into the living room.

Phil is on the sofa, wrapped in the blanket, a huge bruise already starting to form on his upper arm and across his chest. He waves, pitifully, and says, “This isn’t exactly how I would have wanted you to find out about this.”

Dan says, “You are fucking kidding me.”

“No,” Phil says. “I’m not.”

“You- You.” Dan stops, has to regain his thoughts. “You know everything. You’ve been there, with me. You came back to my house.”

“Because I didn’t want you to be on your own, Dan. It was the only way to-”

“To what?”

“Be with you,” Phil says, sadly. “It was the only way to be with you.”

Dan sits down, right on the floor, then immediately jumps back up. “You’re hurt.”

“I heal quickly,” Phil says. “When I’m injured in that form it doesn’t really stick. I’ll just have a bruise, it’s fine.”

Dan has to stand and take him in, for a second. Phil’s hair is all over the place, as well as the bruise he has three large scratches down his back. Dan can see his back, and the purple smudge traveling across his arm and chest, because Phil isn’t wearing any clothes. All Dan can see is pale skin and freckles, the blanket held demurely around his waist.

(So much, suddenly, makes sense, perfect sense; how quiet and attentive he’d been the night of Angharad because, of course, he’d been the one to pull Dan from the water. He’d come home with him to make sure he wouldn’t be alone. The dog watching from the harbour. Knowing that he’d jumped in. He’d said it’s not your fault, whatever’s making you sad. And also the plants. The neverending pile of whipped cream on top of a hot chocolate. Your tattoo is not a tattoo).

He wants to say why didn’t you say but there was no possible way that Phil could have been more obvious. He says, “I have spare clothes. We can share. Or I can radio to Aneurin and you can go back.”

Phil says, “I don’t want you to radio Aneurin.”

The dog deliberately placing itself between the two of them and then running away, so that Dan would have to follow it and not speak to Aneurin anymore. Dan says, “Oh.”
“I want to stay here with you. And to help you.”

Dan gets him some clothes and stands in the kitchen with the door closed until it’s safe for him to come back out. Phil all in black doesn’t look right. Phil reaching one hand out to Dan looks right. Dan goes willingly and lets himself be held, just for a second, in the curve of Phil’s arm before he steps away.

“You were going to do it by yourself.” Phil is equal parts sad and impressed. “You were going to come here on your own and maybe not come back.”

Dan steps away as far as he can, right to the the furthest wall. “Yes, I was.”

“The things that you used to say about yourself, when I wasn’t me. They used to make me so sad. And the things you said earlier, the things about how you feel about-”

Dan holds his hand up. “Stop. That’s not fair, I didn’t know it was you. You can’t bring that up.”

“Why would you say that you didn’t mean it, if-”

“You asked,” Dan says. “About the curse mark. You asked what it meant.”

“A family thing. You said it wasn’t personal to you.”

Dan, very firmly, says, “Phil, I’m going to tell you something and let me just say it, don’t react to it or comment on it or even show me that you’ve listened to it, okay? I’m not entirely sure what the rules are, but you can’t- maybe you could face away from me, could you do that? And just say something completely unrelated when you turn back around. Would that be okay?”

His voice had started firm but dissolved into pleading. Phil’s eyes are wide. “That would be okay.” He twists himself around on the sofa to face the wall.

“I don’t fully understand the rules, like I said, so there’s stuff I’m going to leave out but, basically, my, uh, great-great-great-grandfather majorly pissed off a witch, a really powerful one, and she cursed us, all of the male Howells. And it’s a curse with, like, rules, so when every guy in my family turns eleven we have to write down the details of our- of the person that you would- someone you would instantly love. Like, your perfect person. You have to write down how they would look and their personality and it has to be genuine, otherwise they’ll know and awful things will happen. And we have to write the list and throw in a fire and when you do that the mark appears, and it’s a trick, really, a horrible awful trick, because the curse is that, if you meet that person, that you can’t- you can’t be with them, you can’t, well they say pursue, but I always thought that sounded weird but you can’t. You just can’t. Because if you do then you both die and I wouldn’t really mind but I couldn’t cope with that for……… the person. It would break my heart and it’s already sorta fragile, so. Not many of us actually meet their person though. But, that’s it, that’s the curse. The Howell curse. Doomed to loneliness and relationships that aren’t enough, forever. That’s me.”

Phil stays facing the wall. His aura is suddenly still, like it’s not sure what mood it’s in, not entirely. The blue glows.

Dan says, “You can turn back around now.”

When Phil does his eyes are bright with a wetness that he instantly blinks away. He says, “That jacket looks awful on you.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”
“Well, no, not with him making eyes at you and being all oooo, radio over anytime and I’ll come and get you.” Phil wipes under both his eyes. “What’s the plan? What do we do?”

“The morgen says that it doesn’t like sunlight. Which works out pretty well.”

“It does.”

“My plan was to trap it. It has to come up to breathe so if I, if we, can trap it underwater then it’ll drown and also I’m a coward and I don’t want to actually-” He mimes a tiny stabbing motion, “-actually kill it.”

“You think the people are all still here? Alive?”

Delyth, Gwyn, Angharad, Jack, Rhiannon, Ffion and Mark. Dan knows that it’s unlikely for the first two; Delyth alone has been missing for a month, but maybe. “I hope so. The morgen kept saying that it was gathering, not killing, and if they’re anywhere then they’re going to be in the cave, but we have to get rid of it first.”

“And you were going to do all of that by yourself.” Phil smiles, but it’s a weak imitation of the one Dan usually craves.

“That was the original plan.”

“I guess that we’re going to give A-nye-rin a bit of a surprise when he comes back on Sunday then.”

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Phil changes back into the dog to sleep. He says it’s easier and he won’t take up so much room, Dan can have the sofa and all the blankets, it’s no problem. Dan leaves the room while he does it and returns to the dog, curled up on the rug, tail touching his nose. Dan throws one of the spare blankets over him anyway.

“This is weird now,” he tells the dog. Phil. The dog. “With the whole knowing. But, thank you. For coming home with me after Angharad. It- I wanted you to, anyway, and just. It meant a lot. That’s all.” The dog looks up at him with sad eyes that aren’t three colours. “I’m just- I’m going to pet your head now.” He does so. The dog wags its tail. Dan says, “Okay, that was weird. See you in the morning, Phil.”

He doesn’t sleep very well. The wind howling around the cottage isn’t normal wind, it catches against the doors and the windows. He keeps thinking that he can hear the afanc, heaving itself in and out of the water. There could be an eighth person by now, another one he missed. The sofa is uncomfortable. He rolls to bury his face into a cushion and pulls the blanket up over his head.

Phil, from the floor, whispers, “Dan. Don’t tell me if you’re awake or not. I know that you said not to say that I’d listened but, we used to have something like that too, in my family. But, it’s nicer than yours. It’s not a curse or anything it’s just a tradition. We do it on our eighteenth birthday, as part of the celebrations, and we have to write a list, like you did, but I mean, I didn’t burn it. It didn’t turn into a curse mark on my arm. We plant them instead, with just plain seeds that could become anything, and mine took a little while to grow but when it did it was this beautiful cherry blossom tree. It’s in my parents’ garden and it’s the only cherry blossom we’ve ever had, ever, so everyone said that the person on my list must be unique. Except we have to not let that person go if we find them and we have to look after them and- that’s just unfair, isn’t it? That yours says to stay away from your person and mine is like, just love them and make sure they’re okay, always. The
whole thing’s unfair, isn’t it?”

Dan is crying. As always, it surprises him. He’s a sudden crier, from nothing to huge never-ending tears in two seconds. He covers his mouth so Phil won’t hear him but moves the blanket enough that Phil must realise he’s awake.

Phil says, “And I looked up what rwy’n dy garu di meant in English,” and he sounds like he might be crying too (don’t cry, Dan thinks. Please please don’t cry). “You probably knew that I would.”

Dan nods, half to himself, half so Phil can see it, if he’s facing the right way.

A few moments pass, Phil’s breathes change from the exhales of someone trying to hide sobs and into the gentle rumbling of a dog snoring.

Rwy’n dy garu di means I love you. The elm tree, listening to him practice, had actually leant through the open window and patted a leafy twig to Dan’s shoulder, probably because they hadn’t heard anyone say it in such a sad way before.

Dan, on the sofa, whispers it again to Phil, asleep on the mat, when they should, they should, be both on the sofa together, and sighs.

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In the morning they eat more dry toast and drink too strong coffee, in between changing in separate rooms and splashing cold water over their faces to dry and wake up. Dan moves around Phil in a box-step, like they’re Victoria ladies at a dance and can’t go near each other without a chaperone except if he goes near Phil he’s likely to just fist his hand into his own black hoodie and say what did your list say, please tell me, I have to know.

Phil, for his part, is bumping into all the furniture (there’s not that much of it and it’s very spaced out) in attempt to keep close to Dan. It’s like a comedy sketch only with no one laughing. Phil hits his shin on the table and says, “You want to start straight away?”

“There’s no point,” Dan says. “It only ever comes out in the night-time.”

They decide to go walking, to try and decide on the best route. The beach yesterday had been too enclosed, the afanc too large, pinning them into a tiny space. Phil wears the orange jacket while Dan returns to his usual too-light coat and the scarf. The Scarf, like it needs capitalisation. Phil touches his hand to it. “When you’re happy,” he says. “There’s so much silver that it’s like the Milky Way.”

If that’s the case then he probably looks like the entire solar system whenever he’s around Phil. “Yours looks like the sun hitting the ocean. I told you, or Dog-You, yesterday.”

When they open the front door Phil shudders and says, “Have you ever seen magic like this?” as the curls of fog start to creep in. “I used to see it, from the tearooms, but it’s so much worse when you’re actually here.”

The mist likes Dan more than Phil, for some reason. It’s constantly twining itself into his hair, twirling bracelets around his wrists. It nudges and pulls at Phil but with no real interest. Phil tries to bat it away, wafting his hands through the air, but with no effect.

“It’s fine,” Dan says, walking with all the elegance of someone wading through treacle. “It doesn’t bother me that much.”
“I don’t like it.” Phil swoops a hand through the fog, watches it part and reset. “It makes me uneasy.”

Yesterday’s beach is the only area where they can walk down to sea level. Phil instantly slips and has to hold onto the back of Dan’s coat as they descend. “You’re not as clumsy when you’re a dog,” Dan tells him, trying to keep them both steady.

“My parents always said that,” Phil replies. “I’ve been able to change since I was a kid. We all can, my whole family, but I’m the only one who changes into a dog. I used to trip over and break things all the time, my mother used to actually ask me to change sometimes.”

“My brother can freeze time. My father can talk to animals. My mother can make things, beautiful things, with magic and I— I can’t do very much really.”

“You can do the pfftttt thing.” Phil says. “The electricity.”

“The one last night was a fluke. And I think it’s only because you were hurt. I normally only use it for the internet.”

They reach the pebbles. Phil stands for a second to gain his balance. “What did you do here? Day after day?”

“Chased faeries.” Dan looks out to the sea. “Or, one faerie, as it turns out. Talked to morgens. Didn’t talk to many other people except Louise and Mark. And then, there was you.”

“Then there was me.” Phil follows his gaze. “I was mostly healing things, saving pets, that sort of thing. Putting protection spells around the farm animals so the foxes wouldn’t get to them. And, um, following you around. A bit.”

“It was more than a bit.” Dan points to the right. “There. That must be the cave. It’s huge.”

It’s further out. The only way to get there would be to swim, it’s set too far apart from the beach, but it has to be the place. It’s the right size, the right location, from about where the afanc had appeared yesterday. Phil nods. “But we’d have to swim.”

“It’s not far.” Dan steps closer to it. There’s another, shallower cave just beyond it. “We could trap it in there and then come back to this one for everyone. It would work. We could get it to the cave and you could blind it, with the sun, it hates the sun, and I could shock it, and—”

“But how would we get it there?” Phil says.

“I could help,” says the morgen.

Phil jumps and only just manages to keep himself standing upright. Dan exclaims, “Stop doing that.”

She’s sat on the furthest row of rocks, half in the sea and half out, hair clouded around her face. She smiles at Dan. “I like making you jump. I see you found your boy.”

Phil flushes. Dan says, “I thought that you wouldn’t come back.”

“I thought about you,” she says, in her usual bored way. “All night. And this morning. The two of you out here trying to take that on. I don’t participate in fights but I can certainly help you outswim it.”
“You could take us there?”

“I can. It’s the right choice, there’s lots of smaller lagoons inside, you’d only need to drop a rock or two.”

“It sounds easy when you say it.” Dan looks down at her. She flips her hair over one shoulder and looks back. “Thank you. For doing that. I don’t-”

“Like I said, I’m attached to you. We all are. You’re such a strange little thing.”

“Thanks?”

“Not so gloomy when he’s around though?” She winks and then squawks her seagull laugh. Dan has sort of missed it.

“No,” he says. “Not really.”

***

He gives Phil one of the hunting knives and one of the batons. Phil looks wide eyed at the bow and arrow, to which Dan says, “I had lessons, once. Ages ago. I’ll take them but it’s a last resort.”

“I’ve never been in a fight.” Phil holds the knife awkwardly, fingers too close to the blade. “I’ll just try and follow what you’re doing and-”

“You could stay here,” Dan says, half-hoping. “Just wait for me and have the kettle boiled or something, I’ll feel better if-”

Phil looks insulted. “Absolutely not. Tell me what you need me to do.”

“The morgen will take you there first,” Dan says. Phil starts to protest. “I said first, so you’re ready. She says there’s a little place to stand, you need to go there. I’m going to get it to chase me and then she’ll bring me over. As soon as it comes in then I want you to be the brightest sun you’ve ever been, I want it to be blinding. It doesn’t like that. It’ll be confused or dazzled or whatever and I’m going to get it to one of the lagoons and then shock it or drop something on its head, and then we go back to the main cave. Wear the orange coat so I don’t lose sight of you.”

“You wear it so I won’t lose sight of you.”

Dan says, “Please, Phil.”

Phil wears the orange coat. There’s a huge slash in the sleeve now, which Dan is pretty sure he won’t be able to explain. He helps Phil hide the knife and baton in the inside pockets, for absolute emergencies only, and when he leans back Phil is looking at him very intently. He says, “Dan. I’ve been thinking, with this, with your- is it just, like, on the mouth kissing that isn’t allowed? Because I’ve, we’ve, you know, elsewhere, and I’m not dead, you’re not dead, so I-”

“What are you getting at?”

Phil says, “Can I kiss you? Just for now. Because we’re about to go and fight a huge mythical beast and everything. Can I?”

Dan says, “Only if I can-”

“You can. You can whatever you want.”
Dan kisses Phil’s chin. Phil kisses Dan’s eyebrow, which is an odd first choice that makes Dan laugh so Phil kisses his dimple too. Dan kisses the beauty mark on Phil’s cheek. Phil runs his mouth along Dan’s jaw. Dan sighs and kisses Phil’s hand, palm and then each knuckle. Phil sighs right back and touches his lips, just the merest hint of a touch, like mist tracing over his skin, to Dan’s mouth.

Dan says, “We should-”

“I don’t-

“Me neither. But we should.”

***

The night is silver, as clear as the surface of a pebble. The little beach, as they look down on it from above, looks incredibly peaceful. Phil holds onto the sleeve of Dan’s jacket and tugs as they both notice the afanc circling around the cove, the curve of its back just visible above the water.

“Is it waiting for us to come back?” Phil says. “Why would it do that?”

“Finish things off?” Dan guesses from past experience.

Phil’s grip on his sleeve gets tighter as they walk down the path and hit the stones. The morgen, reclining on some of the higher rocks, gives them a lethargic wave. “I changed my mind,” Phil says. “I want to stay with you. Or I want you to stay with me.”

Dan says, “Sure, we can go and live in the cottage together forever and ignore this whole thing.”

He only realises that he’s said it aloud when Phil exhales, “Could we?” on a whisper.

Dan scuffs his knuckles against Phil’s chin. “We can’t. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“This,” the morgen says, “Is all very lovely and star-crossed but forgive me for saying that it might be a good idea to start now.”

Dan says, “Right.” She holds her hand out to Phil. “Be careful with him.” She scoffs. “I mean it, you don’t need to be careful with me but, just, be really extra careful with him.”

Phil says, “Dan,” in a tone that Dan can’t place. He pushes Dan’s curls out of the way and kisses Dan’s forehead, which is unfair, it’s so unfair, because it makes Dan lean forward and, probably, in another life Phil would just duck his head and-

The morgen grabs Phil’s hand. “Now.”

“I meant what I said,” Dan tells her.

“I’ll be back for you,” she says. “Be here.”

Dan has to turn away so he doesn’t see them leave, just hears the crash of them entering the water. The afanc, across the bay, raises its head in interest.

Dan takes two solid steps towards it and waves. The afanc tilts down to look at him, in an oddly canine way, then appears to recognise him. It shifts itself forward out of the water, the horrible skittering sound of its claws on the rocks. Dan backs away, slowly, the afanc moves towards him, slowly and not slowly, each great heave of its body moving closer to Dan.
Dan says, “Golau,” as evenly as he can muster and raises both his hands. He manages a beam that’s about the power of a street light, straight into the afanc’s eyes. It doesn’t shriek in pain but just looks in some discomfort, it’s movements towards Dan become a little staggered. Dan says, “Golau,” again and the light turns the tiniest bit brighter. The afanc blinks and shakes its head from side to side, changes the angle to try and approach Dan from the side. Dan can’t do it a third time, his palms hurt and he needs to save that energy for later. He unsheathes one arrow and fires. It hits the afanc, uselessly, side rather than point on, and falls down onto the beach.

The afanc sees the arrow rather than feels it, and gives Dan a disgruntled look. He holds his hands up again but the light is getting steadily dimmer. He walks backwards, arms still outstretched like he’s trying to calm down a spooked horse, trying to get back to the spot where the morgen had been. The afanc starts to pick up speed.

“Don’t fall on me,” the morgen says, propped out of the water on her elbows. “Oh dear, you haven’t been doing very well, have you?”

The afanc breaks into a run, shaking the ground beneath them and spraying pebbles and rocks everywhere with each stomp of its foot.

“Let’s just go, please, we can analyse everything later.” Dan spins and inelegantly jumps in beside her. “He’s there? You got him there?”

She loops one arm around his waist, pulling him securely to her side. “He’s fine. Didn’t stop talking about you for the whole time. He’s ready. Are you a good swimmer?”

Dan has a memory of a pathetic overarm stroke, trying to get to Angharad. “Sometimes.”

“Hold your breath.” Her tone is nonchalant, so much so that he shouts in surprise when she turns herself to re-enter the water and he realises that the afanc is right there. The hot gust of its breath blows his hair right off his face. “Calm down, we’ll outswim him.”

Dan takes a gulp of air before she pushes off the rocks and they’re underwater. He closes his eyes. She’s fast, for someone so usually lethargic. He wraps one free arm around her waist and feels the seaweed texture of her hair tangle around his fingers. At this speed the water is an oppressive weight on his shoulders, his legs flailing around with no purchase, his ears are roaring and he needs to breathe, just another gasp of-

They break the surface. Dan is wheezing and choking. The morgen, still holding him afloat, looks at him, almost concerned. “It’ll be here soon. You need to breathe.”

“I’m fine.” He kicks and kicks, keeping himself above water. “Phil, are you-”

Phil, from above, a flame in the awful orange coat, says, “I’m fine. Are you-”

“I’m good.” The morgen lets him go. “You’re ready?”

Phil has his hands cupped in front of him, like he’s cradling something precious, frowning in complete concentration. “I’m ready.”

The morgen says, “If you both have this under control I should-”

The afanc enters with a smash of movement that causes a half tidal wave, as though it’s thrown all of the doors open at once and also smashed all the windows. Dan, who had barely got into treading water, is propelled backwards. Only the morgen’s hand stops him from hitting the rock face. She sighs, like this is a minor inconvenience, “I suppose I’m involved now.”
Dan shouts, “Phil!”, and it comes out in a gurgle, full of the ocean, but Phil understands, nods resolutely and opens his hands.

The sun is blinding. It’s Phil’s aura turned up to one hundred, it could keep an entire rainforest of plants alive, it’s glowing and warm and sends dappling shapes where it hits the sea, bouncing off all the tiny stones in the walls and sparkling. Dan thinks that, if he reached up, he could touch it, the solid gold of it, grab huge handfuls and take it home to look at any time that he feels too dark. The morgen, beside him, says, “Goodness.”

The afanc shrieks like nothing Dan has ever heard. The sound rattles right into his back teeth. Phil raises his hands and angles the beam directly at it. It screams. Dan shouts, “To the right, Phil,” and he obediently turns, making the afanc back away to the left, where the lagoons are.

Dan follows it, overarm to overarm, the morgen instantly disappearing underwater. There are a huge number of stalactites in the cave ceiling; massive icicle shaped things with heavy points. Some of them look like sword blades. They’d be perfect. They’d also be too heavy for Dan to move. The afanc tries to step back and gets a dash of brightness right into its eyes. It howls. Phil, sounded panicked, shouts, “Dan! I can’t see you.”

“I’m here,” he yells back. “I’m here.”

The afanc gives him a considering look, as if thinking oh hello, well you’re closer, and gives him an almost careless push with its paw. The push throws Dan right into the wall, he feels the sharp stab of every stone on his back. The afanc, seeming to enjoy this, pushes him again. This time one of the claws catches on Dan’s cheek and instantly splits the skin. Dan gasps with pain, a noise that echoes, and suddenly the full beam of the sun is back on them.

Phil yells, “Dan!” at the same time as the morgen, laboriously and right next to his ear, says, “Dan. You need to get a move on.”

The afanc is thrashing and spinning in the water, agitated and with nowhere to go. It makes the water choppy and creates a current that’s impossible for Dan to swim against. He can just about keep himself afloat. He says, “I need- The things in the ceiling, I need to try and-”

“I volunteer!” says the faerie.

Dan looks at it, startled. It’s hovering quite high up, looking down at the water with distaste, but, with the sunlight hitting its wings and wisps of hair, it’s never looked more like an actual Disney fairy to him. Tinkerbell, granting wishes in a little ball of light. Dan says, “You could-”

“I volunteer!” says the faerie.

Phil, from across the cave, makes an exasperated noise, full of pain and impatience, and says, “Dan, I can’t-”

The sun goes out, with as little ceremony as someone pulling a shade closed. The afanc, honestly, squeaks but it’s the most terrifying squeak Dan has ever heard. Full of triumph. It smacks Dan, once, on the upside of his head, then again on the way back down. Above, the faerie is chipping at rock. Dan can hear it, just above the ringing in his ears. The morgen, actually with some urgency,
shouts, “Quickly!” The faerie says something in return, something Dan doesn’t catch. He tries to push himself closer to the rock, holds his hand out and yells, “Trydan,” as loud as possible, saltwater in every letter, but it’s a small shock. He’s hurt. He’s bleeding, there’s blood and ocean on his face.

The afanc makes a considering huff sound, enough to show that it felt the shock and also to let him know exactly what it thought of it. Its tail wraps around Dan’s ankle and he has a moment to think well, this is probably it, Dan, you and your half thought through plans, before someone grabs onto his sleeve and stops him from being pulled under.

It’s Phil. Of course it’s Phil. Dan says, “I told you to stay on the rock-”

Phil isn’t a strong swimmer, Dan can tell. The morgen is having to keep him on balance. “Well, I didn’t listen.”

“You two,” the morgen says. “You pick the worst times to have these conversations.”

“Take him out,” Dan tells her. “Take him back to the beach. I-”

The afanc pulls once. Dan slips from Phil’s grip and under the water, is pulled for what seems like yards, down and down, until it suddenly lets go. He kicks his way back to where Phil’s hand grabs, painfully, on his collar, and pulls him back to the surface. He gasps. Phil, face pale, says, “You’re just the-”

Dan never gets to hear what he just is. The faerie makes a little whooping noise of delight as the morgen observes, drily, “Oh, that might be too many,” and an entire caves worth, an entire sky, of stalactites collapse from the ceiling. The afanc screams. Dan, as eloquent as always, says, “Fuck,” and does what he would always want to do with his last movement, his last conscious act, and turns to throw himself over Phil, to shield him from the stones and rock that start peppering Dan’s back and head.

The afanc gets hit the most, takes four sword blades right to its forehead and collapses with a sigh. It hits the water with such force that it sets off another wave, then another, a huge whirlpool of waves that none of them, not even the morgen, are able to kick against. Dan loses his grip on Phil’s coat, then his grip on Phil, and then, finally, with the gentleness of going to sleep after an exhausting day, his grip on consciousness.

***

Black Hair - Check
Eyes that are three colours - Check
Peaceful - Check
Kind - Check
Wears bright clothes and has a bright aura too - Check
Patient - Check
Cares about me - Check
Likes me exactly the way I am - Check

“It’s impossible,” his mother says, spinning neverending blue thread from her fingers. “There’s a way to break it but it’s impossible. But you didn’t ask, did you? You just heard impossible and just gave up.”

Dan is wearing a jacket the colour of his aura, silver and sparkling, with black lapels. They’re in his parents’ living room. Colin is curled up on his lap. His mother is making a hundred blue
scarves, piles and piles of the ocean, neatly folded at her side. “Because it’s impossible. What’s the point in asking?”

“It’s a conundrum, Dan. You should want to solve it, where’s the effort?”

“You can’t solve conundrums, they’re not supposed to be solved.”

“Do you know,” his mother says. “I tried to give you a scarf and gloves twenty-three times? As soon as you were old enough. All that talk about how you thought your aura was black because you’re so sad and of course it was black and no one could ever tell you otherwise. Every birthday I’d try and show you, no Dan, here’s your aura. Look at how beautiful it is, look at how beautiful you are, and you always gave it back, unopened. But his you take first time. You wear it around your neck. You’re sad when it’s lost and he makes you another one. He gave you it without telling you what is was but he was showing you. He was telling you how wonderful you are. I’ve never met him and I already like him.”

“You can’t meet him,” Dan says. “After this I’m never going to see him again, I’m moving away. I’ll move back.”

“Or I could tell you what the cure is.”

“The unsolvable impossible conundrum of a cure. Great. This isn’t even real, this is a dream because I got knocked out, there probably is no cure.”

“The surroundings might be a dream, but I’m real.” She smiles at him. “We’re very proud of you and what you did tonight.”

Dan looks down into Colin’s adoring face. “Thanks Mum.”

“The cure,” she says. “Do you want to hear it?”

“No. I couldn’t deal with the hope of it. If I know what it is then I’ll just get obsessed with trying to make it happen and that’s no way to carry on. I’m fine just being lonely and knowing that he exists and he liked me a bit. A lot.”

“It’s not a cure that you can influence, Dan. It’s something that has to have already happened.”

“Well, that’s worse.” Dan looks at her. She’s stopped knitting. “Fine, tell me.”

“They say it’s impossible but it’s really just more unlikely, or a coincidence that could probably never happen.”

“Just tell me.”

She leans forward. “They have to have wished for you too.”

Dan says, “What?” The blue scarfs are suddenly all around him, dazzling, like he’s wrapped himself up in Phil’s aura. “What?”

Colin, on his lap, looks up and says, with Phil’s voice, “Dan, wake up.”

“That- I mean, that can’t have happened. How do I even-”

“Please wake up.”

“It could,” his mother says. “Why would it be so strange for someone to have wished for you?”
“Dan, please.”

“Because,” Dan says. “Why would he?”

His mother cups his face in her hand. “Wake up sweetheart.”

***

Phil says, “Dan!” and his voice is hoarse, as though he’s cried an entire ocean’s worth of tears. His hair is wet and curling, and he’s still in the terrible orange coat, but they’re back on the beach and Dan, reaching his hands up to pat at Phil’s face and chest, manages to satisfy himself that Phil is okay.

He asks anyway though. “Are you okay? You’re not hurt?”

“Me?” Phil says. “Am I okay? I thought you’d died. She said you hadn’t but I thought you had, I thought you.” he kisses Dan, one hand cupped at the back of Dan’s head. He tastes like salt and his hands are still warm. When he breaks away he pushes his nose against Dan’s cheek, presses their foreheads together. “I’m sorry. I just thought I’d lost you. Sooner than I expected.”

Dan’s fingers somehow are in Phil’s tangled hair. He says, “You haven’t.” He brushes their noses together. Phil smiles. “Did it work?”

“It worked. The faerie brought down the entire ceiling, it says sorry by the way, it rhymed something but I can’t remember what it was, but, anyway, half of everything landed right on the afanc, knocked it out cold and then just sort of settled there. It can’t break out. Also, a quarter of it landed on you, you idiot, you didn’t need to try and save me.”


“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

Phil blinks. His aura flutters and shines. “I thought we weren’t allowed to say that in English.”

“There’s some things I need to work out about that.” Phil raises his eyebrows, hopefully rather than expectantly. “But, later. We need to-”

Phil frowns and then suddenly remembers. “Oh, right! Of course. Are you- Can you get up?”

Dan does, but with great difficulty. His back hurts, his head definitely hurts, like it feels like it’s going to split open. There’s dried blood all down the side of his face and his neck. The morgen, when she sees him, says, “Oh dear,” flatly.

“You brought us back?”

“Both of you at once. One of you was easier to deal with, one of you kept crying and kicking, it wasn’t the easiest journey.” She looks at Phil. Phil flushes. “The trip to the cave will be easier now you’re both conscious.”

It’s not easier. Phil still kicks and accidentally knots his hand right into her hair. The morgen gently deposits Dan onto the rocks at the cave’s entrance, and drops Phil from under her arm so that he stumbles onto his knees. “I’ll wait,” she says. “For all of you.”

The cave is higher, Dan can’t even see the ceiling of it, but it’s smaller. He limps forward and
looks. There are cracks throughout, where the light creeps in, starlight that gently passes through and reflects in the water below. It’s calming and Dan wants to say to Phil that he’ll just sit down for a second, the smallest second, just to rest and-

“DAN!”

Dan says, “Mark?”

There are pods, set in the walls. Little acorn shapes with what looks like a glass front. There are seven. Mark, in one, still in his running gear, hits his hand against the transparent surface and repeats, “DAN.”

Dan says, “Mark,” and limps over. “Are you okay?”

Mark, because he’s just that sort of person, says, “Are you okay? You look terrible.”

Dan presses his hand to the “glass”. It’s soft and moves under his hand.

“You can’t push through it,” Mark says. “I tried. I think you have to be magic or something.”

Dan leans forward. Mark, inside, leans forward expectantly. “Mark, I have to tell you something.”

Mark nods. “I am magic.” A burst of electricity is enough to make the whole weird thing pop, like a bubble.

Mark steps out and says, “Huh,” before slinging Dan into a hug that will probably cause more bruising. He doesn’t even mind. Mark says, “Good job bud.”


Mark claps his hand to Dan’s shoulder. “Then get rescuing. Oh hey, there’s a dog here!” Dan turns around. The dog, Phil, he really needs to work out how to refer to him now, is sat neatly at the entrance. “Is he yours? Is that the dog you were looking for weeks ago?”

Dan says, “Yep, he’s mine.”

Twenty minutes later, Aneurin is pulling up outside the cave, confusion all over his face as he takes in Dan (bleeding from re-opened cuts and holding his side), Mark (in shorts and a too tight vest, waving wildly), Delyth Evans (wearing the orange jacket), Gwyn Rhys (still pristine in his smart choir jacket), Jack Morgan (looking like he’s not entirely sure what’s happened), Rhiannon and Ffion with their arms around each other, and Angharad Williams, with her pyjamas and waterfall plait, stood right at Dan’s side. He has one hand resting lightly on her head, she has one hand on the head of the dog, sat next to her.

Aneurin says, “What the-”

“I can’t explain,” Dan says. “I’m not going to try.”

Ffion, bless her, instantly says, “We were lost and he found us,” which wasn’t really what she was supposed to say (Dan had said just don’t say anything, it’s easier), but is appreciated anyway.

“You can give us a lift home, right?” Delyth says, she’s the tear in my heart still bright on her wrist, even if her hair is faded.

“I-” Aneurin steps back to take them all in again. “Of course. Of course I will.”

In the boat, Angharad leans her head on Dan’s shoulder and says, “We can play piano together,
when I’m home if you want,” and he cries, as always a sudden explosion of sobs that makes the
dog in his lap turn around and start trying to lick the tears from his face.

“Hey,” Mark says. “Don’t cry, you saved us all.”

Everyone nods. Jack, who hasn’t said a word since they left, says, “We won’t tell anyone. You can
trust us. All of us. No one will know. We’ll just say that we were on Skomer and you just happened
to find us.”

“We can do that,” Gwyn pipes up. “I’m a great liar.”

Dan makes a sound which he means to be thank you and cries. When they get to the shore no one
sees or hears the cyhyraeth above except him and the dog. He carries Angharad, now asleep, off
the boat and listens to them say perygl dros. Danger over. Angharad’s parents are there, everyone’s
families and friends are there, Aneurin having radioed ahead and Dan passes Angharad over to her
weeping mother when he’s still weeping himself.

Louise is waiting for Mark. When she sees him she half throws herself into his arms and Dan
ducks back into the crowd. He sees Mark looking around and hears him say, “He was just here, he
was just-.” Louise must say who because he then says, “Oh, no one. I just thought I saw-”

Dan limps up the coastal path, the dog at his side pushing its nose into his hand with every slow
step. By the time everyone in the crowd stops greeting their families and actively searches for him,
he’s disappeared right over the top of the hill.

The trees, all the way home, lean over and whisper da iawn over and over, a steady stream of well
done, well done, and the elm outside his house stoops as far as it can go and says, in halting
English, like bark snapping, “Good work Daniel.”

That, somehow, makes him cry more than anything else.

***

Dan takes out his medical kit and, wincing the entire time, unzips his jacket and takes off his
sweater. His entire chest and back are purple now. He can’t tell where one bruise ends and the
other begins. The dog, at his feet, whimpers at the sight of it.

The cuts across his forehead and on the side of his face don’t seem that deep but he doesn’t feel up
to cleaning them himself, so he says, “Phil. You can change back. Just go in my room, pick
whatever clothes you want.”

The dog obediently shuffles off and, a few minutes later, Phil shuffles back, wearing grey pyjama
bottoms and the only bright piece of clothing that Dan owns (a pink sweater that says Festive AF
on it. Of course). He rubs his thumbs under Dan’s eyes and says, “Don’t cry. You saved them.
Everyone. They’re all fine.”

“I know.” Dan sags under the touch. “I know. It’s just, I’m really tired. I’ve been so tired and now-
they’re fine. I did it.”

“You did it,” Phil agrees. He opens the kit and starts pulling out pieces of cotton wool and
antiseptic gel.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Phil smiles and shakes his head. “Why did you leave?”
‘I don’t want the attention,’ Dan says. ‘That’s not what- fuck-’ Phil presses one of the antiseptic covered pads to his forehead. ‘That’s not why I do it, that’s not the point. I told them all that. I just want-’

“To leave,” Phil finishes. “You’re going to leave.”

He continues wiping antiseptic across the cuts. Dan says, “I heard you. In the cottage. What you said about your family and the cherry blossom tree.” Phil doesn’t say anything but his hand falters slightly, then continues. “And- I’m going to ask you to do something. I’m going to do it too but, I just need to know. And you deserve to know, so- we’re going to do it, before you leave.”

Phil runs the gel right down the longest cut on the curve of Dan’s neck and says, “You don’t want me to stay?”

Dan nods his head. “No, you can’t.”

***

“What I want,” Dan says, when he’s safely wrapped up in his Manchester hoodie and propped up in bed on a million pillows because Phil had fussed, oh, so much, “Is just this one thing. And it might mean something, or it might mean nothing, and if it means nothing then we’ll never talk about it again.”

Phil, holding two pieces of paper and two pens, says, “Okay.”

“Write down who you wished for.” Phil takes a sharp intake of breath. “When you were eighteen. Write it all down. I’ll write down who I wished for when I was eleven and we’ll swap them, okay? And read it tomorrow or whenever and we’ll just- we’ll just know. Whichever way.”

“Dan, I think we already know.”

“It’s important,” Dan says. “Please.”

They both write. Dan props the paper on his knees and tries to make his writing legible. Phil sits at the little white dressing table and, when he’s done, folds his list into a neat little square. Dan says, “Hey, we both did that really quickly,” as he’s folding his, and Phil says, “I memorised it. I’ve had it memorised for twelve years,” and Dan thinks please please please have wished for me please because he’ll not sure what he’ll do if Phil hasn’t.

“You want me to wait to read this?” Phil says, standing up. “Because I’m not going to be able to. I’m literally going to read it as soon as I’m out of the door.”

Dan is honestly going to do the same. “You can read it whenever you want, Phil.”

“If,” Phil stops and starts over. “If we- If I did or you didn’t or if- Is it just so that we’ll know? Despite all the curses and the potential death and everything, I’ll just know and you’ll just know. And that’ll be enough?”

Dan says, “Please, Phil.”

Phil says, “Okay. But I’m going to read it outside. I’ll be reading it as soon as the door closes, okay? That’s what I’ll be doing.”

He walks closer to the bed, tries to find a spot on Dan’s face with no cuts, bruises or antiseptic gel, and finds one right in the top left of his forehead. He presses a finger to his mouth and presses his
finger there. “Get some sleep Dan.”

Dan is already unfolding the letter as Phil is walking down the stairs, already has it open when he hears Phil close the front door and lock it, and has already felt his stupid broken heart start fluttering right as Phil posts the keys back through the letterbox.

***

Brown hair - wavy sometimes curly but I’m the only one who sees it like that
Brown eyes
Creative, wants to make a difference
Loud sometimes
Kind, wants to help people
Wears dark clothes and has an aura like the night sky
Soft, but tries to hide it. Doesn’t hide it around me
Sad, not like overly sad, but sad in a way that I can help with
Cares about me
Likes me exactly the way I am

Dan says, “Oh,” and heaves himself out of bed. His entire body hurts but his heart, his heart, does not. He looks down at his wrist. The mark is gone. He can’t remember when he last even looked at it but it’s not there. He limps downstairs and fumbles with the lock before giving up and charming the thing open.

Phil is still stood on the doorstep. When he sees Dan he smiles. His aura is dazzling. He still has Dan’s list in his hand.

Dan waves his piece of paper aloft. “This is me.”

Phil holds his up. “This is me.”

“You wished for me,” Dan says. “You wished for me.”

“For you. Exactly as you are.”

Dan kisses him. It’s too soft, when he wants it to be desperate and pleading and after fifteen years of waiting, but he can only make it what it is - soft and gasping and twining his fingers into Phil’s sweater, his sweater, and pulling him into the house. Phil trips on the step because, of course he does, and he says, into Dan’s mouth, “Dan, I’m not complaining, okay, but what about the-”

“We wished for each other.” The words are said into Phil’s neck, so he can feel and hear them at the same time. “That cures it. My mother said there was a way but it was impossible and I think she meant that no one wishes for each other, ever, but we did.” He pulls his sleeve up, holds his empty wrist to Phil’s face. “Look, it’s gone.”

Phil presses his mouth to the space where the mark had been and says, “I knew it was you the second I saw you and you dropped your scarf and said you were having a crisis-”

“You were supposed to be too perfect to be real.”

“I’m not perfect.” Phil presses his hands to Dan’s sides then pulls back when he remembers the bruising. “I’m just me. Hi.”

“It was impossible to stay away from you,” Dan tells him. He kisses Phil’s throat, back to his neck, all the freckles he can find. Phil shivers. “I tried so hard but I couldn’t do it.”
“I nearly changed back. The Angharad night, I nearly changed so you could see me, I wanted to, so much, I—"

Dan kisses him again, as hard as he’d wanted to originally. Phil’s terrible balance makes him stumble into the wall, pulling Dan against him. Dan winces again and, when Phil stops, says, “No, it’s fine, its—"

“Can I stay here?” Phil says. “With you? I don’t even mean just tonight can I stay here with you?”

“What about the plants?” Dan asks but he’s already nodding.

“They can keep the house, it belongs to them now, I don’t care.” Phil kisses Dan’s neck carefully, skipping all of the cuts. “You have no idea how much effort it took to just be near you sometimes, all the time. And then, I thought you were leaving—"

“I’m not,” Dan says. “I’m not going anywhere, I’m staying right here.” And then, just because he can, “I love you. You know that, but, I love you.”

Phil laughs. “In other unsurprising news—"

“Phil.”

“I love you too.”

***

Dan startles awake a few hours later with the sudden realisation that he’s forgotten to do something that he’d promised. Phil, next to him, grumbles but doesn’t wake up. They’d fallen asleep next to each other but holding hands. Phil was still worried about the bruising and said I’m clingy, Dan, I’m a really clingy sleeper, you have no idea, and Dan had thought that he wouldn’t have minded, he hadn’t minded being pressed into every available wall space on the way to his room, and then against everything once they were in his room, but Phil had insisted. You’re hurt. You got hurt saving everyone. Yet he’d still fallen asleep with his arm thrown right across the bed, as if to prove to himself that Dan is still there.

Dan reaches for his poor mismatched phone and rings PJ.

PJ accepts the call before it’s even rung and his face, when it comes on screen, is pale and worried. “You said that you’d call as soon as it was done.”


“Is it done? Did you do it?”

Dan smiles. PJ, without hearing the answer, smiles too. The colour floods back into his face. “I did,” Dan says. “All of them. I did it.”

PJ looks as though he might cry. Dan can finally see the jewel green of his aura clearly. “Dan, that’s amazing. That’s so— You’re so- I’m so—"

Dan says, “Also,” and holds up his wrist. PJ looks at it, confused. “Look.”

PJ says, “What?” and then, suddenly, lets out a shriek that any banshee would be proud of. Phil instantly grabs at Dan’s hand and sits up. “What the fuck?” PJ shouts. “Are you serious?”

Dan says, “I’m serious. We’re serious. This is Phil.”
Phil, without his glasses, leans too close to the phone screen. “Hello.”

PJ says, “Phil. You’re real.”

Phil smiles. “I am.”

“I spent ten years telling him that you probably weren’t. Hello. I like the flowers.”

Phil says, “Thank you,” at the same time as Dan says, “What?”

There are flowers everywhere. Cornflowers twined in the carpet, orange poppies around the door, little sunbeams of marigolds circling the bed frame. There’s a sunflower curled around the bedside table. Dan touches it and says, “Right.”

“Should have mentioned that,” Phil says. “They sort of appear. Sometimes.”

“Sometimes?”

“When I’m happy,” Phil says. “When I’m really happy.”

Dan smiles at him. Phil smiles back. PJ, clearing his throat, says, “I’m hanging up now. Bye guys.”

When Dan finally goes into the kitchen an hour or so later it’s full of blue hydrangeas, the exact colour of Phil’s aura. They dance a little in the breeze from the window. Phil, wandering in behind him, touches his hand to the curve of Dan’s back and says, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I like them. Are they permanent?”

Phil says, “They appear when I’m happy. So, I hope they’re permanent.”

Dan runs his fingertips over the top of one and says, “In that case, I’m sure they are.”

***

Two weeks later and Dan is following Phil on his rounds. Phil’s version of rounds seem to be involve him being a Disney princess with a whole row of fox cubs skipping at his feet and little sparrows fluttering around his head. They seem to be confused by this new addition, the one who is holding Phil’s hand, but one of the sparrows lands on his shoulder and tweets into his ear so he takes that as acceptance.

They get free coffees at the tearooms. Jack runs a stall in the market and makes sure that they get all the best food on offer, even keeps back American cereal from the stall next door. Angharad has skipped up to Dan in the middle of town and asked when their piano lessons were starting. Gwyn had offered up the use of the choir’s piano. Delyth, whenever they passed in the street, winked at them both conspiratorially, like they all had a huge secret. But then, they do. Mark leaves out two flasks of coffee and hugs Dan at his locker, progressed past a shoulder pat. He doesn’t only speak to three-sometimes four people in a day. People say “Hi Dan!” to him everywhere. The faerie doesn’t steal anymore but instead just sits and talks with him while they look out to sea. Sometimes they make daisy chains. The morgen wants to know all the village gossip. The trees say, “Good morning Daniel,” in very slow English, and he says, “Bore da!” back. This is his town, these are his people.

Phil smiles. “Hey, you should see your aura right now. There’s, like, shooting stars in it.”

“Well, make a wish.” Dan instantly winces. “Actually, no that was cheezy, I don’t-“
Phil, delightedly, says, “I already did.”

End Notes

You can see closetphannie's beautiful art here, I love it <3

So, I grew up in Pembroke and have been wanting to write a fic set there for a little while! All locations and places in this fic are real, sadly without the magic (possibly). Here is the coastline in all its glory and here is Skomer Island (with the Pembroke coast in the background). We’re somewhat infamous for having one of the worst internet connections in the UK so Dan’s pretty lucky that he’s magic :)

I’m from the South so the Welsh used is all in the South Walian dialect. This is particularly obvious with "I love you" which Welsh people say in a million different ways, but I’ve gone with the one that I know. It’s all from my very basic Welsh knowledge so any mistakes are completely my own! (Shout out to my sister, who is fluent and so contributed to this fic far more than she will ever know).

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