### Of Fairies and Fungus

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**Of Fairies and Fungus**

by **SparkleDragons, Tanacetum**

**Summary**

When a grisly murder and mass poisoning at Glamour Springs is associated with fae activity, hunters are called in to investigate. Barry is not expecting to meet a changeling that not only has answers, but asks his help in finding the supposed killer: her missing brother.

**Notes**

SD: Hey! So I pitched the idea of fae/hunter blupjeans to Tansy a while back and first? she's amazing at world building like dang. But also collaborating with her on this has been amazing! She's such a talented writer and pushed me to work on semi-outlining stuff instead of just jumping head-first. I thank her so so much for doing this with me because I am *so* happy how it's coming out. I hope you guys enjoy it as much as we did writing it.

See the end of the work for more [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/works/15693141).
The blighted forest smells like sour rot and dry mold. Dead trees crowd close together, their branches dangling low to the ground. Old-growth wood that should be prized timber is instead left to decay, embrittled by creeping fungus and choked from root to bow by webbed curtains of sticky black threads. Sunlight gilds the shrouded crowns of the trees with iridescent streaks of color. The abandoned paths beneath are cast in shadow.

There hasn’t been worthwhile game in these woods for decades; the few creatures that still lurk are more likely to do the hunting themselves. Most people wouldn’t venture in for anything but a dire emergency. Unfortunately, the events at Glamour Springs qualify.

Barry arrived hours after the incident: forty poisoned at a traveling cooking show. There will surely be deaths in the coming days; for now, though, the victims are hanging on. Some were even well enough for the constabulary to interview.

The witness accounts were confusing where they weren’t outright contradictory. Sorting out that mess is someone else’s job. The lone corpse—torched so thoroughly that its fingers were fused to the iron pan in its grip—is his.

Flecks of organic matter tinged with ash catch in Barry’s throat. He hacks and spits, then wipes his mouth. He was called in because he’s something of an expert on these woods. No other active hunter has spent as much time in here as him. Ultimately, this forest belongs to the fae. And, with a fire of obviously magical origin, a culprit that fled in the aftermath? That’s probably what Barry’s dealing with.

Normally it wouldn’t be possible to track a fae in here, and Barry wouldn’t have tried. Except for the a huge beacon of roaring fire visible clear from town. It hasn’t spread in the minutes since Barry started his approach. Now he’s close enough for the smoke to sting his eyes.

He creeps closer. The ground’s spongey underfoot, choked with discarded sticks that crumble beneath his boots instead of snapping. A smell like burning garbage permeates the air. Barry ducks beneath a thick limb tangled in black webbing and hunkers low to the ground.

The fire’s beautiful to behold. Brilliant oranges and reds slowly consume the husk of a once-grand tree. The black webs blanketing it are alight, tossing embers skywards as the fire roars. Flames lick at the neighboring trees without catching.

A figure stands silhouetted at the base of the tree, conducting the blaze. Barry’s surprised; the motives of fae can be inscrutable at the best of times, but why run and then light a beacon? Nothing with this much raw power needs to bother with traps. He straightens up and tucks his hands in his pockets. His kit and experience should see him through if he needs to defend himself. But there are too many mysteries here to not ask questions first.

He may get lucky this time, because Lup is more likely than most fae to answer. Her long, clawed fingers dance in the air, carefully controlling the flame. Fire magic isn’t exactly common among the fae. Most tended towards nature and trickery. While she’s all for the second half, fire also has its uses.

Flashes of broken magic intersperse the roaring flames as they destroy the ancient tree. It’s sad to
watch it burn. Old growth like this is sacred, or it was before it turned rotten. Now, like any other corrupted fairy portal, it has to go.

The crackling of the fire obscures her keen, non human senses. She doesn't hear the approaching footsteps, doesn't sense the distinctly human presence.

Barry's trying to figure out what to say when the smoke tickles his nose. He screws up his face and sneezes explosively, then coughs to clear his throat.

Instantly Lup's ears shoot straight up and she whips around, fangs bared. She can smell the iron on him from where he stands. She knows humans don't usually enter these woods anymore, fearing the fae that live within perhaps more than the deadly blight. There's no doubt in her mind the man before her is a hunter.

"Hey! I'm here to talk!" Barry shouts, one hand on the hilt of a concealed dagger. This line is well-rehearsed. It usually buys him enough time to assess the danger he's facing.

He doesn't even know if he's got the right fae. Two passing through the same area would be unusual, but everything about this case is, so far. The constabulary described the missing man to him. A futile effort, really. The figure in front of him makes no pretense of humanity. Its eyes echo the the night sky, black voids pin pricked with glittering light. He tries to ignore the fanged snarl, to not respond to the threat.

Barry makes his decision. He releases the dagger and calmly raises his hands palms-up. The suspect he's after lived undetected among humans long enough to become a minor celebrity; murderer or not, Barry knows they can be spoken to like a person.

Some of the tension leaks from Lup's body. She glances at where the hunter's hand had been and decides shouldn't get too close, just in case. If worst comes to worse she'll have to run off and finish closing the fairy portal later.

"What do you want, hunter?" Her voice echos with a distinctly inhuman age. "I'm busy with something." She could make herself more approachable, but right now she wants to be sure the hunter won't forget who's more powerful here.

That's not the response Barry'd expect from a fae on the run. Or even an accomplice. Fire magic's unusual enough that this scene still raises suspicion, but the controlled inferno here is on a whole different scale from the murder in town.

Lup's ear flicks towards the burning tree in the pause and she reaches out a hand to lessen the flames. She isn't ready to put them out quite yet, but she also doesn't want the forest burning down while her attention is elsewhere.

Barry watches the fae's spellwork with professional curiosity. Seeing something like this up close is a rare opportunity. And there are so many other unanswered questions—trees like this are supposed to be sacred to the fae. He can't begin to guess what's happening here.

Well, he can, if he listens to his most pessimistic impulses.

"I—uh, yeah, I can see that you’re busy,” he says. “I'll be out of your hair in a sec. I wanted to ask a couple questions—like why you're burning that tree."
Lup's ears flick down in annoyance at the question. Humans are always so nosey. What's it to him if she burns a tree in fae woods?

"Why do you care," she practically hisses. "Plant life doesn't mean much to humans." She allows her fangs and claws to shrink a bit, still keeping a close eye on the hunter's hands.

"Uh, I hope you don't mind me saying so? But I thought—thought it'd mean something to you. Thought big old trees like this were special," Barry says.

"They are," Lup says, just a hint of sadness lacing her tone. "But look around you." She gestures to the rot eating at the vegetation and trees. She remembers when the forest was vibrant and green. Fae magic kept it alive and thriving. Now they could only mitigate the damage against the Hunger that ate at it.

"Gotta keep the Hunger back somehow. Closing portals helps."

Barry's relieved he came in here alone. If he hadn't bolted into the woods, or if the fire had started any later, then there would've been time for a junior or constable to show up and tag along. And he can't think of a single one of them he would trust to not escalate a conversation with a fae into a fight.

He gets called foolhardy plenty, but the people who don't believe in his methods don't survive repeat trips into the woods. By giving up a chance at striking first he's maybe avoided violence altogether, and can hope to gain some information as well. He just needs to figure out how to broach the subject of the murder in Glamour Springs—if the fae involved is a friend of this one then he doesn't like his odds against them.

Lup shakes her head. "Is there a reason you're here, hunter? I doubt it was to talk about fire safety."

Barry looks around. It's easy to forget that the forest wasn't always choked with black fungus, even though he's read the books and seen the lithographs. He can't help but be thrilled that he's getting to speak with a creature who saw the forest when it lived. He'd love to learn everything this fae knows. Pity that conversing at length would be dangerous. They can't even exchange names, and Barry would be a fool to stay here overlong. Already he feels his throat swelling from breathing the smoke and spores in the air.

'Hunger' is a rather lyrical way to refer to the corruptive rot; Barry's only seen a handful of texts use that name. He's frankly shocked that the fae would give him a real answer instead of dodging the question altogether. He wants to see what all he can learn about portals, but he's sure the fae will end this conversation if he tries to make it a one-sided exchange.

"We just, uh, had something of an incident—I mean, I could be here to talk about fire safety. You know we—humans I mean—can see that from town, right?" Barry laughs, nervously, and waves a hand at the inferno.

Lup suppresses a chuckle at the hunter's awkwardness. The few she's met have all been very gun-ho and confident. This guy's acting like he stumbled into the wrong profession.

"But yeah, I'm looking into a murder. It was done with magic fire." He's gotten one straightforward answer. He draws in a deep breath of air tainted enough to make his eyes water immediately and rushes out a blunt question before he's wracked with another cough. "Have you been in Glamour Springs this—uh, week?"
At the mention of fire magic and Glamor Springs Lup’s ears shoot up. *Humans lie,* she reminds herself. *He could be lying.* She doesn't know many other fae who use fire magic, not around here. Nor does she know many who would wander all the way to Glamour Springs. Taako isn't a killer though. They're changelings: at worst they'd take a kid or something, and that isn't really their personal style.

She has to phrase things carefully. If this hunter is out for Taako she can easily lead him in the wrong direction and leave it at that. Fae are pretty well known for their sharp tongues and she likes to think she's no exception.

"I know of Glamour Springs. Small, but lots of people." She lets the fire die down behind her. She wants her full attention directed towards the hunter. If she can get him to let slip his name she should be able to convince him to just stroll on back where he came from. "Do you live there?"

Barry takes the fire’s ebb as another sign he can get through this meeting without violence. But he can’t help but remain nervous, confronted with those void-filled eyes. They’re gorgeous, but in the way the distant reaches of the night sky are. Not something meant to be seen up close.

Some hunters would say it's impossible to really communicate with the fae. Barry does better with their body language than most humans just by sheer persistence. Some fae can telegraph whatever they feel like or change their appearance on a whim, but that doesn't mean they're always controlled. Sometimes they slip up. Sometimes they do something obvious, like dodging a simple question and turning away from their amazing feat of magic to focus on a lowly human.

"Nope. I was, was called in, on account of that fire? The murder one," he says. His spit's thick in his mouth and it does nothing to wash away the sour taste of rot. Just makes his words catch and stumble. "I don't need to tell you that humans freak out about that kind of thing."

"Yeah," Lup hums. “Humans tend to flip when a single kid goes missing. I can only imagine what a death would do you guys."

Lup decides to take on a more human form. In her experience humans are more comfortable talking to humans. She allows her fae-like features to melt off, leaving only her ethereal grace and tiniest points of her ears to hit at her true nature. Her preferred human form looks a lot like Taako's, in the same way their true forms match. They both find they enjoy stares from humans so they choose rather 'attractive' appearances. No sense in forgoing an easy manipulation tactic.

Lup’s human form bears far too much of a resemblance to the description Barry was given to be a coincidence. He hopes his reaction is masked by his perpetual aura of nervousness. He’d thought the constable who called the suspect "like, really attractive" was just being unprofessional.

"I didn't kill anyone if that's what you want to know," Lup says. “Not really into that sorta thing." Part of her wants to approach the human, make him more comfortable with her presence. The tinge of iron in her nose keeps her back. "Was the person killed important?" She really hopes Taako hadn't screwed up that badly, if this *is* him. Small deaths tend to be forgotten in a decade at most. They could lay low until then.

Barry worries that this whole conversation could've been a put-on. Fae have played stranger games than pretending to be ignorant of murders they committed. Especially with the question of the shared fire magic. He considers his words carefully. He's done all the reading on dealings with the fae that are available and is more of an expert than most. Too bad that doesn't necessarily translate...
into skill. Unfortunately, with how the evidence is stacking up, it's time to start taking risks. "So, uh—what if whether you killed someone wasn't what I wanted to know? Could you still say you definitely haven't murdered anyone in Glamour Springs?"

Lup smiles that the hunter’s nerves are starting to show. It's kinda cute to watch him stumble like that, in a funny, human sort of way. She leans forward and stares him in the eyes. "I haven't murdered anyone in Glamour Springs."

It makes her uncomfortable to be so direct, but now she needs to make sure he doesn't actually stumble on another fae's trail. "Besides, how do you know it was a magical death. Humans blame us for a lot of things. Could have been an accidental fire."

She doesn't think the man is stupid. Not at all. Dumb hunters don't live long and he... looks old? She thinks? Or older than most hunters she's seen. Human aging is strange, but she's pretty sure she understands how it works. She knows he probably wouldn't mistake accidents for magic, but humans like to talk a lot and she could get him to slip something. She has to find out if this is Taako's problem. If it isn't she doesn't care, if it is she has to find him. Taako doesn't kill people. If he did it means something happened.

"Well, witness accounts—accounts say the victim burned up like that," Barry says, snapping his fingers. "The corpse was completely charred. I'm talking blackened skin flaking off, fat and water boiled in an instant. The works. Guy had to be dead before he hit the ground. I dunno if you know, but cremations usually take hours, at something like 1400 F. This guy had an iron pan in his hand with some streaks—streaks consistent with partial melting, so uh, that'd be something like double cremation temperatures."

Barry pauses for breath. Even with the fire dying down the air quality's still getting to him. "So yeah, no way that wasn't magic." Just like the magic the fae was using to burn down the tree. A controlled inferno, precisely immolating its target. The nearby audience members had some mild flash burns from radiating heat, but the fire took its victim and winked out.

Shit, Lup thinks. She's pretty convinced her brother got himself into a sticky situation at this point and if the victim had an iron pan he could be hurt. It would explain the lashing out, she supposes. Who the victim is is important. She swears, if it's that dickwad of a human Taako'd been working with... well, he would already be dead, if that's the case so not as if she can do much. She told Taako spending so much time in the village was a bad idea, especially hanging around a guy who's always so vocal about hating fae.

Belatedly, Barry remembers that he did manage to get explicit confirmation from the fae that—she? her voice and face are definitely feminine, but minutes ago she was all razor-teeth and inhuman eyes—isn't responsible for the murder he's investigating. Anyone else she's killed off in her long life is, thankfully, none of his business.

There's definitely something here, though; too many coincidences niggling Barry as potential links between this fae and the missing chef. The timing, the fire, the resemblance...he doesn't want to deal with the complication presented, if she's a friend or relative of his suspect. Or if she's the kind of fae that can twist cause-and-effect in her mind to shove all the blame of a murder onto the weapon instead of its wielder.

But, if she's really associated with the murderer, then why didn't he tip her off after he ran? She's right outside of town, and he had hours.
"Fae rarely attack with such aggression without reason. We're tricksters, not blind killers. Who was
the victim?" she asks. No way is she going into Glamor Springs herself to find out. She can't risk
different, more trigger happy hunters finding her.

Taako will probably be back at their tree if he'd bolted. Maybe Merle's place? He lives closer. Fairy
Mother, she hopes Lucy doesn't find out about this. Something like this isn't exactly good for her
whole 'working with the humans' initiative.

Barry coughs explosively and almost misses Lup’s question. He's officially lingered here too long.
But it was completely worth it to blow off getting goggles and a mask and rush into the forest for
this conversation. He has a lot to mull over.

Maybe not so much of it’s pertinent to his case, though. Good thing he doesn't have to justify
himself to his superiors. All he's really figured out is that this second fae, while likely an ally of the
first, doesn't know anything about the murder.

But he got to see some mind-blowing fire magic up close, and learned about a fae faction
deliberately closing portals to stave off the fungus's spread. "Hey, how about—question for
question? I'm not gonna make you defend uh, fae being killers or anything—what you said, what
you said tracks. But I'll tell you who the victim is, if you tell me why you're uh, working on closing
portals? I mean, I appreciate it! But isn't that gonna piss—piss off the other fae that use 'em?"

Lup perks up with interest at the offer a deal. Fae are always interested in striking a bargain and
she is certainly no exception. She considers his question carefully before warily approaching. The
coughing didn’t get past her.

"That sounds like a good deal, hunter. Can I add something? That cough is from the Hunger, isn't
it. If you tell me the name of the victim and if anything significant happened right before, I'll
answer your question and lead you along the fastest route out of the forest. How's that sound?"

Lup extends her hand to shake and watches the human closely. She can kill two birds with one
stone here. Get him out of the forest and find out what she needs to know. She hopes he'll take the
offer.

The bubbling catch in his lungs and scratchiness in his throat convinces Barry that's a great offer
before his brain even catches up. He's in poor shape to get attacked by anything lurking in these
woods. An escort out might save his life. A fae deal can be trusted, especially one with so few
strings attached.

"Yeah, heck yeah—thanks," Barry says. He only needs a moment to steel his nerves and shake her
hand, heart racing. This is probably the dumbest, most dangerous thing he's done in months, and he
can't believe it hasn't come crashing down around his ears yet. As it stands he can just divulge
what's publicly known about the Glamour Springs incident. She could've gotten all that from
spying disguised in town.

It occurs to him that he may be saving her some time to catch up with her friend. He doesn’t really
care about one escaped fae, so long as they stay vanished. "Let's get walking," he says, falling into
step behind her. "There isn't much to tell—most of the witnesses aren't, uh, doing well. There was a
cooking show in town, and it looks like—looks like something was wrong with the food. Poison.
Took out the audience."

Poison... that admittedly doesn't sound like Taako to Lup. And why would he run like that or lash
Barry can’t help but wonder why a fae would bother to establish a brand and then kill their fans. It seems—sloppy. Not premeditated, not engineered for any benefit Barry can see. Maybe everything incongruous can be chalked up to erratic behavior, but Barry's not so sure. Not if this wasn't a trap to lure out and kill hunters. At least he can probably dismiss that possibility; he already stuck his neck out far enough to get his head lopped off, but he's still breathing.

"Uh—anyway—no one's dead yet, except the one burn victim," he says. "I mean, as far as I know—I've been gone for a while. But the burn victim—he was uh, affiliated with the show. Some kinda assistant." Barry pauses and turns to focus on his escort, watching her face. "Name of Sazed."

Lup tries not to react when she hears the name, but can feel her hair bristle regardless. That shitbag did something, she just knows it.

Barry is totally unprepared for the anger that flashes across Lup’s face. The only thing he can think is that she must know Sazed. Were they somehow friends? Associates? Was Sazed a pawn in a fae rivalry, murdered as a slight against her? But how would the poisoning fit that story?

"I'll be sure to keep an eye out for killer fire fae," she says, semi-sarcastically.

As they approach the town, Lup allows herself to shift into the shape of a small tawny cat. She can't really use magic to clear things without her hands but she figures her traveling companion will manage. She'd rather have the added benefit of stealth this close to town. Barry's initial shock at her turning into a cat is quickly superseded by grudging acceptance that he's not going to get his questions answered after all. But then she speaks.

"The portals are corrupted," she says. She briefly fills in the rest of her side of the bargain, speaking easily in her feline form. "All fae around here know about it and many of them help to destroy them too." That’s exactly as much information necessary to fulfill their deal. There’s nothing else she owes him.

Her transformation was already the most effortless Barry’s ever seen; modifying the form to project a human voice on top of that is something well outside of his experience. Between that and what she said about the portals—what does it mean, for the portals to be corrupted? Do they spread the 'Hunger' beyond the fae's control?—Barry's got a lot he needs to research, immediately.

When they arrive at the edge of the trees, Lup leaps up to a low-hanging branch. "Welcome to Refuge, hunter," she says, flicking her tail. "Maybe stay out of the forest next time. You have weak lungs." With that she turns into a cardinal and flies off into the forest.

At her departure Barry looks around to find himself stuck out in the boonies, more than a day's travel away from the nearest library. More than a week's travel from a library with the kind of collection he needs. He has to talk to the other investigators and write up reports before he can even think about leaving the Glamour Springs area, and he's not even sure which town the fae led him to. It'll be at least a couple days till he can hit the road.

Barry can't say he learned anything new about the case he's supposed to be investigating. If he wasn't the most senior hunter present he might have to defend how much time he wasted this afternoon. He'd be terrible at pretending to regret meeting the kindest, most fascinating fae of his career, or witnessing her perform such powerful magic.
He grins to himself. By the time he figures out what town he's in and touches base with the constabulary it'll be fully dark; already the sun's dipped almost below the treeline. A messenger will let everyone back in Glamour Springs know he's alright. He can look forward to a night at a quiet inn away from his coworkers, with plenty of time to take notes about the questions raised by what he's seen.
The Canny Changeling

Chapter Summary

Lup and Barry turn a confrontation into a conversation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It's been two days and Lup still hasn't found Taako. Lucretia’s off near Rockport, too far away to contact quickly. She doubts Lucretia’s even heard about the incident yet, too busy working on human-fae relations. Lup has no interest in that; she’s had plenty of interactions with humans before that tells her they have no intention of cooperating with fae.

It’s been nothing but frustrating. She could barely get anything from Merle. He hadn't seen Taako at all in the past month but was all for chatting about plants. Ren was pleasant as always, and while she’d seen Taako much more recently than Merle—seen one of his shows—she had no idea where to find him.

In fact, Lup had checked every single one of Lucretia’s pocket spaces to see if Taako was holing up with some rando and had come up empty. She doesn't know where he is or how hurt he is or what really happened and it's incredibly distressing.

She poked around Glamor Springs a bit as well, unlikely as it was he’d be there. She didn't find much; local authorities aren't fond of giving out information to random strangers. She managed to talk to a few witnessed with mixed results. Some of them described her brother as a monster who they hoped would be found and killed, others insisted he was trying to help when Sazed attacked him. Others weren't quite sure what happened. Lup is rather convinced at this point Taako’s hurt somewhere. If he isn't he'd be at their tree. The fact that he's not means she really needs to find him, and soon.

She finds herself thinking about the hunter a lot through her search. He was interesting in his awkwardness. She can't help but wonder if he made any progress on his case. She hopes not—that means Taako could be in more trouble. Every day she doesn't find him is another chance for him to get caught.

That train of thought makes it all the more awkward when she sees said hunter wandering the forest again. This time she decides to take to the trees and watch what he does, hoping he won't notice her. If he has found something maybe, just maybe, she'll be able to figure out where he's going and get there first. He wouldn’t be in the forest now if he’d already found Taako... right?

Below her, Barry toes aside crumbling wood to reveal a patch of gravel laid long ago. Without new growth it'll be some time before all the signs of old homesteads disappear. There’s so much they could learn from digging through the layers of rot. But as long as the Hunger stays confined to this backwoods corner of the country there won’t be enough incentive for the government or anyone to fund expeditions. It’s been generations since the forest and everyone in it were given up for dead.

No one entertains hopes of reclaiming the forest—it was always the bastion of the fae, even before
their magic settled over it like rot—but Barry’d rather be poking at the corruption than dealing with his dead-end case right now. He didn't personally interview anybody in Glamour Springs. He’d compiled everyone else's work into a report, conducted an autopsy on what was left of the charred corpse, and delegated the investigation into the deceased's history and known associates to the constabulary.

Reseaching the suspect was frustrating. Justin's public persona and the history of his show were well-advertised, downright boring to collate. He did interviews. He had a touring schedule. His movements for the past several years are plain as day.

And Barry, stuck in Glamour Springs, had to get all this from couriers and junior agents who then insisted that they hadn't yet found anything about Justin's education or family or prior employers. It was like the man dropped out of the sky with a purse full of coin and started his show the next day. Which, to be fair, was probably accurate; transmuting gold is child's play with the right kind of magic. Barry would be a little surprised that Justin's suppliers and associates cared nothing about his provenance, except he knows that enough gold can allay any concern.

He’s ostensibly looking for signs of fae, but this hike is also a much-needed break from a frustrating few days. He'd only gotten one quiet night at the Davey Lamp in Refuge before he had to take a horse along the path skirting the woods back to Glamour Springs. That'd be enough to ruin his day by itself. Barry's a decent rider but he loathes it—the jostling leaves his knees and butt sore, and his face sunburns inside of twenty minutes.

He'd arrived to find that a handful of the poisoning victims had passed in the night. Shock, most certainly, following dehydration from vomiting and bloody diarrhea. Barry knew just enough toxicology to suspect arsenic. He sent the constabulary scrambling for lab supplies while he twiddled his thumbs.

It wasn't until late afternoon that a junior hunter secured him permission from next-of-kin to gut one of the corpses and the reagents needed to test for arsenic. That was remarkably fast for a small town, in all fairness, but his notes on the Hunger, as the fae had called it, and portals were burning a hole in his pocket. Hours later, the test failed—just in time for a constable to burst into his impromptu lab with an empty bottle labeled 'Arsenic' that had been missed on the first sweep of the cooking show's traveling wagon.

Now they were up to six murders, methods known but motives not. Barry's investigative expertise is in consulting corpses, not the living. His skill set will be near-useless until someone else turns up dead or something attacks. But, as the most senior hunter present, he couldn't justify leaving the scene for at least another week.

Of course, if they could find and capture Justin, then the rest of the investigation would default to the constabulary and Barry would be free to conduct research into the Hunger. Tracking a fae is usually an exercise in futility. Especially a fae able to pass for human who disappeared near their forest. Justin's only known close associate is charcoal and his only known residence is impounded next to the constable's office with iron clamps on its back wheels.

They've got a whole lot of nothing to go on. But this was the first afternoon Barry woke up to find that no more of the poisoning victims have died while he napped. He's at a loose end until more evidence turns up. So he scarfed down toast for lunch and grabbed his full kit, protective gear and all, for another trek into the forest. It's a long shot, but Barry now knows for sure that there are fae portals in the area. Justin might have a pocket realm secreted away.
An afternoon spent poking at wispy fungus-cocooned trees and sludgy brooks probably won't bear any fruit. But Barry can take some more notes and mull over what the female fae meant by "corruption". As nice as it would be to talk to her again, he really hopes she doesn't attract a hunter's notice. At least Barry can enjoy a reprieve from his coworkers and the grieving villagers.

Lup watches the human closely as he trundles around the forest. She wonders what in the name of the courts he thinks he's looking for. He probably hasn't found anything new, if this is how he's spending his time. The only benefit of the Hunger she's discovered is it seems to have nullified the effect of running water on fae. While she appreciates being able to cross the streams, the implications are... worrying, to say the least. Natural magic should flow freely, not get clogged and absorbed by rot.

Barry's got his nose in a notebook, working on a crude grid of the forest. He didn't bring proper cartography tools with him so the map extends haphazardly over several pages of unlined paper. He's ripped one out to use as a straight edge and has no ruler to draw anything to scale. The edges are labeled with numbers to indicate where they line up with the real map he has folded in his pocket, one that only shows towns and roads and renders the forest as an indistinct mass bordering the south and west sides of the paper.

He's done this before with better tools, but that project was miles away and focused on mapping the old roads and bridges. So far he's only got a list of nine or so potential fae trees around Glamour Springs. The ones that had odd notched hollows at their bases, or stood apart in an open clearing, or were ringed with stones. Two were oddly bare of fungus, and one was mounded so high with black strands that it honestly might've been a boulder instead. Barry wasn't going to poke at it, protective gear or not. A cloud of spores would probably overcome his mask's filters.

He also revisited the site where he'd seen that female fae burn a magnificent tree. Barry only found heaps of cold ash there, drifting into the black webs tangled around him. He moved on quickly.

It'd take way longer than he has to gather enough data to draw a conclusion on fae portals by himself. Even if he does identify one, the only known entry method is "have a fae let you in", usually with less than amicable intent on the fae's part. Barry doesn't think Justin would cooperate with that. What he really needs is to consult some reference material. Not hike around the woods while juggling fifteen pieces of paper, a pencil, a compass, and his normal gear besides.

One man does not a research expedition make. He doesn't have the time or the resources to do this job properly, he doesn't know what the fae meant by corrupted portals, and he doubts anyone knows which fae are active in this area. The fae that are known to humans usually have established themselves among society's elite, building wealth through magic and alliances. They wouldn't be out here in the boonies. Barry wishes he wasn't either.

It's not like he'd accomplish much more looking into Justin and Sazed's identities. Barry's too socially awkward to put strangers at ease; he never picks up on the right questions to ask. He has better luck getting information out of rocks, or bones. There's nothing to do for it but wait until one someone delivers a lead.

After a few minutes of watching the hunter's seemingly pointless examinations of every little thread of fungus and trail of water Lup decides to get a bit closer. She takes the form of a little black cat, a patch of white fur on her chest in case he's as superstitious as most hunters. She leaps down from the branches and emerges from the mottled gray of the underbrush to great him with a mew.
Barry's already at peak anxiety when he hears the dead branches rustle. When he sees a cat leap down and meow at him—and there are no cats in these woods, he knows this is obviously a fae. But he doesn't have a single nerve left unrattled. He turns towards it with an impassive, slightly strained expression. "I don't suppose you're Justin?" he asks, voice flat.

The question doesn't rattle Lup as much as it would have a few days ago. She'd long confirmed Taako was involved. He uses the name "Justin" when he's around humans. True names have power and it's easier to go by fake ones anyways. Thankfully cats aren't nearly as expressive as humanoids so it's unlikely the hunter would even notice the slight panic it gives her. Hunters just don't give up, do they.

Lup stares up at him with bright green eyes, likely the greenest thing in the forest for miles. He doesn't realize it's her. That's not surprising. Even before the Hunger caused this forest's courts to dissolve this area has been known for fae activity. Lucretia set up little pocket homes throughout the forest, but it's not comfortable to hide in those all day. Wandering fae are a common sight. They've managed to dial it back a tad recently but the reputation is probably still there. It keeps most people out of the forest. Most.

Lup gives Barry a few cursory sniffs, circling in her cat form to get a good look at him. He's still carrying iron and...she thinks a jar of salt? along with a few other trinkets, herbs, and tools. She notices a lightly enchanted quartz stone hanging from his bag. Typical hunter stuff, along with a goofy mask to protect him from the fungal spores. Maybe he's learned something new about what happened in Glamour Springs and that's why he's back out here poking at things.

She has to go for it. At this point she's desperate, and they have a better chance working together than apart if they're going to find Taako. If involving hunters goes poorly she's confident she can protect both herself and her brother, but she needs to find him first. She darts ahead a bit and turns to mew back at Barry again, flicking her tail in an indication to follow.

Barry stares after her with a beleaguered tilt to his shoulders. His nose itches from pooling sweat and flaking sunburn. To scratch it he'd have to put down all his mapping tools and stick a finger under the lip of his mask. He'll have to drop all his stuff anyway, if this fae attacks. Barry still feels the impulse to stroke its adorable fluffy fur, but he doesn't want to pull back a stump.

"Sorry, kitty," he says. "You're really cute, but, uh, I'd be a total idiot if I just followed you." In the next moment he realizes that this fae could be the same woman he met earlier this week. She wasn't cute, she was gorgeous. Barry winces at himself. This is why he shouldn't try to compliment attractive women; he always puts his foot in his mouth. Why the heck would she want to talk to him again, anyway?

Of course, the cat could still be the missing Justin. Those are the two likely options—the idea that there are even more fae in the area strains Barry's credulity. From his perspective the forest’s reputation as a hotbed of fae activity died down ages ago. He was still in school the last time there were rumors.

He shifts his weight and starts resignedly folding his papers to stuff them in random pockets. If he's about to be attacked he at least wants to preserve his afternoon's work. The fae's far enough away that he'll be able to react in time to draw iron.

Lup huffs as he hesitates. Admittedly not that surprising, he's clearly not dumb. Looks like she isn't gonna get away with not talking right now.
"Come on, human," she says. Her fur seems to ripple as the color changes to the tabby patterning from before. "I'm not planning on hurting you. We might be able to help each other."

Barry clearly didn’t expect her to come back. He’d sooner expect Justin to try to lure him deeper into the woods. Killing people who notice you’re killing people always spirals out of control, but sometimes fae decide that murder's the order of the month. They're dangerous like that.

He needs to know why she’s come back to talk to him. And he instinctively trusts her—but that sends up warning flags. He can't logically justify to himself why he wants to follow her, ergo his emotions are compromised, ergo he might be charmed. Great. Being charmed sucks; even if you kill the fae it can takes days to wear off, and the whole time you're nauseous with grief and self-loathing. Definitely not one of his favorite experiences.

"Wait up," he says, crumpling the last of his papers and shoving them into pockets. He leaves one hand hovering near a hidden dagger and gestures with the other. "Just, uh—you know, historically, the whole 'follow the fae' thing doesn't work out for us humans?" He counts off on his fingers; "Will-o'-wisps, puca, hulder? I could go on, that's—that's just uh, what's local, generally speaking. Why can't we have whatever, whatever conversation this is right here?"

Lup reaches up a foot to scratch her ear and sighs. He's obviously not wrong. Those particular fae certainly get a kick out of screwing with humans. And while such activities are enjoyable from time to time she doesn't have time for this.

"I won't make you follow me. I'd just feel more comfortable talking somewhere I'm familiar with. I'm fully aware you're armed. Iron has a very distinct smell."

She shakes herself and says, "I won't hurt you unless you give me apt reason to. I think comparing notes might be of use to both our goals, though."

Barry would've stabbed her without a second thought if she'd attacked him, but hearing that he made her uncomfortable makes him feel guilty. He fights down a sheepish grimace. "Uh, just two questions? What is your goal, here, and where d'you wanna talk?"

"I want to find my brother and I'd like to speak about this at my tree." She smiles the biggest, smuggest she can with her cat features. "If that's alright with you."

If this is a trap, it's expertly baited. She could tell Barry point-blank that she's gonna try and kill him afterwards and it'd still be worth the risk to him.

Justin’s her brother. That answers the resemblance and the shared fire magic. And raises just as many questions. Barry finds himself nodding mutely and stumbling towards her. He can probably fight his way out if needs be. If not...well, the other hunters know where he's gone. This trick won't work twice.

Lup nods and darts into the underbrush, assuming he'll follow. She said she wouldn't hurt him without reason and she won’t. She hopes the situation she's created doesn't give her a reason.

Her ear flicks behind her as she hears the clamor of a human following her through the underbrush. Loud creatures. She tries to maintain some distance, both for his comfort and in case they end up fighting. She does her best to follow an easy path for him, though that’s hard for her to gauge as a cat. Sometimes what's easy for her isn't even possible for him and she has to double back a few times to go another way.
Eventually the forest opens up to a small clearing occupied by a single tree. It’s not the verdant green of a healthy tree, but it’s not rotted either, instead bare and grey as if in the midst of winter. The branches are healthy and the trunk twists in on itself as it reaches for its personal patch of sunlight. Tiny mushrooms dot the clearing, distinct from the fungus that makes up the Hunger. These are the lively tans and browns of native forest growth. The rot creeps in unnatural gray and black and iridescent filaments. At the base of the tree lies a small, unassuming gap in the trunk, formed as the roots branch into the earth.

Is it dumb to show him where her and Taako's tree is? Yes, very much so. Is she making a mistake? She's not sure. Will this help her find Taako? Probably, and that's enough for her.

Chapter End Notes

If it wasn't obvious by chapter 1 that this is a slowburn fic it sure is now.
The Fairy Tree

Chapter Summary

Lup takes Barry to a second location and gets some bad news.

Chapter Notes

SparkleDragons: Woo! Update! Things are getting good ya'll. This is for sure my favorite chapter so far. Thanks for reading!!!

Barry thinks he knows where he is on his grid map. At the pace he had been going he would've found this tree in another six hours. Any hunter worth their salt could tell it's a fae tree at a glance.

But odds are that he'd have been interrupted by a development in his case, or attacked by something lurking in the woods. And a fae that's paying attention can use magic to confuse the senses of would-be trespassers, turn them around in circles until they're hopelessly lost. Barry's got more than one charm to protect him from exactly that. Wouldn't matter as the day wore on, though; concentrated effort from a fae can wear down any human's paltry wards over time.

Even if he had found the tree there's nothing he could've done except burn it. Revenge is probably what the people of Glamour Springs would want, but Barry doesn't care about that. There's no point to lashing out blindly at fae. That's exactly the kind of reactive, territorial idiocy that gives him so much tedious work when the bodies start turning up.

He's frankly excited to be here. He's got twigs and black gunk in his hair from crashing through the underbrush, he hasn't caught his breath in minutes, and between the sunburn and the stuffy mask and the exertion his face feels like it's on fire. But he'd cut off a pinky if that was the entry fee to this fae's tree. He's been in their pocket dimensions before; he knows how to force them to eject him, if it comes to that. But he's never been in one that wasn't specifically commissioned for human use. He doesn't know anyone who has. This is the most exciting research opportunity he's had since he got to dissect those redcaps in their nest.

When he jogs up to the tree he tries to be subtle about how hard he's panting. He feels like a lumbering lummox next to the cat, especially when he sees her waiting patiently for him. He comes to a stop in front of her, eyes flicking towards the hole at the base of the trunk. He doesn't touch the tree; he can't get in without her permission, and he doesn't want to be rude. This is her home.

Lup tilts her head and shifts into the form the human first met her in, with teeth perhaps a bit shorter than before. It's pretty close to her true form. Not quite there, but good enough for this. She doesn't want to show her actual appearance to the human and she enjoys showing off.

"Come on in. I ask you to leave the iron outside, though. Not sure how it'd interact with the magic in there."
Lup raises a hand and places it on the tree, pushing her magic into the bark. The wood creaks as the branches stiffen, healthier than they were a moment ago. Lucretia can make the pocket dimensions, but they have to be sustained over time with magic or else they'll collapse in on themselves. She ducks in and disappears from the human world. Her tree is small, but it's home, and it's a lot better than some of the human places she and Taako stayed when they were little.

Now that Barry's on the threshold of following a fae into her territory—and she’s shifted into a more intimidating form, ethereally beautiful with a glint of sharp teeth—he pauses. She said she wouldn't hurt him. She's fully capable of setting him on fire and hasn't tried once. That was enough to put Barry at ease, but...

But what she actually said was, "I won't hurt you unless you give me apt reason to". That's open-ended; she gets to decide what counts as a reason for her. And too many fae are capable of twisting the definition of what counts as 'hurt' in their favor. This is how even humans with a verbal contract get plucked out of time for a hundred years, pampered in luxury until they return to find their family dead.

Nothing that extreme is possible without the magic of a real court, the likes of which don't exist in this part of the world anymore. So that limits her to charming him and keeping him captive until he tells her what he knows about her brother. Or identifies everyone else involved with the investigation to her, so she can pick them off one by one... Hunters all know each other by pseudonyms, but that practice isn't universal among other branches of law enforcement. Most of the constables would be sitting ducks.

But she came to talk to him when she could've rained hellfire down on Glamour Springs and blown this debacle up into a war. There's no way hunters would've taken her down before she claimed dozens of victims. Barry just doesn't understand enough about her motives. He doesn't know what her relationship with her brother is like, or how Sazed fits into the picture.

And she's the only one around to question. Nice and easy, he tells himself. Just like interviewing any other potential suspect. It's her brother that's burned a man to death in broad daylight.

Still, he's loathe to leave his iron behind. It's bad enough that he won't be able to cast magic in her realm. Not that any human can hope to rival a fae in power, but it's nice to have more tools to fall back on. She's right, though—iron might disrupt the pocket dimension. At least everything else in his kit's safe to take in. The charms should even work for a couple hours longer.

Barry pulls his daggers and needles from his pockets, and the odd miniature horseshoe and other bits and bobs he's accumulated. After a moment he sheds his mask and goggles as well—he's so sick of wearing them that even their protective iron lining isn't worth it anymore. He piles everything a few feet from the base of the tree. There's nothing he can do about the little bands of iron stitched into his jacket, but hopefully she knew that. He's also not going to take his belt and its iron buckle off. That would be weird.

He's technically unarmed for this conversation. He's done more with less. Barry ducks into the tree. For him the transition is jarring. Air pressure builds and pops. All his senses stutter for a moment. Everything from the light to the air to the ground beneath his feet feels subtly off. His body feels foreign; his limbs too light, hands too far from his torso.

And then his surroundings resolve. He blinks away blurriness. The air inside is so much fresher than the fungus-ridden forest. Her home is surprisingly human. It's small, no more than a single,
Two beds. Isn't that interesting. That might answer whether she and her brother actually got along. Barry dearly hopes the bed is Justin's, and that there's not yet another fae involved.

"Uh," he says, clearing his throat. "Should I sit, or...?"

Lup can tell he didn't get rid of all his iron by the tiny, harmless sparks of magic trailing him. At least he doesn't seem armed by human standards. She'll just have to watch out if things go bad. "Feel free." she gestures to her bed. "I'm going to stand if that's alright, easier to think."

Lup leans to rest her elbows on the table and sighs. "Alright. First things first. If we're going to work together we should have something to call each other. I don't want to keep calling you 'hunter' or 'human'. So a deal? You tell me something I can call you I tell you something to call me? Doesn't have to be real."

"Bluejeans," Barry says immediately, lowering himself onto the floor by the stump-like table. He's not going to sit on someone's bed. "Er, I mean—that's the uh, pseudonym I've been going by? For hunter business. You know how it is."

The jeans he's wearing right now are faded grey and caked with dirt. At least they're worn enough to bend easily at the knee when he crosses his legs. He's got too much crap in his pockets and bag to making sitting on the floor comfortable, but this fae's home feels so much like a small cottage that standing around would awkward. Even more awkward than introducing himself as Bluejeans to a pretty girl to open a discussion on hunting down her brother. "And uh, what should I call you, Miss Fae?"

Lup snickers at the 'Miss.' She know she’s old compared to a human but really she’s quite young for a fae in the grand scheme of conditional immortality.

"You may call me Lup."

She doesn't know what compels her to say her actual name. That sort of thing can get fae in a ton of trouble with hunters. But something tells her she can trust Bluejeans. He trusted her enough, might as well return the favor.

"So. Sounds like my goofus brother got himself in some real shit huh? I want to clarify now. He's not a killer. If something happened it wouldn't have been unprovoked."

'Lup' doesn't sound like the kind of pseudonym Barry would expect from a fae. It’s kind of goofy. A lot of fae prefer to choose names that are intimidating or significant, often ripping off popular myth. Lots of Athenas and Remuses and Hippolytas and Grendels. Lup also doesn't pass for a mundane human name, which would've made sense with how...approachable she seems. It begs the question why she's living out in the forest, when it's obvious that she'd be as good at blending in with humans as her brother was.

He’s still not sure she’s given her real name. Would she extend that trust to him when she knows
it'd be a piece of cake for him to make wards and charms against her? She seems kind. Sociable. Cooperative. Assuming his judgment isn't magically impaired right now, Barry thinks that maybe there aren't any traps hidden in her words. She certainly doesn't seem inclined to violence, and her little realm gives him absolutely no impression of hidden danger. He might be able to take for granted that everything she's told him so far is true.

"What kind of, uh, provocation would do it for him?" Barry asks, folding his hands on the table to stop himself from fidgeting. "There's been—eight deaths from the poisoning, last I checked, on top of that burnt guy. Your brother's show was—was real successful, and now it's done for good. Why...?" He lets his voice trail off, leaving the question open-ended. Nothing about this situation has given him a coherent picture of what Justin's like, and he'll learn more if he doesn't ask leading questions. He thinks. He hates interviewing people.

Lup frowns and watches the silver sparks gathering around Bluejeans's vest. Maybe he has a right to be suspicious. Some fae—redcaps, banshee, spriggans—are very dangerous creatures and most others are tricksters. She thinks fae are due a bit more trust, though. While wary, fae folk tend to trust each other. It's the one benefit of being unable to lie. Falsehoods always seem pointless to her; better to just phrase things carefully. It's why she doesn't spend as much time with humans as Taako. If fae are dangerous for being tricksters, what's a human, spouting off outright lies?

"I'll be honest; I'm not sure what the poisoning's about. He loves his show. He wouldn't have done anything to jeopardize it." She turns to look Bluejeans square on. "My brother likes being closer to humans, likes being liked by them."

Lup pauses. How much should she tell him about Taako? How much does he already know? She at least trusts Bluejeans not to kill Taako right away when they find him. They need to share information if they're going to figure this out.

"Justin met Sazed a year or so back. I never liked him. He was always very vocal about his distaste of us... fae, that is." Lup runs a hand down her face. She'd had a dozen arguments with Taako over keeping that shitbag around.

"My guess? He found out. Somehow. You said he was holding an iron pan? T-Justin never let the guy actually cook, there was no reason for him to have that in his hands." She looks the hunter in the eye. He's smart. He'll get the picture. "He's killed in self-defense before. I'm sure you have and obviously I have too."

Barry can't imagine another incentive for Lup to cooperate with human law or hunters when she knows her brother's not in custody. Or to frame Sazed's corpse. She's offering information bluntly, leaving herself no room to prevaricate or distort his impression of the truth for some hidden agenda.

Barry feels like a little bit of an asshole for being so suspicious of her. He's not used to working with the kind of fae that live peacefully among humans. Most people go through life not knowing whether they've met a fae, while hunters usually don't get called in unless someone's dead. So many of the people he's worked with treat all fae like devious monsters. Barry's ashamed that he almost did the same.

Protocol dictates that he take Lup into custody for proper questioning. Any hunter would assume she'd killed a human at some point, she practically admitted it with her self-defense comment. She'd be locked in an iron cell and cruelly interrogated until she gave up everything she knows about her brother, and enough about the victims of her own crimes to charge her too. In the best-
case scenario some wealthy fae's legal team would commute her sentence down to virtually nothing. Worst case scenario she resists and gets killed on the spot.

Barry wants absolutely no part in any of that.

"The witnesses were obviously not, uh, having their best day," he says abruptly. "A lot of them were too busy blowing chunks to see anything useful. But we've definitely uh, got some people who say they saw—let me lay this out for you." Barry fishes in his pockets, freezing when he realizes how bad that looks to Lup. He very slowly pulls out the top wad of paper, the one his stylus is crumpled in, and flattens it on the table. He flips it to the blank side and crudely sketches the crime scene. He’s going to give her the key details...but maybe just the ones she’d like to hear. Humans are scared of the fae and their magic. Some witnesses were convinced Justin was out to kill them all. It does Barry no good to make Lup think he doubts her brother’s character.

Lup watches intently and amusedly as Barry lays the scene.

"Okay, so, when—I forget her name. Some young woman. Mid-20's. She vomited almost immediately after the food samples were passed out, and then recovered enough to sit up. She stayed on her bench about here—" he says, tapping a spot on the paper adjacent to the center row, "and the people around her who were, uh, able to watch, corroborated her story. What she said was the chef ran into the audience after she threw up. She said he seemed freaked out, and he was doing something with his hands, and he shouted for help."

Barry sighs and winces. "And then she threw up again. But she did see Sazed hop off the stage with a frying pan and—clock Justin, full across the face. She said it was like a bomb going off. Light and noise everywhere. Nobody else really got a better view than her. The guy Justin was standing next to still doesn't uh, have all of his hearing back. And he's got like, flash burns on that whole side of his body, from Sazed's—cremation."

Any humor Lup had at Barry’s methods is replaced with burning anger when she learns what that scumbag did. "I knew it," she manages to choke out around her rage. "I knew something like this would happen! I-I should have done something myself! Should have taken Sazed or just outright killed him before it got this far! Taako was too f*cking excited by the willing labor to think past his own nose!" She’d trusted Taako to figure it out. He didn't.

Barry glances up from his diagram at the slip of Justin, or Taako’s, real name to see Lup’s features distort inhumanly. Her hair's pricking up like spines, her eyes are blown wide into deep black pits. The snarl that wrenches her jaw reveals sharpened fangs that catch the orange light glinting off the stream of fire that roars from her hand a moment later.

She knows she's not in control of her form right now. She knows how she must look. She knows she's scaring Bluejeans. But she's so fucking angry right now. She can't even do anything about it. There's no one left to take her anger out on. Instead she snarls and channels her fury. Fire springs from her hands and flashes through the side wall, devouring the wood in an instant and leaving only a patch of magically sparkling char.

No. She needs to calm down. She doesn't want to scare Bluejeans off. He doesn't know she's not gonna hurt him right now. Lup takes deep breaths. She wills her body to meld back into something more human, more trustable. She isn't sure how well she succeeds, but she hopes it's enough. Anger leaving her, she lets herself fall to her knees. She doesn't have the energy left to be mad. She’s been keeping all her anger and worry pent up for days and she just doesn't feel like holding back anymore. So she puts her head in her hands and cries. What is she going to do. He's hurt. He's
really hurt and she doesn't know where he is.

Barry balks. He's such an idiot! Of course Lup would be upset about Taako being attacked. He can't believe he babbled on about the scene like it was an interesting puzzle instead of Lup's brother. "Shit, I'm sorry," he says. He shuffles around the table and extends a hand towards her shaking shoulder. "Can I—is it okay—you want a hug?"

At first, Lup tenses. She's really not sure if she does and the iron-laced vest alone is enough to give her pause. But she sniffs again and leans into his touch. She's such an idiot. "I'm sorry. It wasn't fair of me to freak out on you like that. It's -sniff- it's no wonder Sazed burned. He had the nerve to hit Taako with-," she choke off into another sob. It doesn't surprise her Taako would have exploded like that with such a sudden and violent attack. Not that Sazed didn't deserve it. For what he did? He deserved something much slower.

Barry gingerly rests an arm across Lup's shoulders and shuffles in close. "He's gonna be okay," he says, as gently as he can. He's getting a little choked up from watching Lup cry. "He got away. We didn't—didn't find any sign of him at the scene."

That's the sum of the problem he's been investigating for days now and he's throwing it out as a comforting assurance.

The iron in his vest isn't especially comfortable for Lup, but she leans into the contact anyways. Eventually her hiccuping crying dies down to just a numb sadness.

Eventually Lup rubs at her eyes and looks at the damaged wall. "Damn it... I'm gonna have to get Luce to fix that..." She breathes deeply and tries to settle the last of her nerves.

When Barry follows Lup's gaze to the wall, he realizes he missed the second name she dropped. 'L-' something. Only high faes can create these pocket dimensions. Knowing one of their names is always valuable. Barry examines his feelings and finds he doesn't care, even if this is the kind of slip-up that would've gotten him yelled at when he was a junior.

There's very little about this situation that anyone who trained him would approve of. Lup sniffs and rubs tear tracks on her cheeks. "Barry," he says. "That's uh, my name, by the way. I'm—we can find your brother."

Lup startles and pulls away when Barry tells her his name. She can tell it's real, can feel the power it carries. He trusts her. She doesn't believe anything humans say. There's no possible way to. But she finds she trusts him too. Even if whatever he's saying he's saying just to make her feel better, all lies, it works. After she almost burned the place down around them he decides to trust her.

She starts laughing. She can't help it. The whole thing is just so ridiculous. She's teaming up with a hunter to find her brother. Lucretia would be proud. She buries her face in Barry's chest as she laughs. It burns a bit more than when she just had his arm around her shoulder but she doesn't worry about it

"We should. We should probably get out of here." She gestures to the burn spot, now sparkling generously with untamed magic. "I'm-uh. I'm not sure how long that's gonna stay stable."

Barry wrenches his attention away from the press of Lup's face against his shirt and the blush crawling up his neck. "I've never seen one of these break before," he says. "Are the sparks from, uh, the conduction of magic moving freely from the frame of the pocket dimension to the interior?
What'd happen if we just—threw something in the hole?"

Lup looks up at Barry with a funny expression. He's a nerd. Fairy Mother he's such a nerd. "I'm... not sure?" She gropes around on the floor and grabs one of Taako's little trinkets that'd fallen off the dresser during her freak out. She looks at Barry quizzically and tosses it towards the hole.

As soon as it enters the sparks increase in intensity. The edges of the hole start to crackle and expand.

"Oh shit."

The walls fall away into the expanding hole at the same time the image of ballooning bark is superimposed across Barry's vision. The air in the room swells with pressure, thick and resistant against Barry's limbs, like he's suddenly ten feet underwater. He blinks and the room goes dark, opens his eyes to see the trails of vines along the walls sinking into soft pith, all suffused with nauseating phosphors. Magic arcs and crackles in his ears. Radiant points of light sweep towards them like a tide of ants.

It's the most amazing thing he's ever seen. He's never even heard of someone claiming they watched a pocket dimension collapse. He commits it to memory as he tugs Lup to her feet, circling an arm over her shoulders.

"Time to go!" he says. He sweeps them to the exit, throwing back the embroidered curtain with his free arm. They duck through and stumble out of the pocket dimension just as the nerves in his face fizz. He feels like he has bark in his sinuses. Every bit of iron on him sings with building heat. It's overwhelming, the sensations crawling outwards from his core. But he can still feel Lup's body pressed into his. He screws his eyes shut against the onslaught and compels his feet to carry them forward.

Then they're out. The pressure falls away so fast he feels like he's been scooped hollow. His legs wobble dangerously under him, all sense of balance lost, forcing him to lean his weight on Lup and let her take over dragging them away from the tree. Barry opens his eyes and cranes his neck to watch behind them.

The tree's bubbling with chancreas. It twists in on itself like the bark's being folded in towards a central point. Its limbs whip through the air with cacophonous rustles and deafening snaps. Unnatural burls swell from the trunk, blocky and geometric. The stump of the table Barry was sitting at slowly pushes out of the bark until the smooth crescent of its top forms a shelf.

The triangular passage into the tree puckers and folds with incredible speed that makes Barry happy they got out before that stage. Then something shoots out of the tree and flashes past them. Barry whips around to see the trinket that Lup threw into the hole—a brass hair ornament of intricate flowers—hit a tree on the other side of the clearing with enough force to embed itself and warp from the effort.

Barry starts laughing. Then his ears pop and his temples pulse, so he grits his teeth and gasps for breath instead.

Lup shrugs off the warped magic much faster and starts cackling. She takes a mental note to get Lucretia next time she decides to destroy her pocket dimension instead of tossing random things in. She stands up and goes to inspect the hair comb. It's warped way beyond repair. Taako's going to be pissed. About this, and everything else that got completely wrecked. She pulls it from the tree.
with some difficulty. Thing is really lodged in there. She thanks the Fairy Mother the thing didn't hit either of them. That would have been nasty.

Lup hisses as she realizes the singe across her shoulders. She pokes at the discolored skin gingerly. Iron burns. The collapsing magic must have amplified the effect. Nothing too bad. It'll take a bit to heal, though.

"Well then. That was...an adventure." She reaches out a hand to help Barry up. "You alright?"

Barry stares at Lup's hand dumbly, head swimming, before reaching out to take it. "Don't—don't worry about me," he says. "Fuck, your house!"

Lup pulls Barry up pretty effortlessly and stares at the warped, dying tree that was her home only a minute ago. "It's... alright. I can get a new one. Today, maybe, if Luce isn't too busy. And if she is, she'll get to it when she can. To be frank I'm more bummed about the stuff."

"Luce?" Barry asks, swaying slightly on his feet. That's the name he heard earlier. It's gotta be a pseudonym or nickname—no way would Lup give up a high fae’s real name. "I mean, yeah it—really sucks, about all your stuff. I had no idea pocket dimensions could collapse like that. That was—really something, to watch. Makes you wonder about what it was like when—" he cuts himself off. He refuses to casually bring up more potentially traumatic events from Lup's life. "I mean, you know," he says, instead sweeping an arm to gesture to the trees around them, draped in fungus.

"Luce is a friend of mine. She's helped out a lot since," Lup mimics Barry's gesture, "you know. It must have been fuckin wild. Pretty sure the courts aren't collapsed, though. Wouldn't have to wreck all the portals if it was." She rubs at the marks along her shoulder. Damn it, that's gonna sting for a while. "Just dangerous."

"Wait, so people could still—walk in there, if they wanted? To the old courts?" What's known is that the forest and the courts secreted within it were corrupted. Unusable. The fae lost so many of their own, as well as a huge portion of their magics. A lot of the older stories of fae—of them luring mortals to their realms with luxury, only to steal them out of time—are fears of a bygone era in this area of the world.

It's a little surprising to him that the destruction he just witnessed is more total than whatever befell the courts. Makes sense, though, since he did see Lup immolating a tree to collapse its portal the first time they met. He can't help but think she's good at that.

"Maybe? I've never tried. Shit's wack over there. Fae that cross over get corrupted too, we're too tied to nature. Not sure what it'd do to you but based on the cough you get in this forest?" Lup pats him on the shoulder. "I wouldn't recommend it." Lup looks around and hums a bit to herself. Where would Lucretia be right now? Probably with Lucas. She looks back at Barry. The lab isn't too far. And maybe she can hook Barry up with one of Lucas's masks. They seem to work better than his.

Barry's staring off into space, still mulling her words over. The corruption's out-of-control magic, and all the greatest magics are wrought by fae. It's long been understood that, therefore, they caused the corruption. Or at least one of their factions did. That tracks with how they're the only people who still dare to live in this forest, and with all the records of conflict among the courts.

Most of the fae left are those that never lived in the courts to begin with. Makes it hard to get an
informed witness about the whole thing. Even putting aside that fae tend to close ranks when it comes to humans poking into their business.

He takes a couple steps towards the pile he abandoned all his iron things in, glancing back towards Lup. Then he sees the shiny burns across her skin. "Shit, what happened to your shoulders?" he says, before he remembers the iron sewn into his jacket.

Lup turns and looks down at the burns. A few are starting to form small blisters. "Oh. I think the magic collapsing in on itself amplified the iron's effects. It's fine. It'll heal in a few weeks."

"That tracks," Barry says to himself. Iron's valuable because of how totally it disrupts the flow of fae magic. Spells break open and unravel against it, and laid webs of power dissolve from the edges in like a sugar cube in water. Some fae have bodies so suffused with magic that iron's inimical to them even at a distance. Others have barely more magic than a human and barely flinch from iron's touch. Lup's shapeshifting places her far closer to the first category. "Hey, I've got some stuff for burns in my kit? Would that do you any good?"

Lup hums, considering it. ‘Burn’ is a loose term for the injury. A better descriptor would be a patch of her physical form where her magic has been disrupted, however minor. That’s going to give her a hard time until it finally heals. "Probably not? Iron burns are -uh- a bit more magical? Than heat burns." She pokes at it again, hissing under her breath. "Shifting's gonna be a bitch for a while... Aw fuck. No way I'm gonna be able to get to Luce by tonight. Too far on foot."

She could probably stay with Merle for the night? Or maybe just hang? Ugh. Alright, maybe imploding her house wasn't the best thing in the world.

"Oh geez. Well, let me know if you change your mind," Barry says, packing up all his stuff. "I'm gonna have to make a report tonight, especially if I need to justify leaving town." He shifts his bag to his shoulders and shuffles in place nervously. "I've gotta—I've gotta cite you as my source for what you told me about Sazed. I'm not gonna put your name in, though."

He's not gonna put in a great deal of what happened between him and Lup, because the other hunters would think he's lost his goddamn mind.  He thinks she's been honest with him—that she's certain her brother killed Sazed in self-defense, and that she's genuinely upset that he's vanished. But as, the facts stand; Barry had a conversation with a fae in her realm, the home she shares with his prime suspect, wherein she claimed he was missing. And then she collapsed the whole dimension. Barry got every impression that was an accident, but the end result is that now it would be natural for her to vanish. He doesn't think she's a good enough actress to have been stringing him along. Remembering her tears still makes his eyes prick in sympathy. But no one else would be inclined to believe her, or his testimony.

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Plus, what if Lup's sold him this story of needing his help to find her brother, and then she vanishes too?

Lup side-eyes Barry a bit. She isn't thrilled about being cited as a source, name or no, but she understands why he has to do it. She finds she trusts him enough to not comment on it further. If he wanted to hurt her he would have by now, she's certainly let her guard down enough.

"I'm also uh, waiting on a lot of info they were supposed to get for me," he says thoughtfully. "We've taken over—the inn I'm staying at has this little pub on the first floor with a side room, and that's where we've set up. You probably really shouldn't go into town looking like, uh, a fae.
They'd take you into custody just 'cause. But if you want to be there, and you can manage some shapeshifting—we could try to work something out."

She acknowledges the logic in the 'not going into town looking like a fairy version of the accused murderer' suggestion. Lup wasn't really planning on it, but the offer of staying at an inn instead of cramped in Merle's tiny little place definitely appeals.

_That and being able to stay with Barry a little longer, _her mind supplies and NOPE. Nope. Just gonna. Not think about the idea of actually enjoying this nerd's company more than just as an aid in finding Taako. No.

"That actually sounds like it would be good? As for the shifting I _can_ do it? But it has the possibility of fucking with the warped magic more. Since it's on my shoulders I probably wouldn't be able to fly great. I might be able to handle something else though? Any ideas?"

"For hiding you—even a cat would be too large to smuggle into the inn," Barry muses, scratching his stubble. "Snake, maybe. Lizard, uh, mouse. Squirrel? Something pocket-sized. We've been putting up iron horseshoes and the like all over, since the murder, but the inn's wards are a joke. They're plenty safe with all the hunters around. It was more important to do the civic center and the—the clinic, and mayor's house, and all that. The kid I put on warding buildings is probably not gonna get back around to the inn until next Tuesday."

The more Barry talks about hiding Lup from the other hunters the more certain he is that it's the right thing to do. She doesn't deserve to be detained just because she's the primary suspect's sister. If Taako were human then no one would suggest that, even if they were sure he'd intentionally poisoned his audience.

Lup considers her options. Shifting to coldblooded is more of a leap, might put too much strain on her magic. She _is_ partially mammalian being a changeling. Mouse sounds good. She shakes herself out, knowing the next step is going to be... unpleasant.

She's not wrong. The sting on her shoulder intensifies to a steady burn as she shrinks down into the tiny body of a field mouse so quickly the ground seems to swallow her up. She bites back a cry of pain and groans through gritted teeth, a sound that becomes a high-pitched squeak as the shift ends.

She sits in the clearing as a mouse and pants with the strain. Looks like she's gonna be a mouse for a while. Based on the patchy fur across her irritated shoulders she’s sure shifting made the burn spread. Great. Lup huffs and rubs at her face with tiny mouse paws before looking up at Barry and twitching her nose."Will this do?"

Her voice, generated by magic rather than vocal cords, sounds as clear as it always has. Barry crouches down with his hands on his knees to watch her rub her face. _Adorable._ It's amazing that she change her body so totally, heedless of the displaced mass. Feats like that are impossible for even the most gifted humans.

"That's perfect," he says. He quickly pats through his pockets. Damn, his jacket's got the most empty space, but there's iron sewn into it... Barry shucks and dumps it, then empties out the pockets of the vest he's wearing underneath. He stuffs all this, jacket included, into his bag haphazardly before putting his mask and goggles back on. The grid map he was so painstakingly working on ends up crumpled. Doesn't matter—he found Taako's hidey-hole in the end, and now it's completely gone.
"Okay, I can put you in a side pocket—if that's alright?" He slowly extends an open palm to the ground next to her. "Can—can I pick you up?"

Lup shakes herself out and clambers onto Barry's hand. Being this small is always a weird thing. She's used to changing her perspective. Wandering around as a cat is very different from soaring above the trees as a bird, but she doesn't go this small often. It's inefficient for travel, not threatening, and, aside from downright adorable, kinda pointless. So she's not used to humans being so much larger than her. Barry's hand alone outsizes her entire body. It makes her feel vulnerable. If he's going to hurt her now is a perfect time. He could crush her in his hand if he really feels like it. It sends a shiver down her spine.

But it's ok. She's sure it is. It's just instinct saying these things. She trusts Barry… she thinks. "Pocket's fine. As long as you don't mind having a rodent squirming around in there for a while."

Barry's never handled a mouse before—not a living one, anyway—but it's almost like holding a large beetle. Except cuter and fuzzier. He gently tucks Lup into his breast pocket so she can help him navigate back through the forest. She's adorable, with her little paws on the lip of his pocket, her ears poking up, and her whiskers twitching. The whole journey's like something out of a children's book, and gives him plenty of time to consider how he's going to hide her from the other hunters. And what he's comfortable letting her spy on.
Chapter Summary

Barry allies himself with an enemy.

Lup enjoys sitting in the pocket on Barry's chest. It's surprisingly warm and comfortable. Leading him from the forest is no problem and she greatly enjoys chatting as they go, very different from the silent march of their first meeting. She finds her ears twitch at even the slightest sound, along with her nose. It's distracting, but she gets used to it by the time they reach the town.

Barry transfers Lup to a more hidden position in a side pocket and shoves his protective gear into his bag before striding out of the forest. She's a bit loath to be moved to a less advantageous spot, but she understands the necessity. A mouse poking out of Barry's pocket as he wanders around would provoke more than a few questions. The new pocket is still warm, if not quite as comfortable.

The inn's as packed and noisy as it always is during dinner. Barry scoots past full tables of patrons to the plain door blocking off a small, private room. The three junior hunters inside are kicking back at the table they converted into a desk. Alder and Freckles were obviously chatting—Freckles doesn't even manage to get her boots off the table before Barry throws open the door—but at least Quail's sorting through a stack of reports for him.

Barry makes Freckles scribble down his dictation so Lup can overhear while he eats a leftover wrapped sandwich. He puts on record that the fae he met in the woods is a relative of Justin's, that she seemed very upset to have not seen him since the incident, and then relays her assessment of Justin and Sazed's characters.

Lup's ears prick with interest as she listens to the hunters talk. In hindsight, she's grateful to be in a more enclosed space: the inn reeks of iron. It sets her nerves on end even after the reassurances from Barry. At least his report's satisfying. It's enough of the truth to maybe start clearing Taako's name, but not so much that the other hunters would get suspicious, and circumspect about details that could get either of them in trouble. Part of her can't help but wonder how Freckles and the rest would respond if she suddenly appeared. She snickers at the thought. Barry steers the conversation to the information the couriers delivered, knowing that'll be more than enough to distract the kids.

Quail's compiled a thorough summary of what happened while he was away. Besides the reports on the status of the victims—one more dead this afternoon, but five recovered enough to not need strict monitoring anymore—she's got some info from a courier about Sazed.

Specifically, she's got a receipt showing that Sazed purchased the arsenic. He bought it at from a chemist in Bonneville, the last large town the cooking show had passed through before Glamour Springs, under his own name. This discovery was handily aided by the fact that the bottle was labeled with the shop's name.

Lup's fur bristles. She knew Taako wouldn't hurt people. She knew it. How dare that lying creep try to frame Taako for murder. How dare he attack her brother when he was only trying to fix was Sazed did. Those people could be alive now if that stain of a human had just let Taako help.
Barry can't believe it took a team of hunters several days to trace the poison just because one idiot got lazy searching the wagon. A child could’ve solved this one. A child did solve this one: the letter from Bonneville explicitly says the attending hunter’s greenhorned apprentice was the one who talked to the chemist. Barry promotes Quail to field supervisor on the spot and sends Alder to tell the constabulary that he's heading out in the morning.

"Wait, but there's one more thing," Quail says, eyes wide. She's clearly a little panicked to be left in charge. She'll be fine. Sazed's the only one dead on account of fae and Barry can't think of a more deserving victim. This should be the least eventful assignment of her career. "A high fae was seen in Refuge the same day as the poisoning."

That gives Barry pause. "Are—are they sure? What're the circumstances?"

Quail flips through her papers. She's not reading from them, just fidgeting. "He was seen walking along the edge of town in partial human form with his wings out. He was only visible for a couple minutes before disappearing into the forest. Didn't remotely match Justin's description, and couldn't have been him anyway. This was during the show."

Well. That's baffling. High fae don't generally wander around in podunk towns. "Keep an ear to the ground for matching descriptions, but we don't really have a reason to get worried here. It's been days—he's probably long gone."

It strikes Lup as strange too. A high fae? Could be Lucretia, though she's definitely more careful than that, and Lup was pretty sure she's been with Lucas all week. Lydia and Edward rarely left the deep woods, so they were out. So who? And during Taako's show? Lup wishes she could get more information. Barry skims the report, but then folds it up without commenting, makes his excuses, wraps up the rest of his sandwich for later, and heads up to his room for bed.

He locks the door behind him and fishes in his bag until he comes up with a blown-glass bauble to hang on the doorknob. The charm spun into it will keep him from being overheard. It takes him a moment to remember which pocket Lup's in—his vest is thick cotton, formerly pretty nice, and he can't feel her weight. He slowly nudges it open with a finger. "You okay in there? Want the other half of this reuben?"

More than enough time has passed for his pocket to become hot and stuffy. Lup immediately climbs out and takes a deep breath of fresh air. She’s not exactly hungry; most fae don't really need to eat in a human sense. The bulk of their sustenance comes from nature, but she, like her brother, quite likes food and finds it very enjoyable to both make and eat.

"I'm very sure I couldn't eat half a sandwich in this form, but I'd be up for a small piece," she says, taking a quick look around the room. "Can you put me on the bed? This pocket is getting cramped."

"Yeah, sure," Barry says. He lets Lup clamber onto the quilt and unwraps the sandwich to leave next to her. He's broken far more important rules today than his mom’s injunction against crumbs on the bed.

Lup does her best to pull bits of the sandwich with her hands, but unfortunately mice aren't particularly strong, and definitely not built for ripping off meat, so she takes to just nibbling on it instead. She hopes Barry doesn't mind tearing off around the parts she ate when she's done.

Barry’s hovering over Lup in case she needs help while planning how to pack for tomorrow when he sees the inflamed patches of raw skin across her shoulders. Maybe it's the lighting, or how frail she looks as a mouse, but she seems worse off than earlier. "Holy shit, are you doing okay there?
Lup’s ears flick in Barry's direction. She shifts her shoulders uncomfortably, reminded of how much they sting. "Oh. Right. It's fine. Shapeshifting is a heavy magical process so doing it when my magic's fucked up strains the damage further, ya know? Aggravates the wound, you could say. Probably won't do it again until I'm more healed up." She uses her tiny paws to wipe crumbs out of her whiskers. Barry almost coos. "So you're stuck with mouse Lup for a while."

"Oh. Uh, I guess we'll only need one horse, then," Barry says. He feels a little guilty for finding her mouse form so adorable. "Wait, a while? How long's a while?"

Lup licks sandwich residue off her hands. She barely ate anything by normal, large creature standards, but it was plenty for how small she is right now. Not to mention the sandwich was really only decent. No point gorging herself unnecessarily if she doesn't especially like what she’s eating. She notices the look on Barry's face and really wishes mice were capable of looking smug. This is the second time Barry has found one of her forms cute by her count. Dork.

She shrugs, an action she immediately regrets for how stiff the skin on her shoulders is. "Depends how long it takes to heal. Maybe four, five days before I'll be able to comfortably shift? Longer if I don't want to aggravate it again."

That's a lot better than Barry was expecting. Makes sense, with magic. He's never been in a position where he had to care about fae healing from iron burns before. Just...inflicting them in the first place. Most hunter missions follow the same formula; fae kills humans, hunter kills fae.

Now, barely a week since meeting Lup, Barry's seen summoned fire and collapsed pocket realms and complete shapeshifting. Any of these could be the highlight of his year. "You can ride with me in my pocket again tomorrow, or something. Whatever's the most comfortable for you," he says. "I hope you have a lead for where your brother's holed up."

"I can probably sit somewhere on the horse," Lup says. "As much as I enjoy your pocket it can be very cramped in there." She stretches herself out as far as her shoulders will allow to prove her point, cracking several joints (though she's pretty sure Barry can't hear, with her so tiny). "As for Taako...? I know he's not in any of the pockets around here, at least not the ones I know about. I checked. Honestly I have no idea where he is."

"How'd you check the other pocket dimensions around here? Do they let you in?"

"I know most of the fae that live around here and got connections for the others."

Barry nods thoughtfully. "Oh, and do you know anything about that--the high fae? The one outside Refuge?"

Lup hums and thinks it over before saying, "I know exactly three high fae that live in this area and none of them would wander that close to town." She pauses, whiskers twitching. "Okay, Luce might. But she's not around right now. Did that report say what he looked like?"

"Male, looks late 20s to early 30s, maybe a little over six feet and two hundred pounds. Nicely dressed, all in black. Dark complexion, dreads, walking purposefully. And, of course, the wings—black, with edges that lighten to grey and cream. Had 'em folded, so there's no other details. I dunno how much of this is useful, with shapeshifting being a thing."

He eyes the pile of laundry abandoned on the floor critically. Can he pack up his dirty underwear without Lup noticing, or does he stand a shot of distracting her? He decides she probably can't see
much from the bed as a mouse and starts sifting through his stuff with his back to her, blocking her view.

“Yeah that doesn't match any descriptions of the high fae around here,” Lup says. “Probably from a different set of courts.” She cranes her neck to catch a glimpse of what Barry’s up to. She’s not sure how she feels about being stuck so small this long. It's gonna get annoying fast. He’s paused sorting his clothes to divert his full attention to her. She considers how much she should divulge about high fae and what he might know already. A human appearance and wing pattern is plenty to identify them in any form they could take. As much as she trusts Barry, he's still a hunter. If this new high fae is labeled as dangerous in the future she doesn't want to risk his safety.

Fae tend to be close-lipped about their politics. And humans tend to be mistrustful. The human government had very few official relations with the local fae courts before their destruction. Now it may be too late for humans to figure out exactly what was lost, and how. What little they do know paints a grim picture.

"Could he be moving in?" Barry asks. He knows high fae are needed to establish all pocket dimensions, including ones elaborate enough to host courts. Lup's home was virtually indistinguishable from reality. A proper court's a world removed, hosting thousands of fae and replete with magic that molds time and space like putty. A human who enters a fae court should consider everything from their mind to their life forfeit, so total is their mastery of their realm.

"Mmm. Probably not. And if he is he's not going to be given an easy transition. Two of the high fae around here are very territorial." Luce probably wouldn’t mind a new neighbor, but Edward and Lydia are a different story—likely one with a bad ending.

Lup’s finding there's not much to do as a mouse. She curls up on the bed and listens to Barry shove clothing into bags. Fae don't need to sleep, but as a changeling she certainly gets benefits from it, and she really hasn't given herself a chance to rest in the last three days. She's about as exhausted as a fae can get. Which admittedly isn't much, by human standards.

"The old courts—the realms, at least—still exist, right?" Barry asks, after carefully weighing the question. “It's just that entering them infects fae with 'corruption'? And there's no way around that?"

"I think so?" Lup says. “The realm’s still there, but I can't imagine what it looks like now. It's been sustaining itself on corrupted magic for about a hundred years in this world's time. I think the corruption is one of the things Luce is working on, but as of now, infection is unavoidable." More than a few high fae are needed for a full court to be made, along with a very strong magical power source. They aren't common and the only one in this area is, well, sorta fucked. There's a reason the decimated courts haven't rebuilt themselves yet.

Barry finishes throwing his stuff into his bags—actual organization can wait—and checks on Lup. Magic makes her voice come through clear and even, but her little mouse form is curled limply next to the nibbled sandwich. He carefully lifts it away and wraps it back up. He can eat what's left for breakfast tomorrow, even if it's soggy.

"Well, I appreciate that those territorial high fae haven't been giving us problems—at least not that anyone's noticed," he says. "While humans don't exactly want the courts back, knowing more about the fae that corrupted 'em— and what that, what exactly that means for the forest—sure would be something. Too bad nobody who was there really survived."

Corrupt fae are...something else to deal with. Monstrous. Good thing they're increasingly rare these days. "Do you or Luce have any idea if the power source's gonna run out, someday? There's
nothing close to a consensus in what I've read."

Lup doesn't exactly want to keep stuff from Barry, but his questions are straying too close to the business of other fae. She can't speak for them, only for her and Taako. She doesn't think it's fair to risk their safety. Lucretia knows more about the courts than she does anyways. If she wants to disclose stuff that's on her. "Under normal circumstances it'd be fine. Just by living there fae would give their magic to keep it going. Now, though? I have no idea. You could ask Luce? She might know."

"Is that where we're going?" Barry asks, sitting on the edge of the bed opposite Lup. The inn gave him a nice room, but it's still sparsely furnished. Curtained window, diamond-paned and glazed, a desk and chair set under a gas lamp, a set of drawers, and a quilted bed flanked by two small nightstands. It looks very bare now that he's packed. He's glad to be leaving. There's nothing he can contribute to Glamour Springs that one of the other hunters couldn't do better. He's not good at comforting grieving families, he's not trained as a medic, and detective work's not his specialty either.

His specialties are putting down dangerous creatures and researching magic. He'd be thrilled to get a chance to talk shop with a high fae. She probably won't divulge any more than the lyrically obtuse historical counts he's stuck relying on, but it'd still be an experience.

“Might as well. She's the only one who's gonna fix my house. Might know about that new high fae too.” Lup sighs as she realizes how offtrack she's gotten. Taako's still out there, somewhere. Maybe Lucretia will know something?” Lup’s already checked in with everyone else.

And she can’t forget that Barry may be helping her now, but the reasons he wants Taako found could get them hurt. "Alright, Barry. I've answered a lot of your questions. Your turn. What, uh, what are your plans once we find Taako?"

Barry rubs the back of his neck. He really doesn't want to be at odds with Lup. Even if it's technically his job. "Uh, I'll take a statement. Honestly, he's really lucky Sazed bought the arsenic under his own name. Dunno what the hell he was thinking there, if he was, uh, planning to poison half of Glamour Springs? But that'll take a lot of the heat off Taako. Though his show and that—that whole identity as Justin, those are toast."

Of course, there are other hunters who’d be eager to look for a reason why Taako's really the one behind all this. They'd rather believe Sazed was somehow charmed into buying the poison, or that Taako forged a receipt, than allow a fae to escape recrimination. All the more reason that Barry doesn't want to work on this case. It's so much easier when the culprit's a genuine ravening monster. Not when the suspect is likely also a victim and has a nice sister worried for him.

Lup nods slowly, taking in the information. She trusts Barry to, at the very least, talk things out before acting. Most hunters would have fought first and asked questions later if they'd found her out there burning shit. It’s a point in his favor that he didn’t. "He'll be bummed about that, but I figured."

Taako will be upset over losing his show…if he's okay out there. If nothing worse has happened to him. Barry has no intention of mentioning that possibility to Lup yet. Not with the loss so recent and her so exhausted. Vulnerable enough to ask him for help. Maybe she'll come to her senses in the morning and take off without him. But, if not, then he'll surely get some more insight into fae magic and operations just by traveling with her.

...Barry wants Taako to be okay, for Lup's sake. Even if it complicates his life. She yawns as a tiny mouse and his heart just about melts.
"Okay, I think it's bedtime. I'm gonna leave you there, how about, and just scoot..." Barry kicks off his boots and sits on the opposite side of the bed. Then he gets back up and pours a glass of water from the pitcher to leave out for Lup. He does not change out of his jeans. She understands him wanting to preserve his modesty, but she can’t imagine he’s comfortable.

When Barry gets back into bed he shuffles most of the pillows to form a barrier between them. The last thing he wants to do is roll over and crush her in his sleep, so he ends up squished near the headboard. He's effectively ceded more than half the mattress space to a tiny mouse. Lup, for her part, scuttles even further away from the pillow wall. Better safe than sorry. He shrugs and turns off the bedside lamp.

"Uh, shout if you need anything. If not I'll be up at dawn," he says.

The soft fabric is something Lup hasn't slept on since she and Taako were kids still out in the human world. It's... nice. Nostalgic, of times before their powers came in.

She wishes she would fall asleep quickly. Worry eats away at her dreams before they form. It's late into the night by the time she finally slips into a light, troubled rest. At least she’s too small for her rolling and thrashing to bother Barry. He probably doesn't even notice.
Barry peeks over the pillows when enough early morning light filters through the frosted glass window to wake him. Lup's still dead to the world, whiskers gently twitching as she breathes. Unbelievably cute. Now that he's awake and not otherwise occupied he revisits packing. Everything iron he doesn't immediately need about his person gets wrapped up securely in clothes. He changes his shirt and vest to a soft flannel button down with large pockets. Then, deciding that the leftover reuben smells kind of suspect after all, he heads out for breakfast.

Freckles is already seated in the main room, despite the early hour. Concerning. She perks up when she sees him. Extra concerning. "Heyyyyy Bee-Jay," she says, smiling broadly. "We got a courier from Berston like, two hours ago."

"Uh-huh," Barry says blearily. Damn, she didn't even get him food. He tries to wave the waiter over.

"They're having maybe a big problem? On the road between here and there. It's not too far out of your way, is it?"

Barry doesn't actually know where 'Luce' lives. He crosses his fingers and nods. "What kind of problem?"

"The 'folks are dead' kinda problem," Freckles replies smartly. "And you're the oooooonly full-fledged hunter here at loose ends, and you were heading out, so Quail sent back that you could probably check in there. See if they need help."

Barry nods numbly and tells the waiter to please get him some eggs and bacon. "Do you at least have like, a report for me?"

"Sure do!" Freckles says, slapping a stack of folded-up papers onto the table. "Quail made me copy out a bunch of other stuff too. It's all in there."

Freckles has nice penmanship. Not nice enough to legibly squeeze dozens of tiny lines of print onto each of these pages, however. Great, Barry's gonna need a strong light and maybe a magnifying glass. He shoves it all into a pocket and digs into his bacon.

They're probably a little pissed at him for taking off. And for promoting Quail with no warning. That's fair enough, but Barry never wanted to be their boss in the first place. He was called in to deal with a fae that might be hiding in the forest, not to herd a bunch of juniors. If he wanted to chase kids around he'd get his own apprentice.

He excuses himself and folds a slice of bacon to tuck in with the papers, ignoring Freckles's raised eyebrows. She can judge all she wants. He's out of here.
Alder's got a horse ready for him. Barry leaves the bacon on the bed next to Lup, hoping grease doesn't stain the quilt, and sneaks around the room to gather the bulk of his luggage. He carries everything but his satchel down. Once the horse is packed he heads back upstairs to finally rouse Lup. He hopes she got enough rest.

“Hey? Hey, Lup, good—good morning?” Barry whispers, crouching next to the bed. She doesn’t stir until he repeats himself. Barry sounds as tentative as she was whenever she had to wake Taako and her human parents without making them mad. It didn't usually work, but in this situation she appreciates that Barry’s being considerate. She yawns and stretches herself out, tight skin on her shoulders straining uncomfortably, before settling into a sitting position. It's nice to get all that stress off, at least temporarily.

"Morning, Bluejeans." She notices immediately that Barry’s packed up. It’s a relief that he seems as eager to go as she is. "We heading to Luce today?"

"I hope Luce's place isn't—isn't too far away from Berston, cos we've gotta take a detour. Unless we can come up with some excuse the other hunters will buy," Barry says, strapping his bag on. "Horse is ready, breakfast is, uh, served—" he gestures to the bacon, "so we can go whenever you feel like. Or actually, I need to read some of this first. The Berston report." He digs the papers out of his pocket and glares at them. Maybe he can try to read while riding.

She can’t help but snicker at his rambling. "Uh. Not sure. Luce is at Lucas Miller's lab? His family’s well-known among humans, right? That's over on the outskirts of Rockport, I think." Lup scampers to the bacon and starts chewing at it. It's far too greasy and she decides to leave it after a few bites. Not as if she's gonna get hungry later. "I'm ready to go whenever you're done reading."

"Ugh, so Berston's technically on the way to Rockport, but it's not along the road I would've liked to take," Barry says. He sits down heavily on the edge of the bed and unfolds the reports, angling them towards the sunlight. Frowning, he shoves his glasses into his hairline and squints at Freckles's unnecessarily tiny print. She didn't even put headings down or indent her paragraphs.

The first thing he sees—"Huh, that high fae? That report we heard last night was only the latest sighting. Turns out he was spotted in Refuge and two other nearby towns in the days leading up to the cooking show. But then? Nothing since."

"That's weird. Maybe the rise in hunter activity scared him off?"

Barry snorts. "I mean, maybe. But if I was a high fae, I wouldn't be scared of Freckles and Alder and the rest. He could've just not wanted trouble, I guess."

Lup snorts too, though it comes out as more of a squeak. High fae might have some fancy powers, but they really aren't tough shit in a fight without a court backing them up. Which this guy might have, she supposes. "So what do you have to do in Berston?"

This report's a hot mess: the answer to a question that simple should be way more obvious. Maybe Barry does need to mentor the juniors. They sure could use some pointers. "Something—something—approximately noon yesterday...Ugh, this part's just a list of names of everyone in the caravan that was 'involved in the incident'... Oh shit," Barry says, blinking. "That's the casualties list. Eleven?"

He unfolds all the papers and sits up straighter. "Shit. Bridge troll, two kiloms west of Berston. They shot it with regular bullets. Didn't take it down, just made it mad as hell. It collapsed the bridge. Three people dead, four horses...and one kid missing, shit."
Barry knows that stretch of road well. There's more than one small creek that wends alongside and under that road. There are...at least five other bridges the damn thing could've holed up under. No wonder the hunters on the scene are reaching out for more manpower.

Lup's ears flick. That's a lot of casualties, and a missing kid is just adding on. It’s odd, though, that the troll grabbed the kid. Some fae, like changelings, take kids because that's how they make fae kids. That's understandable. Others take kids if a deal's been broken because they know it'll make humans shape up. That makes sense. But why would a troll want one? Maybe part of a bet? No...Trolls are too dumb for that. More likely they’d make deals for food or territory. "Why'd it take a kid?” she mumbles, only partially to herself. “Trolls don't need kids..."

"Dinner, I guess," Barry says dryly. He jumps to his feet. "In which case we really oughta be going. You ready?"

Lup admittedly doesn't know enough about trolls to argue. Doesn't sound right, but Barry is the hunter, so she trusts his judgment. Not as if she’s ever met a troll. "Yup. I assume I'm riding pocket til we get out of town?"

"Alder's the one in the stables, and in all fairness he's not, uh, I wouldn't trust him to notice a mouse. Or his own hand in front of his face. But we should still play it safe."

Barry would normally take at least Quail with him for support. But he'd rather chat with Lup than have to hide her while he rides. Plus the report says there are already two other fully trained hunters tracking the troll. Should be fine. He folds the papers back up, tucks them in his pocket, plucks the silencing charm from the doorknob, then replays the last few minutes. Miller's lab after Berston...he knew the Millers sometimes collaborated with a high fae, that must be Luce... Guess he's getting that tour after all. That’s some serious luck. He'd written them years ago, even before Maureen published with a fae co-author, and been told that the lab didn’t take visitors.

"Dealing with the troll should only take half the day. Either we catch it or we don't. Tracking fae in the wilderness is— is a real long shot." He approaches to pick Lup up and nearly kicks over the forgotten water glass before laying his palm on the bed next to her. The bacon gets tossed into the garbage.

Lup wants to comment that 'tracking fae in the wilderness' is exactly what they've both been doing for the past few days but decides to hold her tongue. A highly magical, shape-shifting changeling must be easier to find than a troll, right Barry?

She takes a brief moment to stretch one last time before climbing on and being tucked in a pocket. Still warm and not immediately tight, but she knows from experience that she’ll be uncomfortable before too long.

She listens as Barry clatters down the stairs and out to the stables. He stops to talk and she recognizes the other voices as the hunters from last night. It's a little unnerving how many there are, but she’s reassured that Barry doesn’t seem to think they're especially competent.

For a while she loses track of where they are, but then the overpowering reek of horses announces that they’ve entered the stable. Mice have a strong sense of smell, apparently. A voice who can only be Alder directs Barry to a horse and soon the steady ride in walking-Barry's pocket becomes the rather jostling ride in riding-a-horse-Barry's pocket.

At least the flannel shirt Barry's wearing is much softer than what he had last night. Even so, the pocket becomes uncomfortable much faster this time. Maybe it's because she's been in there before? Maybe it's because she's being bounced up and down so much. Lup's not sure and doesn’t
really care about the why. What she does know is she's relieved when Barry reaches in and pulls
her out to be placed on the rim of his...hat? When did he get a hat? Doesn't matter, even if she’s
sick of how much she’s missing while stuck as a mouse. It’s incredibly dorky and is much more
comfortable to ride on than the pocket.

It's not a long trip and she gets to chat with Barry, which is quite nice. He's good company. She
enjoys watching the trees and fields pass by, seeing green start poking through the encroaching rot
until there’s no black fungus to be seen. By the time they reach the first bridge on the way into
Berston the sun's just starting to reach its peak.

"So. Any idea where this thing is?"

Barry laughs. "Hell, I wish, Lu-" —better not use her name, actually. The road here's lined with
fields of fresh green wheat, tended by a handful of farmers visible in the distance. They can't be
overheard, especially over the horse's hoofbeats, but there's no sense in taking unnecessary risks.
"We should see the first bridge over Echo Creek after these fields. Honestly not sure which one got
destroyed, from the report. I don't know 'em by name. Doubt it was too close to town proper."

Lup grips the edge of the hat to look around the lush fields. It's a nice change of pace from the
blacks and grays of the choking fungus. "Well wherever it is I'm sure we can take it. Trolls are
pretty dumb, if strong and irritable."

The path leads around a long, open bend before arriving at the first river crossing. The bridge is a
squat construction of mortar and stone unadorned by anything so modern as safety railing. Beneath
it the creek is a thin ribbon of dark water, nearly hidden by the thick brush thriving on its banks.
The foundations of the bridge are similarly concealed, weathered stone giving way to tangled
branches an arm's length below the road. The stream flows surprisingly clear over the pebbly
riverbed and Lup can’t help but wonder at it. It’s been a long time since she’s seen such clean,
healthy water. It’s one of the oldest natural magics and her home forest is lesser for the loss.

Barry frowns. "Well, that's not great," he says, gesturing to the trees around him. "Look, there's no
streamers or anything left up. The other hunters haven't been here yet."

"Streamers?"

"Yeah, there's this whole elaborate system—really the only ones anyone uses are black for clear,
yellow for signs of fae, and red for 'danger, danger, stay the hell away until you get briefed by
whoever tied this'. But uh, guess we're the first ones here." There's nothing tied to any of the tree
trunks. Or scratched into the bark, which he's seen people do a few times in emergencies. "Dammit,
we're gonna have to check this out. Or do you think we should wait for backup?"

Lup is very sure she shouldn't be the one making this decision. She's not exactly a trained fae
hunter. "I think we should be alright. Like I said, trolls are pretty dumb. As long as we're clever
about it it shouldn't be an issue."

Barry dismounts and slides off his horse, then leads it several paces back and secures it to a tree
close to the roadside. The horse happily crops the grass in reach while he goes through its
saddlebags for equipment. Lup leaps from his hat to the back of the horse. If anything happens
she’ll want the highest vantage point she can get. "You got anything other than fire and
shapeshifting up your paws?" he asks, suppressing a grin at his lame wordplay. "Cuz trolls don't
generally give a shit about fire, and I know you're uh, stuck with the whiskers for now."

"No? I have a bit of nature stuff, like most fae, but it's not particularly strong. Usually shifting
covers what fire doesn’t. What’ve you got, Bluejeans?"
"Too many knives," he says absentmindedly, digging past two he doesn't ever use. "Fishing hooks...the miniature iron horseshoe I was supposed to give Alder, shit... Oh, there's my hawthorn sachet, I should've worn that when I met you."

Barry's been living out of bags for too long. He's been on the road for close to twenty weeks, never staying in any one town for longer than a fortnight. It's not that fae activity's any more frequent than the norm. It's just that the hunters suffered a couple of pointless casualties near the end of winter and then his superiors let people retire before promoting trainees to fill out their ranks. Barry's overdue for a long stay someplace where he can sort through his equipment and shop. It's been one problem after another and now his clothes are all dirty and his herb kit's half empty. Would've been nice to have some pimpernel sprigs when he was trying to question Lup. They're as good for detecting prevarication as outright dishonesty, even for someone with as little nature sense as him.

He redoes his belt with his scabbard and seax attached, though getting into a knife fight with a troll should be his absolute last resort. They don't have anything of the missing kid's to use for divination, so he goes with his elderwood wand instead of the hazel. Then shrugs on his iron-lined jacket and unhooks his lantern from the strap of a saddlebag.

"This thing's so cool, check it out," he says, shaking it and listening to oil slosh. It's heavy even with the tank nearly empty. An iron frame and lead glass enclose its burner and wick. He's had this lantern for twenty years. He etched the runes on its base himself; standard ones for protection and luck, as well as some custom additions.

Barry refills the tank from his backup canister of oil and taps the glass with his wand. The wick lights, burning deep orange with a faint whiff of the citronella added to the oil as a bug repellent. He twists the ventilation cap, lining up the second set of runes. They catch the sunlight and flare blue. The burning wick pulses a moment later and the deep orange shimmers and blooms into bright white. "Portable sunlight," Barry says with a grin. "These're standard kit, now, but when I started hunting you couldn't buy 'em."

Lup's ears perk up when the magic takes effect. "That's amazing! I've never seen one of these." She leaps across the horse to get as close as she can to the lantern. "What are those runes? I wonder if I could find a way to do that with my fire."

"I cribbed them from a couple of patents, which, uh, I was definitely not supposed to have copies of," Barry says. "So, the glass is actually key here. You need about 35% lead oxide to get the refractive index right. Then you dunk 'em in melted resinite for a day—I don't have my notes, so I can't tell you the exact solution—" He realizes he's babbling and cuts himself off. "Anyway. You can probably figure out a way to skip all of that with illusion magic. The runes are—you familiar with the undulatory theory of light? The idea's that firelight and sunlight exist on a spectrum. The fire source isn't magic, so instead the lead glass acts as a conduit for power stored in the runes. They charge on heat and light—like the oil fire—and the end result is that light inside the glass is shifted over on the spectrum to sunlight. Here."

Barry screws the glass chimney loose and lifts it just enough to show that the fire burning inside is still orange. He reassembles the lantern, and the glass sharpens and bleaches the flame inside. "Wish I could tell you more about the runes. I pretty much just copied them. Uh, they're in the calligraphic style 'cause they're actually reversible. Right-to-left is—is perceptive and thought, dictating the appearance of sunlight, and left-to-right is heat and fire, for the actual physical properties. I, uh, screwed that up—I had to throw out my first three goes at etching."

Lup listens raptly to the explanation. "It's fascinating, the lengths humans go for magic, to surpass
what even the fae can do. I love it. So we get the troll in line of this and it turns to stone, right? Problem solved?"

She curls back and leaps on top of the lantern, little claws scrabbling for hold on the metal. Once she gets her footing she scampers up Barry's arm to perch on his shoulder. "Not sure how much help I'll be. Might be able to do some fire, but I can't guarantee how much control I'll have with these little mouse hands." She lifts her paws and wiggles her fingers for emphasis.

"You—you don't have to fight the thing with me!" Barry stammers, reeling from her praise. "This is, uh, my job. I don't want you to put yourself in danger when you're already hurt." Or this tiny and vulnerable.

Lup shrugs and winces at her tightened skin. "I can be lookout then. I'm not to worried about a troll, especially if you have your fancy light box. Worse comes to worst, the one thing this form is good for is hiding."

"That's a good point," Barry says, still blushing. Lup doesn't have anything tangible to gain from helping him with the troll. He never would've guessed she'd find his paltry attempts at magic impressive, and for her to help him take down another fae, even a murderous one? She keeps surprising him.

"So," he says, turning to evaluate the bridge. "Best-case scenario? We check it out and there's, there's just nothing there. Then we continue on towards Berston and run into hunters at another bridge, and they've already taken care of the troll. Worst-case scenario? The report wasn't—wasn't clear on what kind of troll it was. Sounded like a mountain troll—seven feet tall, really hairy, solitary. But, uh, if it's a frost troll the light'll only stun it. So we could, uh, peek under the bridge and it's been listening to us this whole time and it takes my head off."

It's concerning that the troll attacked the caravan before dark. It should be wounded already, covered in pebbly lesions from sunlight. But it's evaded hunters since yesterday.

Lup lifts her ears and listens carefully for any sign of lurking trolls. All she really manages to get is birdsong, which is actually quite pleasant when her home area is so void of life. "Well, I don't hear anything, so who really knows. I could go first if you want? If it is waiting it wouldn't notice me."

"Oh, uh, I guess that's a good plan," Barry says, visions of a tiny mouse being squashed under a troll's foot playing in his head. He tells himself firmly that Lup knows what she's doing and she's right. And a lot more magic than him or any troll besides. He grabs one last thing—a folding silver mirror, about the size of his hand—and snaps it open to catch a ray of sunlight. The runes in the casing spark red and wink out before he shoves it into his jeans pocket. Then he closes the saddlebag and offers Lup a hand. "You uh, want a ride to the creek bank?"

Lup doesn't hesitate before leaping on. A ride sounds much better than scrambling through the thick brush and grass along the water's edge. She could get lost in there. "Lead the way, big guy. Fair warning, though, if we cross that thing I'm gonna go limp and a little...eh...jittery? Running water and all that. Don't want you to freak when it happens."

"Yeah, I figured," Barry says. "So long as it doesn't hurt. Wasn't sure if changelings were uh, nature-magicky enough to cross safely." Dryads and nymphs are: their connection with the power inherent in running water and growing things is so strong that the magic of the creek would flow into them instead of sucking theirs away. Trolls absorb magic similarly. They can rapidly heal themselves with ambient power, but sunlight's enough to overload and petrify them from the inside out. Barry wishes fire was that potent. Sunlight's trickier to wield underground; illusory or captured, he'll be totally dependent on his tools.
He throws his hat over the saddlehorn and carries Lup over to the bank. "We might as well check this side first. Can you make your voice really loud with magic? So uh, I can rush in if you need backup."

"I've never had need to before but Taako can, so I assume it's not a problem." Just being this close to the water sets Lup's fur on end. She doesn't like it, but she does her best not to let Barry notice. Instead she bounces off along the bank to explore the underside of the bridge. Nothing. There's no cave. She's just about to head back when she notices a break in the foliage across the water. That would be it, a large opening the rock descending back into the bank. No avoiding crossing the river then.

Lup shakes out the unease under her skin and scrambles back towards Barry. "There's a cave on the other bank. Looks pretty big."

"Well, shit," Barry says, leaning down to scoop Lup back up. He peers down at the underside of the bridge, but he guesses the foliage is so thick that the cave's not visible unless you're standing directly opposite. "I was uh, really hoping we weren't onto something. It's not too late to wait for the other hunters. If I'm—well, the kid—the troll probably finished the kid off yesterday So we're not really—uh, this isn't time sensitive."

He takes a detour to his horse and ties a single yellow streamer to a branch hanging nearby. The horse mouths at the streamer and goes back to munching on grass. Barry approaches the bridge, raising his other hand to cup around Lup protectively.

As soon as Barry steps out over the water, Lup goes limp. She can feel the curl of the water's natural magic pulling on her own, coaxing it to follow the flow. Her breathing stutters at the feeling of her very self being pulled at along the seams. Magic has a tendency to travel with itself, and
flowing water is a powerful, ancient source of natural arcane energy. As a changeling, almost the entirety of Lup's form is composed of magic. It's why iron is such a potent weapon against her but wouldn't be against a troll. She’s happy to have more innate abilities than most fae, but that does leave her vulnerable to anything that disrupts the balance of her power.

Barry said it was okay as long as it doesn't hurt her. He doesn't need to know it does. He doesn't need to see how the edges of her body whips, magic surging towards the water like smoke. It's good his hands are shielding her, not from the river but from his sight. She's grateful when they get across and her magic pulls back in, coalescing back to its source. She takes a deep breath, knowing there are multiple more streams to cross on the way to Luce's place. She wishes she could shift to be a bird and soar upwards until she’s too far from the river to feel its pull.

It might be worth it to invest in a charm like Taako has, something that will keep her magic in and other magic out. It'll keep her from shifting but she wouldn’t need to wear it constantly, just for crossing water. She pushes at Barry's hand to signal she's alright again.

"You okay?" Barry asks. He booked it across the river at as fast as he could without jostling Lup. Feeling her twitch against his palm hand was disconcerting. He lowers his face to peer at her, so concerned that he forgets to be conscientious about giving her space.

Lup rolls back onto her feet and, though she can't quite reach, makes a motion to push his face away. "I'm fine, Bear. Having something pull at your physical form sucks is all."

Barry jerks his face back. "So long as you're okay." Now that they're on the cusp of potentially fighting a troll he can feel his heart buzzing. He tries to martial his scattered thoughts, tamping down a question about whether the size of Lup's form has any effect on how strongly she feels the river.

The bushes on the bank are a tangled mess. The silencing charm in his pocket muffles their rustling as he kicks his way through them and slides down the bank. Thick denim protects his legs from brambles, and he dimly thinks that he’d like 'Bear' for his pseudonym so much more than 'Bluejeans'. He wades through the brush and scans the bridge, looking for signs that someone passed by earlier. The hole in the east foundation is jagged and rough-edged, crudely chiseled. The bridge isn't tall—he could reach up and touch the underside—and the foundations are maybe three feet longer than his armspan. Cracked stone bricks poke out from beneath thick grass and sit heaped below the surface of the water. Seems this burrow was dug months ago.

Barry raises the lantern with his wand gripped alongside the handle so his other hand can hold Lup. It takes a little wiggling before he can get the wick to ignite. White light flashes into the cave. A few feet inside, the stone gives way to dirt and the tunnel widens. It extends for a few yards and then angles sharply to the north. He shoulders his way through the narrow stone entrance lantern-first, bringing the hand holding Lup in last. Loose earth scrapes across his jacket. He freezes, listening to dirt trickle thinly from the walls, and for any signs of life deeper in.

Apparently mice can barely see in the dark at all. Lup finds herself squinting into the darkness beyond the lantern to no effect. She might as well be glaring at a wall. Her ears stand straight up, turning this way and that for any hint of sound. She grips Barry's fingers tightly in an effort to lean forward as far as she can, sniffing the air. A reek hits her like a wall; she almost gags. There’s an overwhelming musk inside the cave.

"Holy shit," she whispers, pawing at her nose in an attempt to rid herself of the odor. As powerful as it is she's not sure whether Barry’s noticed. It's hard to compare her current sense of smell to a human's. "Well something certainly lives here. It fucking reeks."
"I can't smell anything," Barry whispers. "But I believe you. Yuck. Can you, uh, make out any more details? And can I put you somewhere so I can have a free hand?"

He loves his jacket. It's sturdy, doesn't show dirt, and has about four pounds of protective iron sewn in. This jacket's saved his life about five times. But he almost wishes he had left it with the horse so Lup could ride safely in his pocket. Careful, Bluejeans. He reminds himself that his tiny mouse friend is the same fae he saw incinerate a tree, and that, as personable as she seems, she was around maybe centuries before he was born and will continue after he's gone. She's got a whole life he barely knows a thing about. They met less than a week ago; he has to remember that they're not really friends, and maybe they can't be. He shouldn’t have the impulse to compromise his safety for her comfort.

Still, he loves talking to her. She's the most interesting person he's met in ages and she seems just as excited to learn about him. He hopes...he hopes that, when she leaves, it'll be amicable. He hopes she doesn't have him fooled.

"Can you put me on your head? I'd climb myself, but would rather not scramble over your iron suit." Barry obediently lifts Lup. Her tiny claws prick against his scalp. Having her paws in his hair is the strangest sensation. Barry was expecting it and he's still unnerved. He hopes she can get a good grip; his hairline's been receding up his forehead, and what he has left is thinner than it used to be.

Lup resists the urge to gag again as she deeply smells the air. There's the distinct tang of iron surrounding Barry, but it seems to exist beyond him as well. It's a different kind of iron from the jacket; it has more of an animal feel. Meanwhile the musk is something new. It’s a little wet dog, a little fresh dirt.. Beyond that, if Lup really focuses, there's the tiniest hint of...tea?

"There's blood...and...fuck that musk is strong. I think, and you're gonna think I'm crazy, I think I smell tea?"

The blood makes sense. They know the troll was shot, and it probably made a snack of its hostage already. Poor kid. Tea, though? "That's weird," Barry muses. "Trolls usually don't mess with herbalism." He transfers his wand to his free hand and hugs the lantern close to his body. Then he creeps down the tunnel and pokes his head around the corner.

Lup hangs on to Barry's hair to keep her grip, hoping she isn't pulling too much. "To be fair, most trolls don't have enough fur to smell this bad, either. You're sure the report said troll?"

Barely a second goes by before a low growl echoes deeper in the cave. Her ears immediately swivel to catch the sound and she stands alert with her fur on end. Seems like they definitely found their troll.

"Yeah, it did say troll, and I was—was unfairly assuming that the people who made it weren't idiots," Barry hisses. The cave resolves from blurry grey as he squints and wills his eyes to adjust. Ahead, he can see the dim flicker of a campfire. The room sharpens incrementally until he can make stalagmites along the far side, large shadows thrown behind them. It looks like the tunnel opens into a natural cavern. After a few more yards of dirt, the floor transitions to scuffed stone and the ceiling rises sharply.

Some enterprising troll must've dug out a tunnel to connect the cave months ago. Hidey-holes like this are exactly why bridges are supposed to be monitored. Someone blew off their job and now a kid is dead—even Barry can smell blood now, faintly. The dirt underfoot is dotted with a trail of dark splotches.
Then he spots a small body crumpled near the wall opposite the fire, half-hidden behind a rocky outcropping. "Shit, do you see that?"

Lup sees it too. The kid. Fairy Mother she hopes it's alive, the parents will be pissed if it's not. She scans what she can see of the room and says, "I'm going over there. Find the 'troll.'"

Without more warning Lup bounds from Barry's head, to his bag, to the floor. She's not sure if a normal mouse could manage that but she is very much not a normal mouse. Barry catches a glimpse of her pink tail and then she vanishes against the stone floor. The sound of immense claws scraping on stone echoes from somewhere in the darkness ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Spark drew that art of Lup checking out the bridge! Isn't she great? She's great.
The Bugbear and the Boy

Chapter Summary

Barry does a hit and Lup meets someone new

Barry douses his lantern and follows Lup out of the tunnel, praying the silencing charm in his pocket is enough to mask his footsteps. The way she rushed in would be reckless from anyone else, but Barry can’t help but think of her as heroic. At least whatever else is in the darkness with them has gone quiet. He can only hope it’s retreating further into the cave.

To the left of the entrance, chipped bricks ring a small campfire. A lumpy piece of metal cookware sits obscured in its center, smothering the flames. Barry can hear water trickle faintly in the distance in a way that suggests an enormous open space. There's no one in sight except the girl. She looks three, maybe four, and she's lying with her face turned to the wall. No visible injuries—but he can't see whether she's breathing.

Barry takes three hurried steps towards the girl and freezes when thumps sound as if in echo, out of time with his footfalls. He breathes shallowly and strains his ears. Something about the muffled silence makes his hair stand on end. If she's still alive they need to get the girl out of here before the troll comes back. He springs towards her in the same instant that he realizes the water fell silent.

Lup reaches the collapsed child, scurrying her way around the cave's perimeter as close to the wall as she can. She panics for a moment before she catches the faintest rise and fall of the girl’s chest. She's alive. Now the question of the day is how to get an unconscious kid out without being noticed by her kidnapper.

An ear-splitting whistle sounds from the campfire. The cookware's a kettle! Barry spins around in time to see a looming figure rush forward from the darkness. Its roar reverberates off the stone walls. Barry sees its arm come up and drops to a crouch. The teapot it throws shoots past him and rebounds heavily off the wall. Barry springs back to his feet, activating the runes on the lantern and lighting the wick in the same motion.

He squeezes his eyes shut against the brilliant white light spilling forth. All seven feet and four hundred pounds of bugbear don't even slow down. He catches a glimpse of a furry arm swiping towards him with barely enough time to dodge aside. He darts back and fumbles to draw his dagger. The bugbear's fur is matted with blood around three dark bullet holes in its shoulder. Barry left his pistol because troll hide turns bullets aside, and he curses himself for that mistake. The bugbear charges again.

Her ears flatten tight against her head at the bugbear’s roars. The echo is deafening. It makes much more sense, at least, that a bugbear would be behind this; they’re pack hunters, infamously aggressive towards humans, and much smarter than trolls. They would have a lot of reasons to take a child.

She sits on the child's chest and tracks Barry to the best of her ability as he dodges and feints around the bugbear. She would really, really like to do something to help, but they’re both better off if she’s not underfoot. Instead, she turns and starts tapping the girl’s face. The only way she's
getting out of here is if Lup wakes her up. When tapping at her doesn't work, she bounces down to try pulling at her ear. Then a shadow looms over her and she freezes, hands still gripping the girl's earlobe.

Lup glances up, afraid there might be a second bugbear (or even an actual troll), and is met with the face of another human child. A small lantern swings in his outstretched hand, dim light reflecting off the outsized, round glasses hiding his eyes. *How many freaking kids are down here?* Another bellow shakes the cave and Lup darts back to glance around the rock, in time to see Barry just barely dodge a lethal swipe. The new arrival kneels down next to the girl and starts checking her for injuries.

Lup weighs her options heavily before deciding to make herself known. "Uh. Hi? Did you get taken too?" she whispers, just loud enough for the boy to hear. Well, she definitely startled him—he almost drops the lantern in shock before recovering enough to peer down at her, hunkering behind the rocky outcropping and out of sight of the ongoing fight.

Roaring, the bugbear rakes its claws across Barry's chest. Furrows tear through his jacket as he swivels and cuts a sharp line across the bugbear's arm. Fur and flesh split open, leaving the bugbear to howl over a patter of dripping blood. It snatches its arm back. Barry brings his wand up and lesions bloom outward from the slash. Hunks of fur fall away as it wails.

"Are you another fae?" the boy whispers, curling into himself. He seems to have realized Barry's fairing poorly from sound alone. His gaze keeps darting between Lup and the girl, and he presses himself against the outcropping, too nervous to risk catching a glimpse of the fight.

"I'm...friendly," Lup says, before another roar shakes the cave. She turns to peer around the rock and sees Barry just cutting into the bugbear. Part of her wants to wince at the damage he's doing and another part is just amazed. Barry is... a lot more competent than she thought. Downright vicious, even, unflinchingly matching the bugbear blow-for-blow. She's actually really glad she didn't have to fight him now. She might not have won...

The boy rises to a crouch and shifts the girl's shoulders, sliding his hands under her back to heave her up. He seems much more concerned with the fight going on behind Lup than Lup herself. She's a little insulted she's been blown off so quickly as a threat, but she's not sure she blames him, considering.

"I'm trying to save her," the kid says, motioning to the girl as he struggles to support her weight. "What can you do to—" He cuts himself off as the bugbear breaks away from Barry and staggers towards their hiding place. Lup's fur bristles. She hesitates for only a second before throwing out a paw and extinguishing the boy's feeble lantern.

"Stay quiet," she half-whispers. They're concealed by darkness, hopefully. The only light left is from the campfire. She can just barely see the dim outline of Barry as he baits the bugbear away from them.
Barry lunges for his wand amidst the broken glass. The bugbear stomps at his hand. He pulls back, but one of his nails smashes under the blow. He scrambles to his feet, slashing wildly with his dagger to ward the bugbear off. Then he gathers a miasma of sickening magic in his fist.

He's cast without a wand before. It's not a good idea, especially considering the shape his magic naturally takes. Necromantic energy is a common affinity. What's rare is someone managing to train the ability up without maiming themselves. Barry tries for a fistful of flames, thinking of Lup, and feels hot air whirl and gather against his palm. But the vortex refuses to ignite. His palm cracks and blisters under the heat and his magic hooks into the welling fluid. Skin peels away in a widening circle. He feints with his dagger and forces the bugbear to sidestep. Then he slaps his hand into the bugbear's side and discharges the energy.

There's a nauseating moment where he can feel the bolt sink into the bugbear's flesh. His skinned palm slides painfully over fur as the tissue beneath bursts open with a thousand tiny tears. He can feel the bugbear's nerves convulse with pain—until he flinches and yanks his hand away.

The bugbear crumples to its knees with a pained sob. Barry stabs towards its throat. But this time it catches his wrist, claws raking deep gashes. Pain weakens his grip on the dagger and his strike barely penetrates the bugbear's fur. He tries to pull away, but that only drives the bugbear's claws deeper into his wrist. Barry shoves his free hand into his pocket and grabs the little compact mirror. He chips a nail flicking it open in the bugbear's face. The flash of captured sunlight lasts a split second, but it's enough of a distraction for Barry to throw his weight sideways and force the bugbear off-balance. He hits the ground on one knee, wrist still trapped, and manages to grab onto his wand with two fingers.

Lup can smell the blood lacing the air. It's so incredibly thick, combined with the reek of burning flesh. She prays it's the bugbear's and not Barry's. She can only see their fight as indistinct, bobbing shadows. She only knows the boy's still with her because she hasn't felt air move or heard his footsteps. "You gotta get the girl out of here,” she whispers. “If that thing comes for you I can't help."

She can't see the response but the shifting of dirt and feet tells her he's at least doing something. Hopefully that something is dragging the girl somewhere safer. This is so much harder than it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be a troll, destroyed with one flash of sunlight. Barry’s breath comes ragged and pained in the dark, catching in his throat, and she can't do anything. She longs to shift into a more appropriate form—a bear, a hawk, a dog, anything useful—but doing so with open iron burns would debilitate her.

As it is she scrabbles up the rock to watch the shadows grapple with each other. If things get really bad, if the bugbear comes for her, she'll consider a fire blast. But right now, with her limited control, it'd be impossible to avoid Barry and she'd rather avoid drawing attention to herself. She doesn’t want to watch Barry die. He’s an interesting traveling companion, and useful in her search for Taako. But she’s not going to put herself at risk for him.

Barry channels the drip of blood and stabbing pain from his wounds into violence that cracks his wand straight to the core. He looses a bolt of energy, curdled with thick black darker than the surrounding cave, almost directly into the bugbear's chest. It chokes on a gasp and finally releases him. He rolls away and pushes himself up, dagger scraping harshly across stone as he struggles to put weight on his shredded wrist. His arm collapses under him. He plants a foot against the bugbear and kicks, sliding back a few precious inches. He lets the splintered remains of his wand drop and transfers the dagger to his skinned palm. The bugbear stays prone on the floor and wails as he clambers to his feet. He lurches forward, preparing to slit its throat.
Lup flattens her ears against the bugbear's wails. Trolls are one thing, but bugbear are smart. They're violent, not blindly aggressive. She wants to intervene, to say something, but she can't. Not only would she be drawing its attention closer to the children and herself, she'd be putting Barry in danger too. There is no way he isn't injured after everything she’s heard. If he has to kill it, she'll understand. The thing charged him. She just wishes they could’ve talked things out.

At least she can’t hear the kids anymore. She hopes they got away.

Standard procedure for hunters is to put bugbears down with ranged weapons. Melee combat with them never ends well: they've got enough reach to make their sharp claws an issue, and that’s before you get to their fur, thick enough to turn away blades.

Barry doesn't remember all this in the heat of the moment, despite his fresh wounds. The only thing in his mind is the need to end this fast. He's already gritting his teeth from the pain of gripping his dagger against raw skin when the bugbear wails something that sounds like words.

He hesitates. The bugbear throws its weight forward and punches him in the jaw. His head snaps back and his legs crumple. He scrambles to roll away and hits a wall immediately. The bugbear stumblest to its feet. He’s lucky he didn’t just snap his neck.

Lup winces, heart racing. Damn it. She’s about to be on her own finding Taako. What a waste. Then she hears footsteps and a small voice call out, "HEY!" The sound of a crossbow bolt firing echoes through the cave and Lup hears a soft thunk as it hits its mark.

When she turns she can just make out the figure of the little boy standing with his crossbow aimed and she wants to scream. He was supposed to leave.

The bugbear shrieks and gropes awkwardly across its back to claw at the bolt lodged in its shoulder blade. It twists its neck to gape at the boy. "What? Why are there two of you?" it pants, breath dragging through pain and exhaustion. It darts a look back to Barry, insensate on the cave floor, and then turns to face the child. "Where's the tiny one?"

The boy relights his lantern—sensible, since now the bugbear knows he's there anyway. Now Lup can see the determined look on his face. His stance is wrong, though. He could be knocked over easily. The light also lets her get a better look at the rest of the scene. The bugbear is absolutely ragged, necrotic wounds scoring his pelt and skin. Blood drips down his fur and onto the ground next to Barry. Lup can't help a horrified squeak at the state he's in. His jacket's torn and his face is covered in blood. Both his hands look brutalized and she can't imagine he's on the ground for a good reason.

The danger the bugbear poses seemingly sated for the moment, Lup bounds off the rock and towards Barry, mumbling her worry under her breath.

"Nowhere you can hurt her again!" the boy proudly announces, readying another bolt.

"It's not my fault!" the bugbear protests. "They killed my dog! They killed my dog and shot me. I was gonna let her go!"

Barry struggles to lift his head, trying to focus on something other than the stinging pain in his hands and the pounding behind his temples. His palms are slick with blood, the scent of iron and dirt clogging his nose. He’s not sure where he dropped his dagger and couldn’t wield it now, anyway. He's got very few options left. But he thinks he hears a child's voice. He can't stay down and let them die.
Only the weakness in his arms stops him from attracting the bugbear's attention by lifting his torso up. He takes a deep breath and wills himself to concentrate. The magic that gathers around him flows as sluggishly as the blood from his palms. It clings to his skin, abrading the edges of his cuts. His hands shake as the heat from his body is sucked and subsumed by a growing chill. This is gonna hurt him way more than it'll hurt the bugbear, but he's gotta protect the kid. He just hopes Lup is safe somewhere.

Lup reaches Barry just in time to dig her paws into his thumb. She needs to hold him back; he’s too worn out to cast more. He startles—she’s too close, it's not safe! He shields her with his fingers and lets the bolt he was gathering dissipate. It blows apart like grains of stinging sand. The dampened backlash peppers his cheeks instead of sinking into his bones.

There's no point in fighting. Lup feels bad for the bugbear. Of course he would take a kid after he was attacked. Kids are way easier to nab than adults and make for good leverage. She's starting to think she and Barry shouldn't have intervened. At the very least, they probably shouldn't have snuck up and gone in swinging.

The little boy seems to hesitate, the focus of his crossbow faltering. "You weren’t trying to hurt her? Is she just unconscious because...you don’t know how to care for her?"

Lup's ears flick up. It’s true, there was no scent of blood on the girl and her breathing was steady. She’s not injured, just exhausted from terror and hunger. Smart kid.

Barry can’t believe the kid’s trying to talk a bugbear down. That's—that never works. Barry can't get a good look at him. He's way too young to be a hunter. A sibling, maybe?

But the bugbear drops its shoulders and sulks when it should be finishing Barry off. "Don't shoot me again. I'll let the girl go, if you let me leave."

Lup lets out a breath she didn't know she was holding and loosens her grip on Barry's thumb. It's going to be okay. No one needs to die. Though she doesn’t know how they can get to Luce—or even out of the cave—with Barry so injured.

The boy stares at the bugbear for a long moment before lowering his crossbow. "I believe you, sir. But to be frank I think it's up to him." He motions to Barry. "I'm just a little boy."

Lup narrows her eyes. He's a strange one. She wouldn't be opposed to talking with him more—Fairy Mother, what is she thinking? She's already way too close to humans.

Barry’s glasses are smudged to hell and back. He pushes them down so he can blearily peer at Lup, outlined by the dying campfire. His thoughts feel like they're scrambling for traction. He spaces out for a second, completely unintentional, before his eyes focus again. At least Lup looks unharmed. The kid is probably unharmed too, despite all odds. He certainly doesn't sound like he's in pain.

"I—I can't stop you from taking off, buddy," Barry says. Should he sit up? No, he should try to get comfy on the floor and not spook the bugbear. There's no way he'd survive another round with it, and he can't stop it from going for the kid. He got real lucky in that fight. If the bugbear had gotten a solid hit on his head or torso he wouldn't be walking out of here. "Where the—where the hell is the girl?"

The boy approaches, saying, "I hid her deeper in the cave. She wasn't in any shape to join this fight." Then he turns to the bugbear and affects a very official tone that forces Lup to hide a snicker. "You can call me Caleb, and you're free to go, sir." He holds out his hand. "No further harm will come to you if you release the girl and leave this area alone."
Clever, Lup thinks, making it an official deal so there's no changing of minds. Lup decides she very much likes that little boy. He's got guts.

The bugbear stares at the outstretched palm, confused. Offering a handshake is the ballsiest move Barry's ever seen, and he's taken some stupid risks in his time. Like fighting a bugbear in melee combat while he throws around necrotic energy without a focus. He half expects the bugbear won't be able to resist taking the kid's arm off. They're foul to humans.

But the bugbear makes an expression almost like a… an amused smile and bends over to shake the kid's hand delicately, even as the motion makes blood drizzle down his matted fur. Barry can't believe how close he came to winning that fight. He really messed up the thing's side and arm.

"I’m Klarg. Thank you," the bugbear rumbles. "I'll... just be going, then." He grabs the kettle and teapot on his way out, tying them to a canvas knapsack tucked behind the firepit. It sounds like he's sniffing. Barry presses his cheek to stone and breathes evenly. He almost feels tempted to offer first aid, but his kit's back with the horse.

His head snaps up when he hears a thin shriek. The bugbear, Klarg?, unseen, shouts "Sorry!" over the girl's sobs. Barry's forcing himself to stand, teetering on hands and knees, when he realizes the bugbear is still speaking. "Look, I only—I just didn't want to get shot more—I'm leaving now." With that, pounding footsteps fade into the cave, and the bugbear is gone.

That's not normal behavior. Barry can't believe the kids are okay. He's not, especially after grinding cave dirt into his palms. Ouch. He slumps into a sitting position and wipes blood on his jeans.

As soon as Klarg's footsteps fade, the little girl appears at the far end of the cave. She's leaning heavily against the wall. Caleb rushes forward and she stumbles into his outstretched arms. With his support, she staggers towards Lup and Barry and sinks down beside them, puffy red eyes alert with terror and relief.
Chapter Summary

Almost none of the bourbon actually gets drunk. Everyone's had a hard day.

Chapter Notes

Barry gets stitches this chapter! The description's short and non-graphic, but heads up!

"Thank you for distracting the bugbear, sir," the boy says. With Barry slumped on the dirt floor and Lup in the shape of a mouse he towers above them, glasses reflecting dim light from the campfire as he surveys the cave. "I'd introduce myself but," he motions to Lup. She wants to be insulted, but that’s honestly pretty reasonable. Just because she said she's friendly doesn't mean telling her his name would be smart.

Barry plainly doesn't understand where the second kid came from. He has what, a crossbow? How? Why? He massages his temples, blood dripping down into his shirt cuffs. He kind of wants to stroke Lup's furry mouse back with a thumb. Or cry. But his hands are oozing and filthy, and the kids are both looking right at him. He’s got to be the adult here.

At least the bugbear didn't flee back to the bridge, so they won't encounter him on their way out. Nor will anyone else who might be on the road.

He thinks he's good to stand. Maybe. Definitely, just… not right now. "Okay...um, I go by Bluejeans, and uh—did you give your real name? I don’t need to know it, but did you tell the bugbear…?"

"No sir, it’s a pseudonym!" Caleb confirms. "Nice to meet you!" He offers his free hand to Barry in a handshake, visibly reconsidering when he sees Barry’s wounds. He ends up just wiping his palm uncomfortably on his pants. "I'm training to be a hunter. None of the adults knew where the 'troll,'" he makes exaggerated air quotes and rolls his eyes "went, but I figured it out very fast, so I thought I'd come save the kid who was taken." He motions to the girl, who’s still shaking and sniffling.

Lup doesn't really know how humans age, but she's pretty damn sure this kid is young. She also knows hunting work is dangerous. Barry's current state is plenty evidence of that. "Hold up. Hold up." She turns to Barry with the most incredulous look she can manage as a mouse. "You guys send kids out to do this stuff?"

"Oh god, we really don't," Barry says. His voice would've risen into a panicked shriek at the end, but he's having a little trouble with inflection right now. He opens and closes his mouth, at a loss for words. "Uh—Caleb?" he finally says. "Caleb, uh—how are you—where the hell is your supervisor? …Supervisors?" God, he's got to get out of this cave and get some medical attention and return these kids and then ride towards Rockport while the sun is still up. This assignment was supposed to be a simple troll extermination. If whoever screwed up the 'troll attack' report is the same person who lost their inappropriately young apprentice and the same person who failed to
inspect the bridge then Barry’s going to strangle them himself, wounded or not.

A very guilty expression immediately crosses Caleb's face. "He's... uh... also searching for the troll? I snuck away because I knew I could do it myself. A small boy would more likely go unnoticed sneaking around than an adult."

Lup’s already tuned everyone out, growing more concerned for Barry by the second. She felt like every time she'd seen all his injuries she found another one. The cut on his cheek looks thin, but the blood flow isn’t slowing, she realizes. "Uh, Bluejeans? Not to interrupt, but will you be able to make it out of here? You're pretty beat up, and I’m not gonna be any help carrying you."

Barry shakes himself and wipes his palms again. The worst injury is his shredded wrist; it's gonna need stitches for sure. That whole hand feels weak, and when he tries to curl a fist he can’t get his fingers to close all the way. His heart's still racing in his chest, and he knows he's due to crash hard. But he can keep himself focused until—until his work's done. Until things are resolved. Yeah, that's a plan. Boy, now that he's looking—it's hard to tell, between the darkness and the grime from the cave floor-- he thinks he might be bleeding rather a lot? Ugh.

"Oh-kay," he proclaims, enunciating clearly and carefully. "Here's the deal. Caleb, gimme—get me my lantern. That one, there," he points to it, smashed and abandoned on the ground. It might be too damaged to light. At least the cave's a little brighter now that the bugbear's taken his kettle off the campfire. "Don't step on the glass. Kiddo? Little girl? Hi, my name's Bluejeans, you're gonna be A-okay. We're gonna, gonna get out of here and find Caleb's boss 'n your parents." The little girl nods very slightly and follow Caleb, sniffling as he shakes glass shards loose from the twisted lantern frame. She's real shaken up and, frankly, Lup can't blame her. Probably doesn't help her nerves that Barry's so bloody.

Barry starts to roll to his feet, plunking back down after he remembers that Lup's on his leg. "Oh—uh—Miss Fae. How d'you want to get out of here?" He can’t carry her with his hands wrecked. She snorts at hearing 'Miss Fae' again. But, yeah, there’s no good reason to give her name out.

Without letting herself think about it much, Lup jumps off Barry's leg and scampers to perch on her shoe. "Blue's a good guy," she calls. "He'll get you home." The girl stares down at Lup and coos, reaching a hand to pick her up. Lup lets her, only a little bit begrudgingly. The girl's hands shake as she holds her and Lup resents the way it melts her heart a little.

"I-I'm Emma," she whispers to Lup, just barely a breath. Lup can see Caleb tense and catches the brief glance he throws in her direction. She nods ever so slightly, hoping that's enough to calm his nerves. He doesn't say anything, at least.

Barry makes it to his feet on the second try and Caleb hands him the lantern. He knows at a glance it won't light, even if he could manage some fire without a wand. Half the glass is shattered and the bottom's busted open and leaking lamp oil. Smells like citronella. Dammit, he's attached to this thing; he spent days on it, and he's had it for nearly twenty years. It's trash now, but he fumbles until he gets it hooked into a belt loop. Oil probably washes out of denim.

That's about all the motion he can manage for a second. The cave spins around him as he sways on his feet. He visibly shivers. Lup tilts her ears towards him, tense with worry that he’s about to fall back over. He turns towards the tunnel to the bridge. The entrance is set far enough back from the campfire to be completely lost in shadow, but he remembers where it was.

"I think—we've got to go through a dark tunnel now, okay?" he says, leaning down to make eye contact with Emma. He's glad she seems to like Lup. That tracks. Lup's great. Even when she’s not a mouse. He would've loved to meet a talking mouse when he was a kid. "But we'll be fine. Just a
quick walk, and we'll be outside."

Emma presses Lup close to her chest—not the most comfortable thing, considering her iron burns, but she'll live—and nods. Angus hums and says, "I should go first, sir. I'm the only one with a working lantern." He adjusts his hold on Emma's elbow so she can lean against him. "If you don't mind me asking, why are you with a..." he looks Lup over, "pixie? Skinwalker? Changeling?"

Lup gasps in only slightly exaggerated offense. "I'm definitely a changeling, thank you." Sure, pixie and skinwalkers have some shape-changing ability, but their magic is nothing compared to hers.

The tunnel feels even more cramped with a kid in the lead. Lup hunkers down in Emma’s hand, whiskers twitching. There’d better be no one between them and the exit, because Barry can’t handle another confrontation. Or anything more onerous than a nap. Walking isn’t enough to keep him alert. His eyes glaze over as he follows Caleb’s bobbing lantern light, steady on his feet through sheer force of will. He winds his hands in his shirt to put some pressure on them. Tacky blood smears against his stomach through the flannel. He's gonna have to do so much laundry.

Lup may not have been able to do much in the fight, but Barry still appreciates that she came along. Working with someone he actually likes is novel. It's been too long since he was partnered with Dav. Caleb shoots a questioning look at Barry over his shoulder and says, "Sir, are you alright? You didn't answer my—"

Emma squeezes past him to dash the last length of tunnel, bursting into sunlight with her hands cupped around Lup. Caleb and Barry stumble into the brambles after her. Barry's eyeing the creek and trying to decide whether to wash when it hits him that Caleb works for another hunter and he knows about Lup.

Then a man shouts from the bridge above them.

"CALEB!" Lup startles and hunkers down in Emma's hands, which in turn startles Emma, which Lup feels very bad about. At least it stops her from wading into the creek.

"Shit! I—uh—mean," Caleb looks at Emma, "Darn..." He nervously edges up against the nearest bush. They can’t actually see anyone on the bridge, so whoever called is probably still searching. That's good. It means Lup and Barry will be able to slip away before anyone sees them.

Except that Barry’s a mess. He needs help, urgently. He also left his horse tied to a tree close by, as well as most of his supplies. As nice as hanging with him is, he isn't another fae who can just disappear into the foliage with Lup.

"Angus!" a second voice shouts. Barry rolls his eyes. Sounds like one of the other hunters has more urgency than sense, bellowing what must be the kid's real name mere yards from a streamer marking danger. The bugbear's not gonna have any trouble avoiding this bozo. It's a shame, Barry thinks vengefully, wrist throbbing and itching from flannel lint pressed into torn skin. He'd gotten some real good hits on the bugbear; it would've been easy to finish off. This time tomorrow those wounds will be almost gone.

He reminds himself that the bugbear was about ten times less aggressive than is typical, letting the kids go without a scratch on them. But, with the danger passed and his adrenaline draining, it's like the plug for his reserves of energy was pulled. Hard to appreciate showing the bugbear mercy—or decide whether he should've tried talking to it straight off—when his injuries are increasingly clamoring for attention. Both his hands sting something fierce. Flannel fibers tug at the broken skin along his wrist, even with the blood damp and fresh. It's not gonna stop bleeding by itself, he

Lup’s heart rate spikes. Things might be about to break bad for her. Barry may be out of it, but she didn’t expect him to completely forget about her safety. She scrambles out of Emma’s hands, intent on taking cover in the brush. But, just as she jumps, a second pair of hands catch her. Caleb cups his palms around her, holding tight. Not enough to hurt, but enough that it's clear he doesn't want her skipping out.

He could crush her at any moment. She’s terrified. "Sorry, ma'am," he whispers. “I don't think I should let you go just yet."

Lup’s ears flatten against her head. Few hunters are as friendly or reasonable as Barry was when he first met her. "Ba—Bluejeans," she calls, only just remembering to use his code name. "Not sure I'm keen on meeting other hunters right now."

"Kid," Barry snaps in undertone, rounding on Angus. "Put her down."

There's rustling from one of the hunters wading into the bushes on the opposite side of the bank. They only have seconds before they’re spotted. If Lup can disappear into the underbrush they'll never find her. Barry won't let them.

Angus hesitates and loosens his grip, but it’s too late. The man that slides down to the level of the bridge foundation on the opposite bank stumbles before steadying himself against the stone. "You guys okay over there?" he shouts.

It takes a moment for Barry to recognize Avi. He's grown out his hair in the past year, long enough for him to tie back into a ponytail and still unruly as ever, with flyaway strands escaping to frame his face. His leather jacket's new and shiny, unmarred by any signs of combat. Barry wouldn't have assigned Avi an apprentice this soon out of training. He wouldn't have assigned this nosy child who snuck off to find a troll and is now manhandling Lup to anyone. She can’t bolt without being spotted. She settles for getting a small as she can in Angus's hands, hoping against hope she’ll be overlooked.

Barry slaps a heavy hand down on Angus's thin shoulder. "We're coming up, Cannoneer. Did you not see the streamer?" he calls, pointedly using his code name. There’s still a chance Lup could escape, but things would go worse for her if they realize she’s heard their real names. He steers Caleb up the bank and away from Avi, Emma clambering after them. In a low voice he says, "Caleb, I said drop her. You're being rude."

Angus stares up at Barry defiantly for a solid second before carefully bending down to place Lup on the grassy bank. Barry digs his toes in and holds still. She shakes herself off and runs to climb up Barry's pant leg, diving into a pocket. She peeks out at Angus and he meets her gaze, curiosity written across his face. He's got a lot of guts for a kid. She thinks, if given more time and more boundaries, she'd grow to like him. Barry starts climbing the slope again and she disappears into the hidden safety of his pocket.

A grizzled older man of obvious fae ancestry—shorter than even Caleb, with broader shoulders and a thicker head than most any human—is waiting at the other end of the bridge when they reach the top of the slope. He eyes Barry up and down suspiciously. "What happened to you? Troll did all that?"

Barry almost stumbles when he steps from grass to pavement. He’s relieved to see Boyland. They've barely worked together, but he respects anyone with fae ancestry who's managed to climb ranks as a hunter by default. Boyland can be trusted to show forbearance towards fae and has
always been unswervingly reasonable. Hopefully he can help wrangle Avi and Angus; Barry’s relieved to not be the only adult.

He sways on the edge of the bridge, reluctant to carry Lup across when she’s barely had time to brace herself. She’s tense against his thigh, unable to track what’s happening. He turns and makes a show of checking on Emma. "We’re going to cross the bridge now," he says, ostensibly to her. He releases Angus’s shoulder and clamps his left hand back over the bunched-up flannel fabric around his wrist to stop it from sliding loose. A smear of his blood is left across Angus’s shirt. "Caleb, please hold her hand and help her."

Lup holds back a gasp as Barry steps onto the bridge and crosses the creek at a brisk pace. The discomfort’s the same as always, but she’s so tired this time, nerves fraying from stress and exertion. She tucks her tail against her body and wills herself to recover quickly. "It—it was a bugbear, Countryman," Barry calls. "The report was, uh, kind of—shit."

Avi’s head and shoulders pop up over the side of the bridge by Boyland. "A bugbear?" he echoes, gaping. "But—but the girl's alive!"

Emma shies behind Angus as he leads her up to Avi. "The bugbear dead, then?" Boyland asks. Lup bristles at his casual tone.

"No," Barry says. It takes all his concentration to make it to his horse without stumbling. He rests against its flank and breathes shallowly. Grey fuzz clouds the edges of his vision. Tongue thick in his mouth, he continues. "Caleb here, he—he actually bargained with it—it got to leave, in exchange for giving up the girl," Barry swallows. He's not happy with Caleb, but... "It was a good call. I was flat on my back. I don't think—that would've gone well, if we'd kept fighting."

"It bargained?" Avi asks. He comes up to hover near Barry, hands out like he's deciding whether he's going to need to catch him. "Bugbears don't bargain."

"This one was making tea, too," Barry says. "We can—we can talk about how weird that is after we find my med kit. I'm, uh, bleeding. Lots."

"Oh shit—!" Avi says, as if he’s just noticed the blood. Barry's holding his injured arm away from the horse—the smell's scared her enough that she's pressed her ears flat against her head—and the pattern on the flannel's nearly lost under a dark wet stain.

"Left saddlebag," Barry says, pointing. "Main pocket, probably—or uh, might be in the side one?"

Angus directs Emma to a rock on the edge of the path for her to sit. Then, to no one in particular, he says, "She's dehydrated and hungry, sirs," very specifically avoiding any commentary on his personal adventure.

Boyland takes initiative and reaches into his pack for his canteen. When he approaches Emma, though, she visibly shrinks back. He shrugs and tosses the water to Angus. Angus catches the container easily and unscrews the top for her. She reaches for it hesitantly, but takes deep, eager gulps as soon as it’s in her hands.

"Careful she doesn't choke or vomit," Boyland grunts. "Take it slow."

Avi digs into Barry's bag and then yelps and jumps back. Incredulous, he fishes out a pair of socks and unwraps them to reveal a dagger. "Why do you have loose knives in here?!"

Barry shrugs. "It wasn't loose, it was wrapped—shit! I left my seax!" That one was his favorite, and he forgot about it after the bugbear slapped it out of his hand. He pats his jacket pockets—the
mirror's gone too. Groaning, he unhooks the smashed lantern from his belt loop and transfers it to the saddlebag's strap. Lup’s instantly relieved to feel the sickening buzz of iron retreat.

The medkit turns out to be in the side pocket, and when Avi finds it Barry follows him away from the horses so they can sit. "I'm fully stocked if the girl needs anything, Countryman," Barry says. He sinks down carefully, with his back to the treeline, tenting his pocket so Lup doesn't get squished. She could maybe risk scampering away. She might even go unnoticed, if she can keep Barry between her and the other hunters.

"I already checked the girl for injuries in the cave," Angus says. "Aside from a few scrapes and bruises, she just needs food and water."

"M hungry," Emma says, swishing the canteen. It's the first real thing she's said besides her name.

Boyland scratches at his beard before taking off his pack and rummaging around. He produces a small wrapped parcel and tosses it to Angus. He catches it against his chest and unwraps a lump of cheese. He breaks off a chunk for Emma, watching carefully while she chews and swallows.

Avi has to pull a large flask out of his waistband before he can sit comfortably. Boyland’s stationed in Berston. He was probably the first hunter to hear about the “troll”. Angus must be attached to Avi. It’s unbelievable that someone assigned him an apprentice. "Hey, can I have that?" Barry asks, gesturing at the flask.

"Yeah, you look like you need it," Avi says. He passes it over. Barry uncaps it—and then shakes the flannel off his wrist and sluices his gashes with alcohol. "Hey!" Avi protests. The liquor's a sweet-smelling amber, strong enough that Lup has to paw at her nose to suppress a sneeze. Avi brought the good stuff out for fieldwork. It's no substitute for proper disinfectant, but it's strong enough to burn at Barry’s wound and make his eyes water. He doesn't feel even slightly guilty for the pettiness after the morning he's had.

Barry lets himself slump over as he douses the rest of his injuries in alcohol. He eyes the flask. He glances at Avi, then at Boyland and Angus, attending to the girl. He shakes the flask and listens to the scant remaining liquid slosh. Then he tips the rest of the flask down his throat. Horses can steer themselves.

Trickles of blood are still welling from his wrist. The bloody portion of his shirt fabric sits unpleasantly damp against the waistband of his jeans. The thick scent of blood rolling off him is starting to seriously worry Lup. Ugh, it’s his dominant hand that’s wrecked, and his left palm feels like ground meat. "Hey Cannoneer," he says, squeezing his eyes shut. "Ever done stitches before?"

"Noooo?" says Avi, staring wide-eyed. "No? Yeah, definitely no."

Barry sighs. "Well, you start by opening the first aid kit."

After a minute or so of gnawing on bits of cheese, Emma starts perking up. She looks around, eyes brighter and more alert, and turns to Angus. "Can we give the magic talking mouse some cheese too?"

Boyland narrows his eyes. "What magic talking mouse?" Lup shrinks and stiffens in Barry’s pocket. Should she bolt? What if she can't find Barry again after? She still needs his help to find Taako. He has information and resources she can't get on her own. She can’t even travel like this, stuck in a mouse’s body. And besides, she’s starting to really enjoy his company.

Angus shoots Barry a look as if to say 'sorry, but I have to' and says, "Bluejeans is harboring a
changeling in his pocket, sir. Injured, I believe."

Avi didn’t even finish sorting through the medical kit. Barry’s heart kicks in his chest, but he levels an impassive gaze at Angus and wills himself to stay calm. They don’t have a good reason to take Lup into custody. Boyland can’t give him orders. The key is convincing them that he’s not charmed. So it’s absolutely critical that they not suspect that he gave Lup his name. They’ll never find Taako if Lup gets arrested, or get into the Miller Labs to meet with her high fae friend.

It’s true that he’d feel strongly about losing Lup if he was charmed. But he shouldn’t have to justify liking someone who put herself in harm’s way to save a kid who wasn’t her responsibility.

Moreover, Angus said harboring, like he’s thinking of Lup as a criminal when, as far as he knows, all she’s done is help rescue a kidnapped child. That’s not fair.

"She’s badly injured," Barry says, hoping that’s a good enough excuse for why she hasn’t greeted them. "Iron burns. It was—it was an accident, but technically my fault. Uh, you can't—can't do stitches for those. Speaking of, where's my anesthesine, Cannoneer? Let's at least do that before we talk about—about shouting your apprentice's real name when you know there're fae around." He gestures at the yellow streamer on the tree by the horses.

Boyland eyes Barry suspiciously. Angus levels an exceptionally stern look at Barry, considering his age. Emma watches the scene unfold with confusion and returns to nibbling on her cheese.

"Fix Bluejeans up first, Cannoneer. We can talk about things once there's no longer a three year old around. Shouldn't chat with a changeling while a little kid's nearby." He fixes Barry with a hard stare of his own.

Lup glowers at the inside of the pocket. Changeling don't just take kids willy-nilly, they take them to make more changelings. Used to, at least. Also, three years is already way too old for that! She's honestly getting sick of listening to hunters talk about things they don't seem to understand. Have any of them besides Barry actually talked to a fae about this stuff before? And even Barry’s more than a little biased at times, despite his best efforts.

"Where'd you get a changeling?" Avi asks, glancing between Barry and Boyland instead of doing anything helpful.

"The anesthesine, please. C'mon, it's a blue glass bottle," Barry says. It's surreal how much more his skinned palm hurts than his bleeding wrist. Nerve density, probably. "She's the one who was burning that—the fae tree in the forest. I reported that a few days back."

"And you took her with you to find a kid?" Avi asks, finally digging out the bottle.

"The report—was it your report? Said troll, so I assumed the girl was dead," Barry says, staring Avi down.

Avi balks. "When I interviewed the caravan leader—the way he described it—"

"Because—because civilians are trained to identify fae, huh?" Barry says. "Give me the rubbing alcohol now."

The tinted bottle Avi hands him is probably less concentrated than the brandy. Doesn't sting as much on his wounds. Barry gets his cheek this time, slopping alcohol into his collar in the effort as he pats it dry. Lup sneezes at the smell. Once he's fairly sure they're clean, he holds out his hand for the anesthesine. He uncaps the bottle and pours out a generous dollop of the ointment onto his skinned palm, then rubs it into his cheek and wrist.
Avi threads silk suture onto the needle while Barry waits for his wrist to dry and numb. He might've offered Angus a chance to learn this too, but he's put up with enough for today. He directs Avi through stitching the gashes, balancing paying enough attention to catch mistakes with trying really hard to not focus on the needle's slide through skin. He ends up with a few more than a dozen sloppy stitches, sitting uncomfortably in thin skin in some places and trapping his arm hair in others. Tugging them out once the gash heals isn't going to be any fun. The whole process isn't the grossest thing Lup’s ever known, but she’s still glad she didn’t have to watch.

Barry doesn't try to move his wrist. He can worry about whether he's permanently lost motion in his hand later, after he's seen a healer with some skill in magic.

The smell of blood is fainter, totally overpowered by the scent of alcohol. Lup sneezes again; it’s so damn strong, even from inside her pocket. She kind of wants to come out, now that everyone knows she's in there, but decides it's probably best to stay out of sight. The less attention she draws the better.

Boyland gives Barry a moment to breathe as Avi disinfects the needle. "Alright. Get Bluejeans and the kid on the horse and get into town. We can talk about..." he glances between Barry, Angus, and Avi, "things at the inn."

There’s no getting out of this one. Barry really wants to get to the Millers’s, where he can tour private labs with none of his coworkers around to bother him, as soon as possible. Lup’s loathe to let anything delay their search for Taako. But it’s almost lunchtime, and Barry needs rest and food. "If you don’t—don't mind, I was headed to Rockport? I just came from Glamour Springs; I'd rather not backtrack. And—and the girl's parents are in Berston, right?"

"Oh man," Avi says. "We were headed to Glamour Springs for that cooking show poisoning thing. A—Caleb here dug up an apothecary receipt—did you guys get that? Anyway, I figured it'd be a good case for him, what with being an investigation instead of a monster hunt. I mean, since the fae blew the coop."

Avi really can't seem to talk and work at the same time. Barry takes over packing the medical supplies back up. "We got the receipt. Thanks, it was—was pretty crucial." He wraps a piece of gauze over his palm and shoves himself to his feet, the creasing of his jeans momentarily crowding Lup. Standing sucks. At least he's not swaying much anymore, and most of his wounds are numb. But he's exhausted and everything's either aching or cold or both. He digs a canteen out of his saddlebag and drains half of it before he even thinks about trying to mount his horse. "Can the kids ride with y'all? I'm, uh, gonna have enough trouble just keeping myself on a horse."

"She can ride with Cannoneer," Boyland huffs. "Caleb, you’re with me."

Angus frowns and begrudgingly takes Boyland's offer. Avi lifts Emma with him onto his horse, and Boyland climbs after Angus, carefully hoisting himself using extra loops secured around the stirrups. "We can go to Berston’s inn. Gotta get the kid back anyways. Avi and the girl first, then Bluejeans. I'll bring up the rear."

Lup really doesn't like that she'll be in the middle through all this. That means they can’t bolt. Barry, on the other hand, is frankly glad. Mounting his horse is an exercise in stamina, riding doubly so. He's ready to slump over for a nap. Gripping the reins hurts his hands, so he holds them loosely and trusts his horse to stay in line with the others.

They make it back across the first bridge quickly. He remembers to check on Lup before they get to the second. "Hey," he whispers, hooking a finger to pull his pocket open. She's been quiet for ages; he's half-expecting to find that she vanished into the forest. Half-afraid, because he doesn't
know how she'd catch up to him afterwards. "Are you okay in there?"

Lup looks up and blinks against the sudden light. She's really not enjoying how much time they've spent crossing water this morning. It feels awful. And now that the adrenaline of the morning has worn off, she's starting to feel the sting of the burns again. She can't bring herself to complain, though, when Barry's clearly been through worse. "M'fine. How many more streams do we have to cross before we get there?"

"Four more bridges," he says. Barry clearly can't tell exactly how woozy she feels. A weak grin spreads across his face; he's happy she's still with him, and hoping she's only rumpled from hiding in his pocket. "Or, uh, I guess three bridges, and whatever's going on with the one that bugbear wrecked. You up for that?"

"I'll be alright," she says, popping her head out to look around and reorient herself before diving back in. She likes traveling in such green places, where the trees are vibrant with healthy foliage. Some are shading to beautiful yellows and oranges as winter approaches. Maybe her forest will look like this again, someday. "I'm a bit woozy, but it's fine. How are you doing? I don't think I actually asked."

"Little hard to—to have a chat, with the kids hovering," Barry says, huffing a laugh. The horse plods along without his direction. Avi's back is to him, broad enough that he can't see Emma sitting in his lap. Nothing this morning's gone right for him, but knowing she, Lup, and even Angus are all safe makes his injuries worthwhile. "I've—I've had worse. It's just inconvenient, for traveling. Countryman will put a report in about all this and uh, and they won't ask me to do anything serious for a few weeks. I'll get medical leave, basically. I'm still hoping we can make good time to Rockport."

This is definitely more of a set-back than Lup expected. She desperately wants to find Taako. He's...he's not dead. She knows that much. She hasn't told Barry, but their magic is so entwined that she'd know if he died. But that's all she's got. He could be maimed, he could be trapped, he could need her right now and she wouldn't know. "I just...I want to find Taako..." Her voice is soft and cautious: Barry has to strain to make out her words. As an afterthought, she adds, "I mean. I enjoy spending time with you of course, but... I want to know he's okay."

Barry knows it's not a good sign Taako's own sister can't find him. That she's so desperate for help she reached out to hunters. Well. If she comes to the realization that Taako's gone... Barry will do right by her. Comfort, money, something. Support. As much as she needs. "Of course," he says. "We'll keep looking. We've—we've only been on the road for one morning. We'll get to the Millers' in no time."

He was wrong when he thought Emma was dead. He hopes he's wrong this time too. He'd almost rather Lup have been running a con this whole time than have to watch her grieve.

Lup looks up, scanning his face for any sign of untruthfulness. She trusts him more than most humans, but that's not saying a lot. She’s lived just over a hundred years and she can count the times humans did right by her on two hands. The habits formed by that, and a childhood spent having her own inability to lie turned against her, are hard to break.

"Yeah," she says. Barry's constantly friendly and worried over her, in his own fumbling way. In a genuine way, a way she doesn't think he could fake if he really just wanted to use her to get to Taako. "Let's get this sorted and hopefully we can get there tomorrow or the day after."

Barry nods. He feels like Boyland's eyes are boring a hole in the back of his head. He refuses to turn and check, instead focusing on the copses of trees and open fields sliding past. There's no
other traffic; they're miles from Berston yet, and everyone’s probably waiting on word of the “troll”. No other sound rises above the horses' hooves, not even the babbling of the creek that occasionally peeks between the trees.

"Sounds like a plan," he says to Lup, absently. He rests his fingers in his pocket, crooking them to keep the fabric raised so she's not trapped in his jeans. Lup leans into them, whiskers brushing against his knuckles. She wants to reassure him she’s okay. He’ll feel her twitch and shiver when they cross running water, but he’d rather know she was safe through it than remain ignorant of her discomfort. Ahead, the road dips towards a small gully, crumbling dirt banks connected by another simple stone bridge. "More water coming up. About forty feet. Let me—let me know if you need a break."

Boyland grumbles, annoyed that Barry’s whispering to a changeling, but doesn’t say anything outright. Angus leans around their horse’s neck, watching with an intensity not often seen in children his age. Barry risks a quick glance at them before facing forward and squaring his shoulders. Lup sees none of this, instead lulled into a light meditative state interrupted only by the crossing of water. The warmth of the pocket space and motion of the horse, combined with darkness interspersed with faint filtered light, is comforting in a way it probably shouldn't be.
Chapter Summary

Lup and Barry have an awkward conversation with his coworkers.

Chapter Notes

Sparkle: Hey, guys. Sorry this chapter came out after so much longer than we've been doing? I'm gonna own up to that one. I mean. Neither of us wanted to edit this chapter (the first draft was mmmm) but I personally kept getting bogged down with school work and wasn't feeling great in general? And that's on me since we both do a round of edits before we publish. That being said I make no promises as to when the next chapter is coming out. I'm still doing school and still not feeling great so it might be a similar wait. Thank you so much for keeping up with this if you do! It means a lot to me <3

It's the second-to-last bridge before town that the bugbear 'destroyed'. This one's a truss bridge made of thick pine, suspended several yards above the creek bed. A few of the deck planks and their connecting struts are smashed and splintering away into the creek below. Barry can see how that would stop wagon traffic. Lone horses have no trouble jumping the gap, and it should be a relatively easy repair.

He would've doubted whether a troll was responsible at first glance. Wouldn't be the first time a civilian fudged the details on a confrontation. Especially if they were trying to justify their decision to open fire. The funny thing is that bugbears are more aggressive towards humans than trolls, but they don't have the same reputation for ambushing people on bridges. Nor do they travel alone, usually. It’s a piece of good fortune that there wasn’t a whole pack involved.

They're held up at the gate across the last bridge before Berston while a guard captain takes their statements. Barry curls his fingers into his pocket and fires off the key details about the bugbear as fast as possible, anxious to get Lup away from the water. He's not sure whether he's touching her fur. That whole hand's numb until he flexes it, and then comes over in pins and needles. He can barely discern texture. But he can’t go fishing in his pocket for Lup with the guard watching. Boyland's stationed here, so it's his call whether and how the guards are informed of her presence. No sense in creating unnecessary panic.

The captain elects to send two men to find Emma's parents and eight to stomp around the woods in search of the bugbear. There’s virtually no way they’ll catch him. It's a show of force to reassure the town, and Barry supposes that increased human activity is often enough to scare fae away. He's just glad to wrap things up and leave the bridge.

By the time they make it into town Lup’s utterly drained. After so much back-and-forth over water she'll need a good rest to build her magic up to a fully stable condition. Fortunately, the inn's only a short way up the main road, row flush with the neighboring shops in a brownstone row. Herbs spill
from its window boxes; there's a rainbow of decorative petunias, but protective fern and ivy twine
down and nestle around the doors. She's a bit dazed as they enter, not quite able to pick up on the
conversations going on around her. She's sluggish in a way she's not used to and it drives her to curl
tighter around Barry's fingers. It's way too late for her to take a chance on escaping alone. She'll
have to wait for Barry's word.

The inn's altogether nicer than the one in Glamour Springs. Two ostlers stable their horses for
them. They offer to send Barry's bags to Avi's room, but he ignores Boyland's stern expression and
says that he doesn't plan to stick around long. Bemusedly, he follows Avi through the side
entrance, around a corner, through the small cafe, and finally to a tiny meeting room. Avi peers in
the window before ushering them in. "They hate when we don't book these," he says, "but I think
they'd hate it even more if their guests saw us talking to a changeling in like, the cafe."

The meeting room's plain. There's a curtained window, a polished oak table, and worn upholstered
seats. It's intolerably stuffy and hot. Angus sets himself up on a stool in the corner of the room. He
pulls his notebook out of his bag and starts scribbling furiously. Avi probably wasted no time in
delegerating documentation to him. He looks totally absorbed, but Barry catches him watching
shrewdly from under his curly bangs.

In an effort to make the room more welcoming, Avi throws the curtains back, but makes no move
to open the window before plopping into a seat. Within a moment he jumps back to his feet. "Hey,
we should probably get lunch for Em---uh---the girl. While we wait for her parents."

Boyland drags a chair out and sits down, glowering heavily at Barry. "We might as well all get
something to eat. The kid can have a sandwich. I'll have a burger. Caleb, what do you want?"

"Some sort of chicken," Angus says, without looking up from his writing.

"Sandwich for me too. Something with meat," Barry says. Then he addresses his pocket, trying not
to feel foolish. "Uh, Miss Fae? You wanna come out for lunch?"

Lup groans and pushes at Barry's hand as a response. She doesn't want food. She wants to sleep. To
drive in her point, she curls into a tighter ball and sighs.

Barry only slightly panics. "Hey, are you okay in there?" he says, pulling open his pocket. He
shoves his chair back from the table and angles into the light from the window to get a good look
at Lup.

Lup opens a single eye against the glare and looks up at Barry begrudgingly. "M fine," she
mumbles. "Magic's all fucked up right now. 'S making me sleepy."

"Is there a problem, Bluejeans?" Boyland grumbles.

"She's not feeling well. Uh, probably from all the water crossings," Barry says. Her fur's going
every which way from rubbing against his pocket, spiking up around the reddened iron burns, and
her little whiskers are bent at the corners. He shucks off his jacket and throws it over the empty
chair next to him. He's starting to sweat under his arms, but one of his flannel breast pockets should
still be more comfortable than his jeans. "You wanna at least switch pockets, Miss?"

Instead of answering, Lup climbs onto Barry's offered hand. She yawns wide and crouches down
into the warmth of his palm. She hopes Barry can handle most of the discussion. Boyland's
expression doesn't change from his perpetual scowl as Barry lifts her. She crawls dutifully into the
chest pocket and quickly slips back into a doze.
"Cannoneer, go get the food please," Boyland says, not directly addressing the elephant in the room quite yet.

"Can't Caleb get it?" Avi grumbles.

Barry manages to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. "If it's that much trouble for—I uh, I could find us a waiter."

"Cannoneer, I can't send Caleb because, apparently," he shoots a glare at Angus, who doesn't seem to notice, "he has a tendency to run off. And as soon as the girl is taken to her parents we'll be discussing things I'd rather a waiter not overhear, Bluejeans."

Barry flinches and reminds himself that it's **totally normal** to exclude random civilians from dealings involving fae. Even if safety's not an issue, it's always best to avoid gossip and rumors. Boyland would be hounded for months if it gets out that he talked with a fae at the inn.

"Yes, sir," Avi says, getting to his feet with a chagrined expression. He waves at Emma before disappearing through the door, only to shout, seconds later, "Hey! I think her parents are here!"

Emma’s head snaps up. She glances between the door and Boyland, as if asking permission. "Yeah, go join your parents outside, alright?" Boyland says. He calls to Avi, "Tell them the guards will fill them in!"

Emma didn't hesitate a moment longer before popping up and darting towards the door. She nearly bowls Avi over. He sidesteps, flails, salutes before recovering his balance, and closes the door after them. The room instantly feels hotter.

Barry considers the window. The sash has a simple latch that would normally be no trouble, but with his injuries… Well, it’s down to how paranoid Boyland feels about whether Lup might make a run for it. "Hey, Countryman? Can you open the window for us? I would, but..." Barry waves his bandaged hand.

Boyland sighs and goes to unlatch it, letting a cool breeze in. He turns back around and grunts as he clambers back into his seat. With everything else out of the way, he claps his hands on the table in front of him. "Alright. Let's start, hmm?"

"Yeah, sure," Barry says. He mops his face and does his best to remain composed. "So, uh, have you been getting the Glamour Springs reports?"

He needs to know what Boyland's heard about Lup, and whether he figured out that Barry deliberately kept her a secret from Quail and the rest of the team. He wishes Lup were awake enough to advocate for herself. She’s good people. Boyland’s been handling things sensibly, and Barry’s sure he’d judge her fairly. She’s been nothing but compassionate, and helpful, and…

...That's the kind of thought you have when you're charmed. Though, if Lup was plotting something, she probably wouldn't have steered them into a confrontation with hunters while she was exhausted and vulnerable. At least she’s nestled safely in his pocket, for now. He hopes his frantic heartbeat isn't loud enough to bother her.

Boyland sighs. "Yeah, I have. Real nasty situation. First report I saw was that some shapeshifting fae had managed to pose as a human for years—until he went off and poisoned forty people. One more victim was violently burned alive and the fae escaped into the forest. Then a few other details came in, including Caleb's discovery that the burn victim was likely behind the poisoning. Your team was supposed to find the fae and either contain it or put it down."
Just enough of what Boyland says filters through Lup's exhaustion-addled brain for her to process what he means by “put it down”. She jolts awake and climbs, tiny claws digging into flannel, to poke her head out. Boyland eyes her warily.

"Right, right," Barry says, flinching a little for Lup's sake. She knows what his job is, of course, but he doesn't like how tactlessly Boyland's reminded everyone that his investigation might've ended in Taako's death. Though Boyland doesn't know that he's Lup’s brother, yet. "So—the day after the poisoning, there was a huge fire in the forest. Magic, contained to a single fairy tree. I uh, immediately went on foot to assess it, in case it was Justin. This is all in the reports. It wasn't, though, it was Miss Fae here. We walked and talked, about the corruption, and exited the forest around Refuge." Advocating for Lup because she helped him out of the forest will only put his judgment in question. Barry skips over those details.

He folds his hands on the table in front of him and immediately discovers that hurts. The anesthesin must be wearing off; the gauze is starting to feel rough against his skinned palm. "After that? Nothing, for almost a week. No recent signs of Justin, no—no breakthroughs in the reports from our people checking into his show— Sizzle It Up's—associates, or suppliers. Uh, and last night I went back into the forest. Doing a manual grid search for more fae trees. That's the kind of, uh, bullshit we were having to resort to, waiting for news. We don't have the manpower to do a proper sweep. So I didn't bother to take any of the juniors in with me, 'cause—it was too much of a, a long shot, to put them in that kind of danger." And because Barry loathes supervising trainees, but Boyland knows that already.

Boyland hums and says, "Alright. But you haven't explained why you're traveling with a shapeshifter. Regardless of what happened with the poisoning, the suspect definitely killed someone. Bluejeans, you're a senior hunter. You must understand how this looks."

Lup rests her head and paws on the edge of Barry's pocket. There's no story he can spin that would make both her and Boyland completely happy. He can't lay out all his reasoning as to why traveling with her is advantageous, not when she’s trusting him to make her case. And he doesn’t want to let her out of his sight any more than she wants to run around Berston injured and nearly helpless.

Angus is staring at Lup, writing abandoned. She cocks her ears at him. He may have snuck off after a bugbear alone, but he did more to help clear Taako’s name than every full-fledged hunter on the case. He seems like a smart kid. She'd really like to talk to him, once this all blows over.

Barry pushes his sweaty bangs back and mops his forehead. He wants to shred some paper, or tap his fingers on the table—anything to get this nervous energy out. Instead, he locks his ankles and breathes evenly through his nose, willing himself to be calm and professional. "Well, I found Miss Fae again, yesterday. I don't—I don't think this surprises you, but she confirmed that she and Justin are family, and filled in some info about Sazed—that's the burnt guy—for us. Before we even got the receipt from the Bonneville apothecary." Barry knows he didn't put the destruction of her pocket dimension in the report, or that Taako's her brother... God, was there anything else he left out? He didn't even manage to keep Lup secret for a full day, he wasn't ready for this. If he contradicts what he reported he's done for. They'll assume he's compromised, that Lup's done something to him, and that'll be the end of her and maybe his career.

He swallows dryly. "She approached me because Justin's been completely missing, since the—since the incident. No signs, not even among the fae. And, as a senior hunter, to the uh, best of my judgment? That's not a trap, or a lie, or a trick. She's genuinely worried about him."

"I want to find him, that’s all," Lup pipes up. "I want to know he's safe. If—if it's what has to
happen, I'm willing to leave with my brother as soon as we find him." Taako won't like it, but it'll be a good few years before he can be out in society with his own face on. But also, she doesn't want to leave. If she's being honest with herself, she wants to keep hanging out with Barry. She likes Barry. She's never liked a human before, but he's pleasant and nerdy, and apparently kind of a badass.

Boyland gives Barry a questioning look before glancing over to Angus. "What do you think, kid?"

Angus flips through his notebook and scribbles something down before saying, "Well she's obviously telling the truth, and I don't think Bluejeans has been charmed." He pushes his glasses up his nose and locks eyes with Barry. "If he was, he wouldn't be trying so hard to hide the fact that he adores Miss Fae."

Barry choke's on his own spit. He gets one syllable out, coughs again, gropes for a drink that hasn't been brought yet, gets self-conscious over coughing with Lup recoiling about a foot below his face, and has a minor panic attack. He didn't think he had any adrenaline left in his body after the bugbear. This damn kid's tapped a heretofore undiscovered well, and now he feels like he's drowning.

"That's—we've been traveling together for one morning," he says. "And—" his voice breaks off in a squeak. He's got to keep some of his composure. Boyland's patience will only extend so far. "She was uh, impressively helpful, dealing with the bugbear, which Caleb can tell you all about. I mean, she's injured, so uh, not up to fighting, but—but anyway. I left Quail in charge of Glamour Springs because, without uh—without a fae present, and with the poisoning being mundane arsenic? It's really not—not our purview, anymore."

"Caleb, please keep it professional," Boyland grumbles, rubbing at his temple. Angus only smiles smugly and goes back to his note-taking. "You're not out of the woods yet, kid. As soon as Cannoneer gets back we're having a talk about your little adventure. And, Bluejeans? I'm going to add to my report that you're traveling with a changeling, something you should have done as soon as it developed."

"Right, of course," Barry says. Boyland didn't find out that he and Lup exchanged names, that he visited her pocket realm, or that he hid her at the hotel overnight. This is the best outcome he could've hoped for. If he can pass his relief off as more anxiety he's in the clear. Boyland's probably waiting until later to confront him about what he intends to do if they catch up to Justin, and he'll be grateful to not have that conversation in front of Lup. "Yeah, uh, right now I'm really wishing we'd—convened, and exchanged reports, instead of uh, me rushing into the cave and getting mauled by a bugbear. Anyway, we're headed to the Miller labs—near Rockport—after this."

Minutes crawl by in awkward silence until someone kicks at the door. Barry jumps in his seat. There's a swear, muffled scuffling, and before anyone can react Avi twists the knob and shoulders it open. The dishes teetering in his arms make a bid for the floor, but he manages to rush forward in time for them to clatter to the tabletop instead. Boyland's burger slides from its plate. Avi grabs and resituates it before extending Boyland's plate with a beleaguered grimace. "Sorry, it's a madhouse out there."

"It's fine, Cannoneer," Boyland grumbles, taking the food with a grimace of his own. "We just finished discussing the fae situation," He grunts and takes a bite of the burger. "Which means it's time to talk about your professionalism."

Lup sniffs at the food with mild interest before resting her head back on the edge of the pocket. They seem to be done talking about things that interest her, but she should eavesdrop, just in case.
Never know when a human's gonna decided she's not worth keeping around anymore. Well, she's not so worried about Barry on that account, but the other three definitely haven't earned her trust.

The most awkward lunch she or Barry have ever endured ensues. Boyland upbraids Angus for running off and Avi for losing him. Junior hunters are assigned supervisors or partners for their safety, and even a senior hunter with no partner—such as himself, and Barry—either cooperates closely with law enforcement or winds up dead. Barry acts as a prop for Boyland's lecture, waving his bandaged hand to punctuate statements about maiming and undue risk. He also takes strategic bites of his BLT so he's usually busy chewing when Boyland prompts him for a response.

He feels a little vindicated when Boyland reminds Avi that second-hand information about fae activity is always suspect and needs to be clearly flagged in reports. He listens with interest and offers Lup bits of bacon and lettuce as Boyland reveals that “Caleb’s” early promotion to field training was due to his ridiculously fast graduation from coursework and is a special privilege that can be revoked at any time.

It doesn't escape Barry that some of Boyland's lecture on undue risk is directed at him, for traveling alone with Lup. That's fair. But he's allowed to follow his own judgment. So long as he's not compromising anyone else in the organization by say, exchanging names with a fae. Or potentially drawing the public's ire by 'colluding' with an accessory to murder. Or otherwise perceived as working against his organization's goals.

He and Lup are going to be watched everywhere they go. He'll have to report his movements in detail, even if he's on leave to convalesce. And if anything goes wrong around them that remotely looks like it could be a changeling's fault... And any asshole senior hunters who care little for due process and less for fae might take it on themselves to “check on” him. Barry's torn between resentment and anxiety, just thinking about potential confrontations. If he wanted half his coworkers breathing down his neck he would've become an officer like Davenport.

By the end of lunch Barry's wounds sting something fierce. He can't just glop more anesthein on them; that stuff'll stop working eventually, and he'll need his dexterity for riding. He folds up his napkin with the rest of the trash and shakes his wrist out, turning it over to examine Avi's stitch job.

"Oh, Bluejeans," Avi says, somehow managing to enunciate clearly through a mouthful of food, "your bags got dumped in my room after all. Stable didn't want to store 'em for this long. You staying overnight?"

"Uh," he says intelligently. He really, really doesn't want to. He wants to get back on the road so he can talk to Lup and make plans without worrying about the other hunters' opinions. Which is exactly the kind of behavior that anyone sane would find suspicious, dammit. He turns to Boyland.

"Is there—does Berston have a real healer in town?"

Lup's very unfamiliar with human medical practices, and really all she knows about human injuries is they take a lot longer to heal than fae ones. Even fae with weak magic often have enough to knit themselves back together quickly. For Barry's sake, she hopes humans have magic healers. One of her closest friends in the area has some skill in that, and she knows he works with humans. But tracking him down would that set them back at least another day, and she's reluctant to mix him up in all this anyway. He probably hasn’t even heard about Glamour Springs.

"A healer?" Boyland hums and scratches at his stubble. "Yeah, I think there's someone on the east side who should be decent, at least. Small town, though. You're not gonna find anyone especially powerful."

Barry was hoping Boyland would say no outright so he could hit the road. He's sure he's good to ride—hell, he'd rather let a horse lick his injuries than be stuck here. At least he doesn’t seem
worried that Lup knows Angus's name. The kid’s young, just starting out, and it's common for
hunters to leave their birth names behind and choose something that's not on any town records for
their personal lives. No one's called Barry “Sildar” since his dad died. But even with that problem
aside, the longer he lingers the more scrutiny they'll be under. "What do you think, Miss Fae?" he
asks. "Is—uh, Miller, expecting us soon? Or should we uh, take another detour and see this town's
healer? 'Cause we could always head on to Rockport—they'll have the best, uh, the best of the best
there."

"Uh," is all Lup can manage while she tries to process what he just said. "Oh! Oh right. Lucas
doesn't even know we're coming. Not sure how much longer Luce is gonna be there, though." She
glances over at Barry's hands and says, "Honestly? I think you should get some healing. But if you
think you're good, then I'm good. Luce can probably do a little bit for you when we get there, since
she’s spring court. If you still need it."

Barry looks from Angus, sulking and picking at his chicken alfredo, to Boyland, fuzzy caterpillar
eyebrows furrowed together over his nose, to Avi, blithely tearing into his sandwich like he's
already forgotten the morning’s troubles. He listens to the hubbub of the inn leaking under the
door. There's probably a swarm of guards taking lunch alongside Emma and her family, and after
that everyone will jump back into action to refresh the town wards, report to the mayor and press,
reassure any panicked business owners, maybe search the forest again…

Boyland must enjoy his cushy town assignment. Trouble like this probably only happens a couple
times a year, so he gets to stay home with his family and act as a liaison between hunters and the
guard. Barry would break out in hives if he was constantly accountable to a bunch of law
enforcement-types. He'd better go now, before Berston's guard ropes him into consulting on their
bugbear issue. They won't care how unlikely it is that the bugbear will be back; what's important is
whether people are panicking at the possibility. They'll want to make a show of turning over every
stone.

He doesn't want to be part of that show. "Yeah, uh, yeah. I think I'm good. Cannoneer did a great
job with the stitches. Uh, we'll just, take it easy on the road and I'll see someone in Rockport, or
Luce. It's not—I'm fine, barely hurts."

Boyland closes his eyes and sucks in air through his nose so hard his nostrils flatten. "Your face is
bleeding, Bluejeans."

Barry grabs for his napkin and turns it over until he finds a spot untouched by grease or mayo. He
swipes at his face and it comes away with a red streak. Seems like eating pulled at his cheek
enough for the scratches to leak through the bandage. "Uh, it's nothing—no worse than if I cut
myself shaving."

"You really gonna ride with both your hands screwed up?" Boyland drawls, taking a cigar case out
of his pocket. "Cos I seem to recall the last time I saw you mauled. Specifically, the part where you
said you were good to go out looking for that sluagh again the next night, and then it nearly
scalped you cos the blood loss made you slow."

"I did, uh, shoot it, though."

Boyland waves a hand dismissively. "Whatever you say. You can take all the risks you like, for as
long as you get away with it. But, Miss Fae? If you're party to getting this man killed then it'll be
on your fuzzy little neck."

Lup flattens her ears and a low, squeaky growl escapes her throat. She's getting sick of being
treated like a wild animal that could attack at any moment. This is exactly why she stopped
"If you hadn't noticed, I'm stuck as a mouse for the foreseeable future. I'll do what I can but it's not on me if Bluejeans gets himself killed. You hunters are too quick to blame us when things go wrong." She's a tiny mouse settled in a pocket, she can't exactly intimidate anyone right now. But she’s angry. She hasn’t done anything to Barry yet. She said, very directly, that she wouldn't, and still they mistrust her. *Humans* are the ones who lie. Boyland must have fae family—he should be more understanding!

Boyland sighs explosively. "That's exactly my point. Hunters are too quick to blame fae if something goes wrong. Bluejeans, I can't not report on your little fae friend. If you let anything happen to your stubborn ass, there'll be hunters lining up to make it her fault."

Barry winces. Boyland pushes himself up from the table and ambles to the window. He bites off the end of his cigar and spits it into the flower box. The cigar blooms with red heat as he idly waves it, and he takes a long drag and puffs smoke out the window.

Lup sinks into the pocket until she can barely see over the edge. He was...looking out for her? She...ok. She misjudged him. "I apologize, Countryman. It seems I've misunderstood your motives here."

Boyland grunts, facing away. Barry remembers that he almost didn't get his hunter's license. He told the story, one week into their first assignment together: when he was training for field work, his mentor was killed. There were enough baseless mutterings of collusion that weeks passed before someone stepped up to take over as his mentor. He didn’t go into the details, but Barry imagines that being treated like a suspect instead of comforted after his mentor's death, with his career in jeopardy to boot, made that one of the worst periods of Boyland's life.

"Okay. I promise I’ll be careful, but I—I still want to get going. So here's what I'll do. I'm uh, technically on leave already, or I will be, retroactively. I'm gonna—I'll turn my horse in and hire a rig and team."

Avi perks up. "Hey, that's actually a good idea," he says, gesturing with the dry end of his sandwich. "But I think Berston's too small to have charter carriages? Or autos either, I guess. And they wouldn't let you take a fae with other passengers, on account of panic."

Barry sags back in his seat. "I'll buy out all the seats in the coach, then, and uh—just eat that cost. Miss Fae, the frame's gonna be ribbed with iron—you okay with that?"

"That sounds like a good idea," Lup says, enjoying the idea of traveling in private, “and iron should be okay, so long as I don't touch it. Might be a bit uncomfortable but, I've...admittedly grown more used to its presence, since starting to travel with you."

"I'm not gonna stop the two of you, so long as you do things by the book," Boyland says, gesturing with his cigar.

Avi scratches a spot of mustard on his chin. "So, if *I* turned up with a fae—"

Boyland jabs his cigar at Avi. "Have you been in the field for near thirty years? No. You're gonna have to really impress me before I trust your judgment. I'd think you were charmed."

"Oh, c'mon," Avi says, blowing a lock of hair out of his face. "Anyone can be charmed!"

"Yes and no," Barry says. "People can react differently to the, uh, compulsions, and there's all kinds of protective measures. It's uh, relatively simple to defend against, with practice."
"Yeah, and I was halfway to thinking you were charmed anyway," Boyland says. "I'm gonna write Cap'n that you're traveling with someone voluntarily and he's gonna want to send a gift basket."

Barry flushes an embarrassingly obvious red. "Oh, c'mon, I'm—I'm a team player."

"Drink with the rest of us after the game sometime, then," Boyland says. "Go figure it'd take a missing suspect and a ticket into Miller labs to nail you down."

Avi sits up straight and cranes his neck to look into Barry's pocket from across the table. "Yeah, Miss Fae, who's Luce? Do you also know Lucas?"

"Haven't met Lucas, actually," Lup says, “but I know of him. Luce is...” she pause. How much should she tell them? "A friend." Lup glances up at Barry to see if that's an appropriate answer. She doesn't want to be cagey, but she can’t compromise Lucretia’s privacy. Humans value the magic unique to high fae. Hunters would surely love to get their claws in her.

"So are fae just able to come and go from the labs as they please, then?" Angus asks from his corner, still picking at his barely eaten chicken.

"Well, um, Luce works closely with Lucas, so she'd let me in. I'm going to see her more than I am him." It's well-known that the Millers collaborate with fae. Anyone who researches magic has to. Boyland shrugs disinterestedly and motions towards the door.

Barry takes the hint. "We'd better get going then, so we can catch her at the lab," Barry says, shoving his chair back. "Where's the—the—"

"Station's right up the road," Boyland prompts. "Porters will even take your luggage for you. I'll deal with your horse and the bill if you get out of here before that kid's parents come around to shake hands. I want them happy about the rescue, not panicked over changelings."

"Right, right," Barry says. "Do you know if there's a coach leaving soon?"

"No idea what their schedule is. Step to it, if you're gonna buy out a whole coach. Otherwise I'll see you back here."

Barry doesn't need to be told twice. If he's stuck at the inn overnight Boyland will pick at his story more, and he’s already losing track of what he’s lied about. And it's bad enough that traveling by coach is guaranteed to slow them down. "Wait, Cannoneer—you just came from Bonneville. The Rockport Limited has a stop there, right?"

"Shut up, Bluejeans!" Boyland says, waving his hands. "Don't plot in front of me! I've got family they don't let on there. If you're smuggling your changeling friend I don't wanna know about it!"

Barry grins. "Fair, fair." Avi gives him a thumbs-up and mouths "yes", winking as Barry snags his jacket and heads for the door.
The Greenman's Apothecary

Chapter Summary

Lup and Barry take a breather, meet some friends, and get some much-needed medical attention.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barry follows two porters up to Avi's room—furnished with two twin beds and a rug, with work papers in tidy stacks on the nightstand Barry suspects is actually Caleb's—and lingers to splash water on his face from the wash basin while the porters carry his bags out. He digs the silencing bauble out if his pocket. It's gone cold to the touch; a jolt of magic applied from his closed fist imbues it with enough power to run another few hours, even as his stitches throb painfully with the effort. "Alright, Lup. Ready to see if we can get a coach?"

Lup sighs. More hiding in pockets. When she stretches her shoulders she can feel the sharp twinge of burn-tightened skin. It'll still be a good bit before she can change again. Maybe visiting Merle wouldn't be the worst idea? No. It'd take too much time out of the searching, and they already lost so much today. From now on she just needs to find Taako. That's the goal, her own comfort can wait. "Yeah sure," she says. "I'm looking forward to being able to stretch my legs."

"Yeah, lunch was kind of—painfully awkward. But I'm, uh, real glad we don't have to sneak around other hunters so much? At least the ones I know are—well, not shitty," Barry says, picking at the damp edges of the bandage on his cheek. The cut doesn't seem to be bleeding. There's no mirror, so he pulls off his glasses to examine his reflection in them. Doesn't work; he can't make out details when he holds them far enough away to catch his face, and the lighting makes his image too transparent. He wishes he hadn't lost his compact. It was silver and rune-worked, and while he can expense a replacement it probably won't be as nice.

He sighs and puts his glasses back on. Drives him nuts that he has to rely on porters to haul all his stuff around. He forgot to grab a clean shirt before they ran off with his bags, and now he's stuck in a bloody flannel for a while longer. "It'd actually be convenient if you could look human now, since we're headed away from Glamour Springs. Especially if we wanna get on the train later. How're you feeling?"

"Itchy," Lup deadpans. Yes, taking a more human form would be very convenient right now, wouldn't it? "From both the burns and the whole 'being stuck in one form'." She'd been trying to ignore it, but she can't even remember the last time she spent this long in a single body. She doesn't know how Taako does it. Though, she supposes he doesn't stick to looking like a damn mouse . "Wish I could look human too, my dude. Hey, is the healer here magical or, like, a human healer?"

"Gonna be a human healer who dabbles in magic, probably," Barry says. "And we're pretending you don't exist for now, in case Emma says anything about a talking mouse to her parents. Boy—Countryman probably won't even mention you came into town with us in his report."

Lup can't help but pout a bit at that. "You're sure we couldn't get them to help me out? I'm sick of being a mouse." Lup grins to the best of her ability, which probably ends up looking more like a
grimace with a lack of complex facial muscles. She stares up at Barry while he considers the basin of water. Then, before he can think better of it, he dunks the bloody hem of his flannel.

The water he squeezes out runs pink and leaves flecks of lint floating in the basin. Avi and Angus are just gonna have to get it refreshed later. He pretends very earnestly that he looks slightly less like a mauling victim. "So I think I'm, uh, presentable. How about we see what the ticket situation's like, and then if we can't leave soon we drop by the healer? Since you want to. I'm fine with bribing them to ignore some uh, hunter business."

"Sounds good to me, because, yes, I very much want to." Lup says, glancing at the dirtied water. "I want you to get healed up too."

The coach station is nice. Small and country, but the floors are waxed dark wood and there's an alabaster chandelier hanging above the main lobby. The clerk at the station about chokes when Barry wanders up to her desk covered in bandages and with the bloody, sodden edge of his flannel poking out the bottom of a deeply gouged leather jacket. She practically vaults over the desk to rush him off to the closet the porters left his luggage in. Her panic intensifies as he explains they want a coach to Rockport, and when he says that he wants to buy all the seats on it she gulps air and agrees that's for the best.

It costs him an arm and a leg, only about a quarter of which he'll be able to get reimbursed, but he walks out with four tickets on a coach heading back to Bonneville. The traffic blockade works in his favor; drivers are just becoming aware that they can't get over the destroyed bridge, so there are a handful that have left their passengers to find accommodations in town and are turning around. He gets his pick of unscheduled departures. It's only Lup's earlier request to see the healer that stops him from asking if they can head out immediately. Barry asks that the team delay leaving until the last minute necessary to beat the sunset.

Lup stays crouched in his pocket, biding her time as best she can. It's mind numbingly boring, but she gets through it with the knowledge that once he's done she'll be able to walk on her own for the first time in a freaking day. Then Barry almost forgets to ask the clerk where to find the town healer. She appreciates the clerk's tone of utter disbelief, because how on earth did this man forget he was bleeding.

The clinic turns out to be a fifteen minute trek towards the east side of town, down a cross street that eventually turns into a farm road. From the outside it looks more like an old-fashioned herbalist's than a medical office. The building's sided with cedar clapboard painted a cheerful yellow, with two front-facing gables over the windows. The dumpy garden pressed against it is crowded with herbs. The sprawling plants expand into a thick jungle choking the alleys on either side and encroaching on the neighboring buildings. Slate boards advertising hang at each open window, swaying in the breeze.

Barry is certain they're about to meet some country quack peddling disgusting syrups and poultices. Squinting to read one of the boards only convinces him further; they each have a chalked list of herbs and drugs for sale, the proprietor left unnamed and with unknown credentials. He supposes that even a country dispensary might have some herbs he needs. Normally he'd rather lick his wounds in private and not go to the trouble of trying an unproven doctor, but even the smallest chance that this person can help Lup is enough for him.

They can hear laughter through the open window. Barry knocks and get no response. The laughter comes again, and he huffs impatiently and bangs on the door. The conversation inside pauses, and a man's voice shouts, "It's open!"

The door is indeed unlocked, and leads them into a narrow hallway that stretches past a bare
handful of open rooms. The chatting men are somewhere near the back garden. At least it sounds like there's only two of them; Lup needs a private audience with the doctor. Dealing with some other human is not worth the potential fallout. Barry’s hunter buddy probably won’t be able to protect them if someone raises an alarm.

Barry hooks his thumbs in his pockets--Lup notes the dried blood and dirt under his nail--and ambles towards the back of the store, only making the barest pretense of browsing the goods on display. The chatting men are clearly dear friends who don’t give a damn about professionalism, and Barry's beginning to feel like this side trip's a waste of time.

One half of the chatter strikes Lup as extremely familiar, but she can't quite place it. And how could this person be someone she knows? She barely spends enough time with humans to recognize them feature-wise, how could she remember a voice from a town she's never been to? But...it just sounds so freaking familiar.

"Yeah. Lup's been looking for her brother and came to visit," comes a muffled voice down the hall. "Held me back a day from coming up here. Sorry 'bout that, sweetie."

Lup freezes in shocked incomprehension. Then her head rockets out of Barry’s pocket. She scans the hallway as Barry turns a corner into a dining room and gapes at the poorly-disguised greenman lounging at the table. "MERLE?" She screams and stares him down. He's wearing loose-fitting shorts and an unbuttoned floral-print shirt. A wide-brimmed hat does nothing to hide the leaves poking out from his brow or the waxy, dark green of his face. His beard of bushy green grass and flowers spills over his collar and down to his chest.

She knew Merle spent most of his time with humans, but today’s just been surreal. Merle has a hand resting on the human man’s thigh. Lup thinks she preferred meeting the bugbear with the tea. They look very comfortable among heaps of clutter. The room is lined with jars and bowls containing all manner of herbs and crystals. Bundles of plant matter hangs from the ceiling on ropes. Mismatched shelves crammed full of books and plants circle the dining table, leaving a gap for a couch and another for an open window overlooking the back garden. The table itself is piled with even more potted plants, as well as scattered papers, discarded dishes, and a half-eaten plate of cookies dusted with powdered sugar. It's barely past lunch, but an open bottle of amaretto sits next to a stacked set of cups.

"Lup! I was just talking bout you with Indrid here." Merle smiles innocently and gestures to the elderly human adorned with all manner of herbs and baubles, and a comically large pair of round glasses. Lup really wishes she could set Merle on fire with her eyes. "Indrid, this is the changeling who lost her brother I was telling ya about! Haha. Small world."

Lup's a talking mouse and Barry's still the odd one out here. Indrid looks him up and down with raised eyebrows, taking in the bandages and ruined clothes. Barry would almost rather go another round with the bugbear than sit down for a surprise parlor chat with Lup’s friends while he’s this big of a mess.

Merle enthusiastically beckons him over to the table, leaves making up his body rustling softly with each movement. Barry approaches slowly, glad that he doesn't have a knife strapped to his person--he looks enough like a serial killer without one. Or, well, a hunter. Merle’s shoving a cup at him before he’s sitting all the way down "Uh--are we drinking?" he asks, by way of greeting.

"You look like you need it, kid," Merle says. He pours a slug out for Barry, who downs it like a shot, hoping it'll take the edge off his stress. The aftertaste is a perfect almond sweetness that puts him in the mood for some of the cookies, but he's not going to reach for someone else's food when it means giving them an eyeful of either his gross bandaged palm or his stitched wrist. "I'm Merle,"
the greenman continues, “and that's obviously Indrid. I guess you've met Lup. Lup, what are ya doing with a hunter anyhow?”

Lup runs her hands down her face and groans. Merle has always been too trusting and she swears it'd get him killed if people didn't just like the guy so much. Getting someone else killed is another story, though. "He's helping me find my brother,” she says, tone betraying her grievances. “Why are you in Berston with some random human healer?"

"Why the heck are you still a mouse when we’ve got booze? Indrid here's a friend. He gets me all kinds of nicknacks and things and in return I grow him herbs he couldn’t get otherwise. He's also great company.”

"It's nice to meet you, Lup,” Indrid says. "I've heard much about you. Why are you two visiting me today?" He has a soft smile that reaches his wrinkled eyes as he looks over their battered forms critically.

"I'm Barry,” Barry says, after a moment. Lup supposes that the sheer awkwardness of being the only person stiff and untrusting outweighed the risk of giving his name. She hopes he has better survival instincts while out hunting, or else it’s a miracle he’s survived this long. "Lup can't shift right now because of iron burns, if you've got something for that."

"And Barry's real fucked up from a fight with a bugbear," Lup adds on. If she's getting help then so is he.

"Dang! Well, I can probably do something with that, at least enough to get you shifting again. Funny form to get stuck in.” Merle offers his hand for Lup to climb onto. She sends him another glare before accepting. Merle carries her over to the table and deposits her there before smoothing her fur out of the way to examine her shoulders.

"I can help you, Barry," Indrid says, standing up and cracking his back with a groan. "If the wounds aren’t magical then my abilities should be plenty enough to fix you up." He crouches next to Barry. "Where are you hurting?"

"I don't know if we have time? We've got a coach leaving in five hours,” Barry says. Indrid crowds into his space, decorative baubles and herbs dangling, and Barry sinks back into his chair. "Nothing's bad, we uh, already did first aid. Are you a...doctor?” If he has to buy some tonics to make Roy happy he will, but he doesn't want to put up with being poked and prodded by some quack.

"I'm a healer, Barry. I've got some tricks up my sleeves. Nothing quite as strong as Merle, of course, but I can fix basic stuff. Certainly won't take five hours."

What's someone with talent for magical healing doing in a tiny town like Berston? Maybe Indrid just...likes living here. Also, he neatly sidestepped the question of whether he has actual credentials - which goes a long way to explaining why Boyland didn't recommend him. Even so, Barry might as well take advantage of some help. He nods in tacit agreement, anxiously watching Merle and Lup. She hisses under her breath as Merle pokes at her burns. It's fine. In a second he'll fix it and she'll finally be able to shift again.

"Well," Merle says, pulling back from Lup. "Luckily it's all surface level. Not like you were stabbed with iron or something. I can tell you've been aggravating it."

Lup huffs a little laugh. "One shift and a bunch of water crossings. We can't all teleport between oak trees, Merle."
Merle's only response is a chuckle. "Alright, I'm gonna see what I can do. This might sting a bit." He extends his thumb and presses it carefully into the left side of Lup's burn. Immediately she can feel his magic starting to flow through her own, coaxing it to rebuild damaged skin. Barry swallows a pang of terror at seeing Merle’s thumb dig into Lup’s tiny back. She’s okay, he’s not crushing her.

It's a strange sensation to Lup, feeling another fae's magic reaching through hers. It’s not something most people’s magic is shaped for. Only certain spring court fae have the ability to so seamlessly use their own magic to alter another’s body, much like only certain summer court fae have power over raw heat. It's uncomfortable on a general level but soothing to the frayed edges of her form. She lets out a long breath as Merle rubs his thumb harder across her shoulders, leaving the skin behind raw, but healed.

When he pulls away Lup stands up and stretches, reveling in being able to do so without the cracking of burnt skin. She rolls her shoulders, testing the depth of Merle's work. Barry lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. She still has bald, shiny spots on her shoulders, but the skin's not nearly so red and inflamed. "Let me see your arm there," Indrid says, demanding his attention.

"Uh, sure," Barry says. He offers his right hand out of habit, then changes his mind and switches to the left. The stitches are just fine for his wrist, while his left palm hasn't even finished crusting over.

"Let me see both arms," Indrid amends. He takes Barry's offered hand and stretches his fingers. "This is from a fight with a bugbear? When was this?"

The pain resurfaces when Barry's muscles shift, forcing him to suppress a hiss. Indrid peels the gauze and bandage off and frowns when he sees the wet, raw skin underneath. "This morning," Barry says. "Couple hours ago? It doesn't hurt until you do that."

"Wiggle your fingers for me," Indrid digs his into the back of Barry's hand, feeling the tendons move. Barry grumpily complies, wincing the more his muscles tug at flayed skin. The amaretto was a bad idea. The comfy cushion underneath him and relaxing in general are bad ideas. His injuries hurt worse and worse as he unwinds, and he's got most of the day to go before he can sleep. "It looks like you just skinned this badly," Indrid continues with a frown, "but it feels like some real nasty magic. And what the hell is that on your shirt? Is that all your blood?"

"...Probably?" Barry says, not entirely sure himself. He doesn't cooperate when Indrid tries to reposition his hand, too absorbed by Lup's progress. Indrid rolls his eyes and goes to a cabinet to root for supplies.

Hopefully Indrid can fix him. Barry's got a flesh body; not made of magic like Lup’s, so there’s not much Merle can do for him. Lup’s a little worried, but she’s got more important concerns right now. She can feel her restored magic thrumming through her body, itching to be used, to be manipulated. She has no interest in denying it. She jumps to the floor next to the coffee table and makes sure she has ample space before shifting.

Lup's form distorts. One second she’s so small Barry can barely see her from his seat, the next she stretches above Merle, the transition as quick and total as striking a match. She meets his eyes with a human face, modeled after how she looked as a kid. She hasn’t appeared this way since she last lived among humans. She'll miss the claws and teeth and ears, but she understands they need to move inconspicuously. She flexes her fingers, rubs at her face, moves her facial muscles around; simply revels in the more familiar form.
Barry blushes bright red from chin to forehead. If only he could somehow sink into the floor and disappear until he's composed. There's no good reason for him to be gobsmacked by her radiance. She was just as gorgeous with her inhuman true appearance. He thinks he would've recognized her in a crowd; the slope of her brow and nose, and the shape of her hairline and jaw, are just the same as when they first met.

Lup stretches her arms over her head and gives the room a once-over from her improved vantage. Dang, she missed being big. "Welcome back, sis!" Merle says, smiling up at her.

She grins wide and grabs Merle under his arms to scoop him up into a big hug. Being entirely magic and plant matter, he's surprisingly light. She's a little pissed at his liberal use of true names, but she does owe him. "Thanks Merle. It's good not to be a mouse again."

Merle laughs as she swings him around and lightly deposits him on the couch squashed between bookshelves. "Well it's good to be appreciated for once," he says. "How's Barry doin', sweetie?"

Indrid abruptly looms over Barry, arms full of salves and wrapped bandages. "The hand seems like a case of inimical magic. Barry, did you channel something nasty without a focus?" By the flat expression on his face, he noticed what a struggle it was for Barry to tear his attention away from Lup.

Barry supposes he'd better start cooperating. "Yeah, it was an emergency. You don't have to tell me to not do it again."

"I shouldn't think so, if you're this old and you haven't rotted any of your own fingers off. I'm going to do salve and fresh bandages for everything, but I probably can't speed up healing much for you."

"So how long is healing gonna take?" Lup says, looking over Barry's wounds from a fresh perspective. She couldn't tell how bad they were as a mouse. "I'm unfamiliar with how fast humans recover from injury."

"It'll be a few weeks before his hands fully come back," Indrid says, letting go of Barry's to wipe his off on a rag, "but he should be in working condition in a week and a half? Maybe a bit more. Depends how he takes to the salves. Hey, Merle?"

"Yeah?" Merle says, scratching at his grassy beard.

"Can you get me some aloe? Looks like I'm out."

"Yup," Merle chirps and holds out a leafy hand in Indrid's direction. From his palm a small succulent inflates, steadily growing larger and fuller until there's an outsized aloe plant sprouting from his hand. "Break a few leaves off and plant 'em instead of using them. It'll grow more. S'how most succulents work."

"Thanks," Indrid says, reaching over to carefully twist and harvest the plant from Merle. Barry watches the exchange in awe. Merle pats his hands together and goes back to his drink like nothing even happened.

Some people's magic flows cleanly through vessels, like a wine bottle filling a cup or current through a wire. It's enviable, that healers like Indrid and Merle can extend their own power to shape their patient's recovery. Barry's read descriptions of the process; like putting the tip of one finger to one drop on the window pane, and gently guiding it to its fellows until they combine to form a running river.

His magic does not play nicely with others'. That's common enough, or else mundane doctors
would be out of business. It's damned inconvenient, though. Imbued salves are supposed to speed healing by guiding the flow of someone's innate magic through the injury, but on him they lose potency in hours. Faster if he exerts his magic towards other ends. Uncontrolled, his magic cuts like knives, ripping apart anything he channels it into. He's spent years developing the finesse to operate most charms normally, and even so he'll always struggle with herbalism. Plants are so much more fragile than the glass or metal he prefers.

A good enough healer can work around the natural obstinacy of Barry's magic, or channel enough of their own power to force his into dormancy. But it can take hours of effort. Last time he bothered with professional healing was when a kelpie broke his leg. Pretty much anything less serious than that isn't worth waiting around for. Not even if Merle would let him ask nosy questions about greenman magic.

Still, it's not the power he envies, watching Merle. It's the easy familiarity between him and Indrid. Barry doesn't have any social outlets besides his coworkers. He's been trained to be wary around fae, in a way that he's beginning to realize has made him unjustifiably anxious. A natural consequence for someone whose weekly routine is stumbling from the site of one grisly murder or disappearance or haunting to another. As much as he hates to admit it, he's overdue for a vacation.

He lets Indrid poke and prod at his hands and face, cleaning him up and disinfecting his wounds more thoroughly. Indrid presses butterfly bandages across the scratches on Barry's face and wraps his left palm in waterproof dressings. Barry's relieved that he doesn't insist on redoing Avi's stitch job. "You might avoid scarring if you let me fix this," Indrid says, to Barry's shaking head. "Suit yourself," Merle chuckles. "Indrid's much better with his hands than whatever chump you let do that to ya." He winks at Indrid. Barry internally recoils. "I'm good!" he says. "A little scarring never hurt anyone, right? Raring to go over here, it's been great, how much do I owe you?"

"Let me write you up an invoice. It should only take a moment," Indrid says, rising to his feet. Merle ambles over with a fresh drink in his hand—promising—and then pats Indrid's ass after handing it off to Barry. He knocks it back in hope that alcohol will drown the memory, then shoots Lup a look of wide-eyed panic. She mirrors it, recoiling from Merle. This is why she doesn't hang out with him more often. The last thing she needs to think about is an old plant-man's sex life.

"You sell shirts here?" Barry asks.

"I'm willing to sell you one of my shirts," Indrid says, turning to Merle. "If you could grab him— I'm thinking the round collared one with the filigree pattern? Should be big enough."

"Oh yeah, I hate that one! But it's not covered in blood," Merle says, heading out of the room. "Glad to see it gone--you look way hotter in just about anything else. Or nothing else."

"You're gross, Merle!" Lup shouts after him. Then after a moment of thought, "GET ME A SHIRT TOO!!" She turns to Indrid and says, "I can find a way to pay if you'd like. Or I can bring it back as soon as I get something else? Or both. I'm more comfortable in, like, actual physical clothes. I like the feeling." Behind her, Barry chokes on his offer to pay for Lup's new shirt when he realizes that she's not wearing a shirt. The plain clothes she's generated are as much of a magical construct as her body.
Roy eyes her over, a light frown on his face. "Go ahead and get the shirt for Lup too, Merle! The one with the black spots!"

Merle comes bumbling back a few minutes later holding two shirts. He hands one to Barry and one to Lup. She can't help but think about how ugly they are. She is definitely finding something else as soon as possible. When she pulls hers on it creates the odd effect of clipping through her illusory blouse as it's dispelled, then it settles nicely. Lup wanders over to one of the empty cords hanging from the shelves and takes it to cinch around her waist. That... improves the look a little, but definitely not enough.

She turns around to catch Barry staring, dumbstruck. Merle throws the second shirt at his face. He rolls his eyes and says something about undressing and Barry has the revelation that Lup's pants must be fake too. He flees to change in the bathroom and doesn't come back until he's practically dunked his head in cold water.

"Uh—I'll pay for both shirts," Barry blurs, when he finally returns to the room. It took him a while to get all the dry blood smeared across his stomach wiped up with only a sink pump.

Indrid, bent over the invoice he's writing, gives him a wry look. "I'm billing you a few bucks for each, don't worry."

Lup hums. This is not a nice shirt. She thinks about the pretty silks and cottons back home that were consumed by the void when her house collapsed. Comparatively, she isn't especially fond of the feeling of this fabric. "Honestly? I kind of still want to just give this back later." She looks Barry up and down. "Why is your hair all wet?"

"No reason," Barry says, way too hurried. He retreats to the table and leans over Indrid’s shoulder to get a look at the invoice, followed by Lup’s glare at his obvious lie. The rates Indrid’s charging him are very fair, and these expenses are fully reimbursable anyways. He retrieves his abandoned jacket from the chair and fishes around until he comes up with his checkbook. Flipping to the first empty page, Barry belatedly realizes that he's having a much easier time moving his fingers. The salve on his hand keeps the pain at bay without fully numbing him. This was a worthwhile trip, as much as he wishes he'd been able to nap instead.

While Barry pays, Lup spends her time exploring the various nicknacks around the room, every so often being told off by Merle to avoid touching one or another that's harmful to fae. Indrid’s halfway done with the line-items on the invoice when Barry's head clears and he remembers the state of his supplies. That is to say, that he's low on nearly everything. He couldn't restock his herb kit in Glamour Springs when they needed to treat more than forty cases of poisoning.

He lets Indrid lead him around the store, throwing together a huge paper bag of different wrapped herbs, and some bandages and silk thread besides. Indrid bluntly tells him his lips are chapped and Barry sighs and adds Vaseline to the pile. With a roll of his eyes, Indrid redirects Barry to scented lip balms for him to sniff critically before selecting Plain Boring Mint.

There's a worrisomely diverse selection of “marital aids” like caraway and violet, but Barry's able to purchase yarrow, aloe, witch hazel, and other medicinals. He even stocks up on angelica and wormwood, though Indrid can't help him out with a new elderwood wand. There’s also not anything so modern as Veronal. Indrid claims it's addictive—though that’s not based on anything Barry's heard—and chivvies him into buying a box of chamomile tea instead.

The bag's not terribly heavy when they're through. Barry practices hefting it in his hands to test their range of motion until blood starts spotting from his stitches and Merle swats him to make him stop. The extra expenses are definitely worthwhile. Merle presents him with the gift of an aloe
plant in a tiny plot, which Barry takes with a tight-lipped smile and the resigned assumption that he's going to kill the poor thing inside of two weeks.

He and Lup leaves the dispensary together. Barry is considerably more put-together, with his jacket pulled over his new shirt and a shopping bag on his arm (and the poor aloe shoved perilously into the shopping bag). The impulse to extend his other arm to Lup gets stamped down. They're not a couple out on a shopping trip, and she'd get burned by the iron lining his jacket anyway.

The station's more than willing to accommodate their request to depart earlier than planned. They've been assigned a tiny country mud-coach that seats six, or four comfortably. Barry's glad they only charged him for four tickets. He's spent more in one morning than he usually does in a week. It's not anywhere close to a strain on his savings, but he's still going to be anxious about it until he gets reimbursed.

He asks for his luggage to be piled in the wagon instead of tied to the top, intending to spend the afternoon finally getting organized. He throws his jacket on top of the pile so he can help Lup up the high steps. The chassis rocks as the horses stamp and shy away from her. They can hear the confused driver soothing them until Barry shuts the door tight.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Indrid was a random OC in the draft of this we did months ago, long before he appeared in Amnesty. It took very few edits to turn him into a cameo =) --Tansy
Lup has her first experience on a train while Barry naps.

Lup opts to spend the trip sleeping. The bumpy ride is comfortable and she's reveling in her ability to stretch out along the seat normally meant for two. She's still worn out, despite the healing, and the rest does her extremely well. In her comfort her form shifts slightly, edges closer to her true appearance. She's thankful later she opted to lie down, outside the view of passerby and the driver. In the past she's only ever been this comfortable when at home in her tree. Even Taako had the good sense to wear a charm that kept his magic from acting up on the road.

When Barry nudges her awake, she easily slips back into a fully human shape. Lup helps carry what she can out to the train station. The platforms are uncomfortably busy. Humans are bustling this way and that, carrying things, shouting things, and only barely missing her when they walk by. It immediately sets her on edge. She wouldn't come within a mile of this place a week ago. And here she thought she was getting used to people.

She hates the smell. It's wrong and grating in a way the Hunger's rot never is. The Hunger, corrupt as it is, is still mostly natural. Things rot, not at that level in that amount of time, but they always do. This smell doesn't belong. It’s like burning, but twisted, and it makes her cough like she never has before.

Lup trails close behind Barry as he buys the tickets, resisting the urge to bolt or lash out when someone bumps into her. The lights are too bright, the station too cacophonous, and they wouldn't have been able to find the ticket counter if the flow of the crowd took them elsewhere. The clerk's voice blends with the hubbub around them. She and Barry have to shout their questions back-and-forth, and his tickets end up saying "Mr. and Mrs. Bluejeans". Lup’s beyond caring.

There's one small moment where she accidentally flashes her true eyes at an unfortunate bystander. The poor woman yelps and runs off in a panic as they clamber up the steps onto the train, Barry bracing himself on the iron railing and Lup with her hands balled in her pockets.

"You might get a fae activity report here later," she whispers to him. "Uh... Sorry..." He shrugs with one shoulder and cracks a yawn.

An attendant ushers them into their compartment, gives his spiel about washrooms and the dining car, and then takes off after dumping their bags. The room itself is cramped but well-appointed: there's a single curtained window facing the adjacent train; a small, capped jug of water strapped
above a tiny counter, both attached to the wall; an upholstered chair at the window, next to the
counter; and, presumably, a carpeted floor, somewhere under Barry's pile of luggage. Almost the
entire left side's taken up by a bunk. The bottom mattress is curled into a couch and the top's
pressed flush and strapped to the wall above. Folded sheets and pillows sit neatly in the base of
the small coat closet. Lup's stuck in the passageway while Barry pulls the bedsheets out and crams his
satchel in their place.

He assesses the cabin. What he wants to do is wade to the bunk and pass out. But the floor's
layered with lumpy burlap and leather bags concealing mystery objects. Stepping on them seems
unwise, especially since he owns more than a few loose knives. Barry throws the bedding on the
bunk and awkwardly shuffles the bags to the chair in the corner. They resist his efforts, slumping
towards gravity with the singular purpose of making his life difficult. Lup scoots past him and
plunks down on the floor by the window as a cat, stretching out as he clears space. She appreciates
the existence of blinds on the cabin door window.

Eventually he constructs a haphazard pile centered on the chair. The integrity of the pile's
definitely not enough to survive the train moving, but that can be a problem for later. Hopefully
after Barry's had a nap. He shoves the clean bedding to the far side of the bunk and collapses with
a groan, leaning up against the closet.

Lup's patient enough to wait until the train shifts forward before she gets the itch to do something.
She jumps up onto the bed to peer at Barry. He's staring at his knees with his eyes barely open,
rocking lightly with the movement of the train. Looks like even odds as to whether he remembers
how lying down works before he falls asleep. She feels bad about disturbing him, but she needs his
help if she's gonna figure out how things work on a train.

"Barry?" she whispers, lightly prodding his leg with a paw. "Where can I get food?"

"Mmph," Barry says intelligently. He rolls his head. Forces his eyes to focus on Lup and taking a
moment to process it's her. "You want the couch? I can move."

Lup narrows her eyes and jumps off the bed, seamlessly changing to human before sitting back on
the floor. She's not sure if he's messing with her or if he really didn't hear. "I'm too anxious to sleep.
And I napped in the coach. I was asking if there's a place for food round here, babe."

The jolt of adrenaline he gets from Lup calling him babe is enough to kick his brain into gear. If he
was any more awake he might blush. "Uh—I think the porter said...dinner? There's gonna be a
dining car somewhere. Probably, uh..."

He's forgotten which way the front of the train is. He sits up and looks around the compartment, as
if staring at the water jug will illuminate the situation. It takes him a moment to realize the train is
slowly inching along the tracks. The pile of bags slides ominously, swaying towards Lup. "Oh shit,
watch out!"

Lup holds out an arm and catches the falling bags without really looking. "I can find it." She shrugs
and pushes the bag-pile back together, dumping a few on the ground. "I can bring you something
back if you want? For after your nap."

Barry's face says that Lup is the best person to ever exist on the planet and he's blessed to be in her
company. He rolls off the couch and stumbles to the closet, bending over and digging in his satchel
for his checkbook and tickets. That'll be enough proof of identity for her to make purchases in his
stead. "Here," he says, offering both. "Buy whatever you want. I'll eat anything. Thank you."

"Aw hell yeah," she says, taking the assortment of papers. "Thanks, Bluejeans." Barry's nice, just
giving her his money like that. She'll get something small, make sure not to betray that trust. She slides open their door and looks up and down the hallway, swaying with the shift of the train under her feet. She chooses a direction at random, and ends up passing through what must be a normal passenger car. A bunch of people are sitting and chatting, some reading magazines or newspapers or books.

She perks up a bit when she passes one of the passengers, a well-put-together man casually reading the day’s paper, completely innocuous. Lup can feel the natural magic radiating from him, though. She's not sure what kind, but he's certainly fae. She doesn't sense any shifting magic, so he's lucky to look human enough to pass. Lup knows some fae choose to live among humans, the chances of him calling her out are slim to none. She shuffles quickly through the cabin regardless.

The dining car smells nice and is filled with the soothing sound of utensils clinking against bowls and plates. She's not really sure what to do, though. At most restaurants she's been to, and she hasn't been to many, there's either been someone to seat her or a place to seat herself. She doesn't immediately see either of these things. All the tables are occupied and any servers seem to have jobs already.

Before she can gather herself, a waiter with a stack of dishes balanced on one arm bustles over to Lup and motions her towards an occupied table. This is not at all what she wants or expected. He sweeps up more dirty dishes and deftly wipes the tablecloth while offering pleasantries as she internally fumbles for a polite way to bail. In a whirlwind he informs her that there's wine available but they're out of steak and he'll be back to take her order. He sets a place for her with a menu and then spins to deliver a bill to the table across the aisle.

There's only one other person at Lup's table, a human man with a bushy beard and caterpillar eyebrows who's already digging into a pasta salad. He doesn't look appropriately dressed for the dining car. He looks like he's in nightclothes, with a plush robe that opens in a low-cut V. Some of his chest hair's poking over the collar. He smiles broadly at Lup. "Hey there! Guess we're dining buddies. I'm Graham, it's nice to meet you!"

"Hi...Graham," Lup says, and isn't that weird. Saying his name doesn't carry the same feeling of power it should. She wasn't trying to do anything, but she should feel something with a real name. Does he know she's a fae? Is that why he's being cautious? "You can call me...Lulu." She opens her menu and scans what's available. At least the selection is better than the inn's. Hopefully the quality holds up to the style.

"Hi Lulu!" Graham says. He smiles wide and leans forward. His purple robe slides down one shoulder and exposes a disquietingly wide stretch of collarbone. "I recommend the pasta salad, it's really good! And the steak was really good too, before they ran out. Or you should try the chicken! I spend so much time on the train that I've tried everything they serve at least once. Graham's my train name, by the way! It can get exhausting, talking with strangers all day and confiding personal details about yourself. Where are you from?"

He says all this in one breath and without a hint of irony. The collar of his robe continues its downward slide. One dark nipple peeks out from beneath the velvet, glimpsing the world for a brief second before Graham fists the fabric. He gathers the robe to his neck and drops it in favor of his fork. The robe instantly yields to gravity and falls open, beginning its descent once again. Little chest hairs spring free as the velvet shifts.

Lup's eyebrows crease together watching the display. Ok. This...probably isn't normal behavior. She finds herself really wishing she’d waited for Barry. And 'train name'? What the hell does that mean? He's asking her for personal details while not sharing his own and it's not doing much for
how on edge Lup is feeling.

"Uh..." is all she can manage for a solid few seconds of silence, before she continues, "I uh. I live just outside Glamor Springs." That's true enough. He doesn't need to know more than that, right?

"Oh, wow! Glamour Springs?" Graham, says through a mouthful of pasta salad. "Sounds like a great place! What with all the glamour and the springs!" He leans across the table, disconcertingly close to Lup, still chewing. She can tell he’s never heard of the town, which is probably for the best. He swallows as he cups a hand to his mouth. "Wanna know a secret?" he asks. His gaze is direct and vacuous, eyes brimming with excitement without taking in any details of Lup's expression. "I'm from Neverwinter. I'm from the Poncibles of Neverwinter—yup, Percy-E-Poncible, that's me! The "E" stands for Enos."

The way he pronounces 'Percy-Eeee' almost sounds like he's yodeling and in a single moment Lup is suddenly very sure this man doesn't know she's a fae. Well, that or he just really doesn't know anything about fae. He just rattled off his full name directly in her face. Though, she questions the rationality of someone saying they like to be more distant with others and then immediately giving out personal information. She is also very sure he has no interest in any information she gives him about herself. Which...is good for her.

Little stars picked out in gold thread on his robe collar catch the sunset as the train finally reaches the outskirts of Bonneville and passes into open country. Deep blue fields crawl past, and the twinkle in the windows of distant cottages grow brighter against the evening sky.

It's probably not the best move. And if Barry finds out he's not going to be happy, but to be fair Lup really doesn't know what else to do. So....

"Alright, Percy Enos Poncible," she says, letting magic seep from the name and into her words, "can you back up a tad?" She laces the question with charm. He could say no if he really, really wants too, but her suggestion capabilities are powerful and not easily circumvented by the average person. All fae charm magic is grounded in suggestion. Even the natural power a high fae tied to a court holds over other fairies is just a form of powerful proposal.

"Oh, of course!" Percy says, eyes unfocusing for a moment. "I did sort of- sort of… I did dump you 'in media rez', as it were! See, when I was a kid, my parents enrolled me in the Eigersstor's Jewels Academy for Youth—good old EJAY! You know how it is, with legacies— and… and…” She shakes her head and he seems to loose his train of thought, blinking confusedly.

She's...really not sure what to do with this now. What was her plan? Did she have one? Damn it... She could make him go back to his room? That seems excessively rude, though.

An approaching waiter steps to Percy's side, notepad in hand, and saves her from having to think of something right in that moment. Percy stares straight ahead, dazed. The waiter gives him an odd look, cocking his head at the way Percy doesn't even move to say hi. Based on his expression, a silent Percy is unusual.

"I'm here to take the lady's order," the waiter says smoothly, brushing past the strange behavior after the initial confusion. "What will you have, Miss? Shall I recommend a drink?" The way he inflects 'drink' speaks to either an exhausting day or familiarity with Percy. It's clear that only politesse restrained him from saying 'strong', and that he'd rather like a drink himself. Lup quickly scans the wine list before picking out a random white that looked nice; she needs the waiter to go away before he starts asking questions neither she nor Percy will want to answer.
Once the waiter slides away to his next table, Lup turns reluctantly back to Percy. Charmed or not, he’s still deeply annoying.

"I’m sorry," Percy says suddenly, practically bouncing from his seat as he changes posture. "I’ve been awful forward!" Lup takes a breath. Maybe pouring magic directly into his brain will make him shut up and leave her to eat. “Here I’ve just been talking about myself. What brings you to the Rockport Limited, Lulu? I’m here because I’m a traveling magician!"

Lup bets her ass his 'magic' isn't as impressive as he thinks it is. She could probably blow his mind if she really wanted. Might keep him occupied, though. Instead she says, "I'm going to visit a friend." She can be amicable for now, she'll keep magic flowing into the charm, figure out the strings to tug to make him stop. She could order it outright, that is the point of a charm, but that seems...inappropriate. Rude. Plus, the waiters might notice.

Percy halts his nodding long enough to shove another forkful of pasta salad in his mouth. He chews and swallows, then waves an arm behind him to flag down the waiter, still addressing Lup. "How far are you going? Are you changing trains in Rockport? Ooh, want to see a card trick?"

The waiter spots Percy's waving hand and slides down the aisle. "Dessert, Graham? I'll bring your wine and food out in just a minute, ma'am."

"Yes please, I'll take some chocolate cake," Percy says. "How about you, Lulu? My treat." He seems to have completely forgotten the offered card trick already, but his enthusiasm leaves no doubt that he'd be thrilled to perform. Lup wonders if he would have offered desert if he wasn’t charmed. He seems the kind of overly friendly person who would.

"I'm alright on cake I think. But, food-wise," she addresses the waiter, "if there's still some chicken left I'll take that. And...an order of the pasta salad to take back to my room as well. Thank you."

Percy’s beaming at her when the waiter leaves. His eyes are unfocused, but they seem to do that a lot. "I'd love for you to show me a magic trick, Percy," she says. That should distract him long enough for her to enjoy a few minutes of peace.

Percy pulls a pack from his robes—hopefully from a pocket—and sets to shuffling the deck with a flourish. When his cake arrives he ignores it, so intent on his work that his robed elbow brushes against the frosting. Sometimes he pauses to ask Lup to "pick a card, any card!", but otherwise he's fully occupied.

The waiter brings Lup a plate of chicken marsala and folded box of pasta. He raises an eyebrow at Percy's show, checks whether Lup seems annoyed by his attention--she gives him a little smile to assure him she’s alright--and disappears quickly.

Lup doesn't realize how long it's going on, enjoying the peace and her food too much. If she doesn't think about it, time can pass by like water for her. The food's good, the wine's sweet, and finally, finally Percy's noise has been reduced to the quiet shuffling of cards and the occasional offer to take one. He cuts and re-cuts the deck, matching pairs and aces, bringing four kings to the top of the deck, and unerringly finding her card. He demonstrates a gamut of tricks spiced up with a bit of quiet showmanship. It's clear that everything he's doing is sleight-of-hand, nothing extraordinary, but he's practiced enough that it's hard to follow his motions from across the table.

The dining car's emptying out; travelers shuffle away past darkening windows, back to their compartments on either end of the train. Percy continues to mechanically perform card tricks.
Running out of novel material, he starts drawing out and elaborating how he shuffles the deck, flinging cards around and sending them flying from hand to hand. The waiters busing the empty tables start to shoot him worried glances.

Only when a waiter arrives at the table to inform them the dining car will be closing soon does she realize how late it's gotten. Lup looks outside and sees the sky dark, not the bright amber glow it was when she arrived to eat. How long has Percy been doing card tricks? She glances at him and can sense her magic swirling behind his eyes, trickling through his hands as he shuffles and deals and shuffles again. He hasn't even touched the cake he'd seemed so excited about. Oh, whoops...she hadn't realized he’d taken the request as a command. She almost forgot the charm was working after how little it affected his personality. "You can stop, if you'd like, Percy. That was very impressive."

Percy almost drops his cards the moment Lup finishes speaking. "Thank you!" he says, enthusiasm dulled by fatigue. "Gosh, it's gotten so late!"

Lup can't help but feel a little bad. Things like this are how fae drive humans to death, unaware of the limits of their mortal bodies. In those cases at least the fae are more aware of the command given, though. She just let him go on and on without saying a word.

He tucks the cards into their box and vanishes it up a sleeve. Then he rediscovers his cake. Thrilled, he seizes his fork and starts shoveling frosting into his mouth. The elbow of his sleeve leaves a tiny smear of brown chocolate on the tablecloth.

He seems enamored with his dessert, but he keeps shooting preoccupied glances at Lup while chewing. His expression falls incrementally. After licking a gob of frosting from his lips, he swallows thickly and says, in a small voice, "You know...people usually tip?"

"Oh," Lup says, surprised. She was just getting ready pay so she could leave. She knows enough to tip the waiter, but magic shows were never a particularly high priority growing up. She didn't know tipping them was custom. "Let me see what I have..."

Barry's checkbook is already out on the table. She starts flipping through it, finding a few bills shoved in the back. She pulls out what's probably enough and holds it out towards Percy. "Is... a five? alright?" She really hopes it is, especially considering he'll probably take just about anything she offers him.

"Definitely!" Percy says, smiling broadly. He happily takes it from her hand. Lup realizes from his glee that that's a lot of money for a tip, but not an amount he finds overly shocking. Frankly, with how long she forced him to perform, it's probably reasonable. "Wow, that makes me feel a lot better about getting distracted and missing my evening performance! I'm glad you liked my show so much. You're a really good audience, Lulu! You should come see me tomorrow morning! Right before lunch, in the public compartment. I do a lot more than just card tricks!"

"I'll tell my companion about it," Lup brushes him off, making a mental note to let Barry know so at least she's not a liar. "Have you paid yet?" She wants to order him out of the car, but the waiters will notice if he runs off without paying.

"I have a tab!" Percy says, cracking a yawn. "Since I'm an official performer! We're like family here." He waves at the waiter from before across the car, who seems perfectly happy to have his hands full of dirty dishes and does not wave back. "Hope to see you around tomorrow! If you're not getting off at Rockport then you can catch my evening show too!"
"I am getting off at Rockport, actually. Now," she lowers her voice so no one else in the car will overhear, "Percy? would you go back to your room for the night and not talk to anyone about me, at least for a little while? I like to keep a low profile..." She smiles sweetly, falsely. The yawn implies he's tired anyways, so she really doesn't feel bad about sending him off. The waiters will probably be relieved.

"Sure!" Percy says, springing to his feet. He draws his hand across his lips in a zippering motion and dramatically tosses away an imaginary key. "Mum's the word! I'm going to scamper off for some shut-eye—ol' Roger and the rest are probably just as ready to bed down for the night as I am!"

With one last wave, he turns to pad out of the car. As he passes Lup, it becomes apparent that his robe is cut very, very short. Pale, hairy thighs don't disappear beneath the velvet so much as ascend into its embrace, undulating gently below the word "JUICY" emblazoned across the butt. That is...a lot more of Percy than she ever wanted to see. That is...quite a robe...to wear...in public. She can't look away.

The robe's ridden up a little in the back, exposing the bottom of Percy's boxers. The waiter, Roger, makes an abortive gesture as if to pull the hem down as Percy passes, overtly deciding to not touch that after all. The other two waiters jump aside to let Percy sashay out the door, leaning over the tabletops. Roger shoots her a long-suffering, commiserating look, and hurries over with the check. With his help she pays quickly, gathering up Barry's food and leaving with an awkward nod.

She knocks politely on their compartment’s door before entering. She'd rather wake Barry than walk in on him unexpectedly. A muffled sound most accurately rendered as "Grznit?" emanates from beneath the door.

"It's-uh. It's Lu? Can I come in? Sorry if I woke you." Lup shuffles uncomfortably in the hallway, glancing around to see if anyone else is there. "I brought food?"

Barry makes an empathic noise that was probably a "Please", though it sounds more like he's got a pillow in his mouth. There's some shuffling from within, then he calls, "The door's unlocked!"

Lup slips as quietly as she can into the tiny space and puts Barry's checkbook on the little counter. The room seems much smaller now that the bed's been pulled out. She’s surprised he managed that before his nap; he even put the fitted sheets and pillowcases on. She gently lobbs the food in his direction. He fumbles the catch, but at least the box doesn’t spring open.

"OhbythewayIcharmedsomeone," she says, very quickly and barely understandably, hoping his sleep muddled brain won't process her words. “Also, a dude is having a show in the morning."

Barry adjusts his glasses and blinks until his eyes focus. The smile he gives her is dopey and unguarded, face lined from being pressed into the mattress and hair mussed from sleep. One of his butterfly bandages is peeling at the corner. He sits up on the mattress, stretching out his legs and wiggling socked toes as he takes a moment to process her words. He stares for several seconds and then says, quite eloquently, “What?”

Lup shrugs. “I told him I’d tell you.” She gives Barry a quick once-over and decides to change the topic to distract from how she charmed someone. “And you should really change your clothes before sleeping. Those ones are gross."

The gears in his head visibly turn as he parses her words. His eyes flick to the box of pasta, then back to her as he snatches it. He it open and lets out an appreciative noise. "Jeans don't get dirty,"
he says, tipping the box into his open mouth.

Lup visibly recoils at that concept. "Yeah they do, Bear. What the fuck?" She gives him an incredulous look and says, "Eat your pasta and change your pants. I'm not sleeping in the same bed as a grimy-pants-Barry."

Barry nearly chokes. He coughs to clear his throat and slowly, deliberately, sets the box down on the mattress. "Uh, right, yeah. There's the—second bunk. Right there," he points to the iron frame, still secured against the wall with leather straps. His face has gone bright red, from sleep or coughing or embarrassment or all three. "Let me just—" he knee-walks across the mattress to the wall, avoiding the pile of clean, folded sheets, and reaches up to fumble with the straps.

Lup watches him fiddle with the bed skeptically. She gives the iron frame a wide berth and goes to pull the blinds on the little window down before stretching out a bit. She lets her ears lengthen, teeth and nails sharpen, and her eyes sink into ethereal voids. Her body melts into something more real, less illusion. Her true form is almost human, easily mistaken if you don't notice the eyes and ears. It feels more vulnerable, but it's the only shape she can take for an indefinite amount of time without feeling discomfort.

The upper bunk frame groans and squeals, still folded against the wall. Barry curses. "Even if you do get that thing out, you should still change," Lup says.

"These suck so much," he complains. The springs are stiff and he's not sure unbucketing the leather straps even did anything. "Ugh, Dav—my, uh, ex—ex-partner—and I never even bothered with them, to be honest."

The frame's not going anywhere soon and he's waking up enough to concede that Lup was right about his jeans. He abandons his efforts and shuffles to where the edge of the mattress is pressed against his piled bags. He's got to count on having a relatively clean pair of pants packed somewhere, because he doesn't own pajamas anymore. They're yet another entry on the long list of things he's been planning to replace. "I'll uh, change while we wait for the attendant—they can fix the frame for us—oh—"

Lup can see the exact moment he finally processes that she's dropped her human guise, because his brows climb into his hairline. He hasn't seen her like this since they first met. The absurdity of the situation strikes him—here's the fae he was so wary of in that forest, a woman more magic than flesh, capable of absolutely wondrous power—and now he's stuck in a cramped train compartment with her.

He has a vague, sleepy memory of her saying she charmed someone, and since she there's no sense of danger or urgency about it he's happy to assume she didn't get caught. She brought him pasta and told him his jeans were too gross to sleep in. She's got his checkbook and a ticket that says she's his wife, which, somewhat pathetically, is the closest he's come to a relationship in years. Barry steels himself. "Uh, I guess maybe we shouldn't get the attendant in here after all...?"

"I can change back if we do," she shrugs. "This is just more comfortable while we're in private."

She hops up to sit on the counter and watch. It's really nice of Barry to help out like this. She doesn't know if she deserves him; especially considering he’s hunter who, for all intents and purposes, should probably have arrested her. She finds herself looking at him with a softer expression than she really expected and shakes her head to clear it.
"My true form's the easiest to sit around in so I tend to use it for sleeping if I can." She thinks for a moment. "By the way, do you have, like...non-gross pants I can borrow? This isn't quite 'true form' since I gotta wear pants and shit."

"Hoo boy," Barry says, tugging bags out of the pile and up onto the mattress. "Maybe. In, uh, in my defense? Glamour Springs was such a disaster that the inn didn't have a chance to wash much for me."

What little the inn did wash included his dearly-departed flannel, and the bloodstained jeans he's wearing now. He unearths three more pairs of pants and ten shirts from his bags. More than half the shirts were pulling double-duty as wrapping for spare knives and hobby junk. He has some chunks of glass he's been etching runes into, clockwork for tinkering with, iron caltrops—they've never come in handy but have cool-looking, wicked barbs—and an assortment of other junk.

Once upon a time, when he was serving on Davenport's ship and hunting along the coast, he had a little closet of a workshop tucked away in the hull. It was basically a cubby, so small that he couldn't close the door while sitting inside. But it had a built-in desk and hanging nets to leave his tools in. Now he's so used to traveling full-time that he's stopped imagining what it would be like to have his own space. The bedroom his mother keeps for him is the closest he's ever come, and he only spends maybe two weeks a year there.

There's no way he's sniff-testing his shirts in front of Lup, so he's stuck in Indrid's filigree monstrosity a while longer. It's the only one he knows for sure is clean. The pair of pants he offers her is the one that he wears the least, since his gut's grown too large to fit comfortably. She gives Barry a cursory look as she smells the pair to make sure he's not bullshitting her--she doesn't doubt him but also he's done nothing to convince her he frequently cleans clothes. Barry gives her a sheepish grin as she deems them acceptable and selects the second-best set for himself.

"Yeah it'll work," Lup says, further looking the pair over. There's no iron in it; that's good. It looks like the buttons and things are made of nickel or something mix. If there's any trace of iron it's faint enough that she can't detect it. "Thanks!"

Barry's passed through crippling embarrassment at what a disaster his life is and come out on the other side to task-focused resignation. Travel to next destination, eating and sleeping as needed. Sort out whatever fae is the problem. Rinse, repeat. Lup pulls the pants on over her shifted ones, causing the same clipping effect as before. They mesh together into a strangle jumble of two pairs of pants trying to exist in the same place at once, overlapping and poking out of one another. Barry's pointedly looking away this time, so he doesn't get to see the way the fake pants sink away as she shifts fully into her true shape.

Lup sighs, shakes out her legs, and says, "That's much better. Thanks Bear."

"You're welcome," he says, still not risking looking over. "I think I'm gonna go change in the bathroom—the one at the front of this car. Do you want me to flag down an attendant while I'm out there, so they can come in here and fix the bed?"

Lup groans, clearly exaggerated, and shifts back into something more human. "Fine," she says, swinging her legs lightly against the counter she's sitting on. "I don't really care, though." She narrows her eyes up at the iron frame. "Gonna have to fly up there so I don't have to grab the edge..."

"We'll figure it out. It's no problem for me to take the top bunk," Barry says.
It's a quick trip to the bathroom, a short wait in line, and then Barry has a chance to lock himself in and breathe for a moment. He’s still not used to traveling with something like a partner again. And instead of getting the same organizational support, everyone he works with will distrust Lup.

He likes her. She’s a good person. But her brother's still a murderer. Taako won't be able to find sympathy in a courtroom by claiming self-defense, and he doesn't have the wealth and power to bribe his way out of charges. There's only so much Barry can do to help him without ending his career.

The best he can do is support Lup and get her to her friends. This high fae who works with Lucas Miller should be able to pull strings he can't. Disappearing after they reach the lab might be the best thing for her. He'll just be glad they met, even if Lucas turns him away at the gate.

Barry cleans up and goes through his bedtime routine. Brushes his teeth and hair, wipes off flecks of dried blood with a wet washcloth. Once he changes his jeans he's almost presentable. When he leaves the bathroom, there's no sign that an attendant has reached their compartment yet. He resolves to wait outside the door for a minute before checking other train cars. Another man standing outside a compartment down the hall's had the same idea. They share a commiserating shrug.

A few minutes later, Lup slides their compartment open and scans the hallway with a human face. She got bored waiting for him that long and it’s really not a big deal. “Hey, babe?” she calls, when she spots him. “We could just share the bed. I don’t mind, and honestly the upper bunk is more trouble than it’s worth.”

She thought about searching through Barry’s bags for a moment in there, just to hold off the boredom, but there’s no way she’s going to do that. They’re full of knives and iron and herbs and all manner of anti-fae things, and she also doesn't want to betray Barry's trust. He’s been so nice. He deserves the same back.

Barry's heart stutters as he stares back at her. He'd like nothing better than to sleep. And to sleep next to a gorgeous, amazing woman who just called him "babe"? He's definitely having emotions about that. He can tell that they'll steamroll him later, as soon as he's rested enough to process them. "It's—uh yeah, that's what Dav and I, what we always decided. Lots of trouble, definitely..." he says, trailing off and casting another look towards the door to the next train car.

The landscape outside the windows is fully dark now. Only the hum of the wheels betrays that they're moving at all. Lup steps aside and motions at the open door.

"If you're okay with it,” Barry says, following her inside. “I shouldn't be uh, gross anymore.”

Lup snorts as he blushes, realizing what he said. "Eh. I'm not worried. I've slept in the dirt before." She takes her true form again before flopping down on the bed, then rolls aside to make room for Barry. Honestly? She really doesn't mind sharing. In fact she might be looking forward to it… just a little.

There's more than enough room for both of them. Barry turns off the light lets himself collapse heavily onto the mattress. They don't have to worry about sleeping in; the itinerary has them reaching Rockport after lunch the next day. The sheets are cool and soft and smell like strong detergent. "This is so much nicer than dirt," he murmurs, face smushed into the pillow.

Lup snickers and stretches out length-wise on the bed, reaching her hands up as far as she can
without brushing the iron frame above. She hums a quite agreement and turns to see him face-down. It's actually kind of cute. She finds herself looking at him softly before blinking away that expression. She shakes her head and flops over on her side so that she's facing away from Barry. Her cocked ears betray the positive emotions bubbling in her chest.

"G'night Lup," Barry says, rolling over to face the wall. "Breakfast tomorrow, if we wake up early enough." She's a quiet, comforting warmth at his back. It's just...so nice, to share this space and this moment with her. He'd like to tell her how grateful he is, how happy she makes him. But no, that would be weird. He pulls the blanket over them and hugs his pillow.

"Night, Bear," Lup mumbles. She turns over her shoulder to watch Barry. She doesn't need to sleep, not really. Watching his breathing even as he slips into unconsciousness is...comforting. It's been a long time since she trusted a human like this; never had a human trust her like this either, not knowing what she is. She curls up tight on her side of the bed and stares at the wall.
Lup and Barry make it to the lab.

Morning comes and goes with Barry still asleep. The curtain proves thick enough to keep out all light, so it's not until a noisy family passes by in the hallway that he finally stirs. Lup shows him to the dining car to enjoy a leisurely lunch, with Barry lingering at the table to write up reports, and then they have just enough time to return to the room and fold the mattress back so Barry can unearth and pack all his bags.

Rockport's the largest city in this part of the country. It's ballooned in size in recent years, benefitting immensely from the Miller's extraordinary work. The train station is the busiest in the world and every building citywide is fully wired with the most modern conveniences. The department store across the promenade from the train station is absolutely thronged by crowds. A bandstand beside the entrance plays to a couple dozen park tables ringed by food stands, as well as the fenced patio belonging to the store's café. Barry's never had an excuse to explore inside, and he catches himself wondering whether Lup would enjoy shopping. He doesn't know if she'd have any use for human stuff like that.

Instead he buys them snacks from a food stand and ushers Lup into a streetcar. They speed west across the city, fresh air blowing in through open windows, and debark at the coach station adjacent to the local hunters' office. Barry sends Lup on ahead while he sneaks into the office to drop off his reports. He manages to escape without being drawn into conversation and catches up to Lup minutes later, chartering them both a carriage out to the Millers's lab. It's well-known that the Millers don't allow visitors, but the lab is enough of a spectacle that it's not unheard of for people to travel out and gawk from the security gate.

The coach ride starts off with the driver and Barry struggling hilariously to strap all his bags onto the top. The other passengers depart in twos and threes at each stop, leaving Lup and Barry to watch wood and plaster buildings give way to countryside. The road turns from brick to gravel as they pass hundreds of neat rows of young trees, planted decades ago to help reforest the countryside. As they enter the forest proper, the trees grow thicker and wilder, stretching up to shut out the sky above.

It's with an eerie silence that Barry watches the foliage speed by. He doesn't know what to say to Lup. He should be excited at the prospect of meeting a high fae and visiting the lab. But afterwards he and Lup will probably part ways, and he can't bring himself to care about anything else. There's no way to stay in contact with her, since neither of them have a fixed address. He can't exactly send letters to a hunter waystation for her to pick up.

He doesn't broach the subject. It's a well-worn story; a human grows enamored of a fae, not remembering that their lives are uncountably longer. That, to them, days slip by like water. Novelty breathes life into the passage of time, and so very little would be new to an ancient fae. Lup’s the most interesting person he’s ever met, but she’s probably known dozens of men like him. This past week has been much shorter for her. She and her brother will have centuries after he's gone to forget the unpleasantness that was Glamour Springs.
The road ends at an imposing iron gate. The bars are sleek and geometric, with no embellishments or artistry whatsoever. The lab buildings are ringed by a cement wall that stands feet over Barry's head. They're topped with evenly-spaced sharp iron spikes, a deterrent to fae and human intruders alike. The guard station just inside the gate looks empty. Barry assumes that the lab schedules its supply deliveries—and wouldn't that be something, to be so wealthy that businesses will drive out into a forest to deliver!—and that no one's expecting company.

The land along the walls is cleared, with no overhanging branches. Inside, though, it's like the forest resumes. Thick trees choke off their view of the lab, leaving slivers of grey visible through the gaps. Barry's under the impression that Lucas Miller effectively lives in there, so he was expecting something far more like a country manor.

When the coach pulls to a stop, Lup slips out the door and into her true form to gaze up at the imposing structure. Barry's about to say something about staying disguised in front of the driver, but he seems unphased. It's well-known that the Millers work with fae and it's likely not the first time an unaware driver has played chauffeur.

"Shall I stick around and wait to take you both back to town?" the driver asks, patting his horse's flank.

"You can head back," Lup says, waving him off. "Hopefully getting back will be much easier." Lucretia should be able to open a little portal out to Glamor Springs and save them the trip. Spatial magic is a high fae specialty.

"I'll go get Lucas or Luce to let you in," she says, before sliding through the gate as a snake, careful not to brush up against the bars. She reforms easily on the other side and walks undeterred to the door. It's made of iron as thick as the gate. For a man that works with fae, Lucas is certainly paranoid about them.

She presses the call button in the panel next to the door and waits for the beep.

"Who is it?" Comes a very confused, nasally voice. Lucas.

"Friend of Luce," Lup says. "Put her on. I know she's in there."

There's grumbling from the other side, followed by a dignified voice saying, "Hello?"

"Heeeeeeey Luce!" Lup says, immediately more comfortable. "It's Lup! I'm here with a friend and may have imploded my house. Let us in?"

Lucretia's laughter can be heard from the other end. "I'll see what I can do."

A few moments later a loud beep echoes through the yard. Barry practically jogs through the gates as soon as they open. The path to the front door is a flat, gentle curve, so it's more from nerves than exertion that his breath goes short. Lup laughs at his astounded expression. The lab itself is—well, kind of ugly. It's a blocky, imposing structure of weathered concrete, without any front-facing windows to take advantage of the forested view. There's not even a proper front door—the path leads directly to an open loading dock, a dark gaping rectangle puncturing the otherwise featureless concrete.

Lucas comes back over the intercom. "Can I talk to your friend first? I just want to make sure he's all good."

Barry can hardly believe his luck. Maureen is something like a hero to Barry, and he's not sure he could stay composed if it was her on the other end. "Uh, hey?" Barry says, leaning towards the
"This is—" he falters, unsure if he’s introducing himself as a hunter or a civilian. "My name is Barry Bluejeans."

Lup’s ears perk in surprise at Barry’s use of his actual name. She would have been more discreet in his position, even though she knows Lucretia is trustworthy. Barry regrets it in seconds, worried being so free with his name might make Lucas suspicious. Though Lucas might assume it’s a pseudonym...at any rate, too late now. "I'm not here in any, uh, official capacity. I'm just escorting my...friend."

There’s the light whir of a camera as Lucas zooms in on the two of them to get a better look.

"Leave the bags in the loading dock. I don't have time to look through all of them. I'll send Lucretia down to pick you guys up." The speaker clicks off, leaving Lup and Barry temporarily alone. Lup rolls her eyes at the use of Lucretia's actual name. She doesn't think she minds, but it still makes Lup vaguely uncomfortable.

"He's gonna send Lucretia to pick us up?" Barry echoes, somewhat incredulous. The idea of Lucas ordering a high fae around is so weird that he can't properly enjoy getting to see a security camera up close. The Millers put out a paper on some of the principles behind them but they're still not on the market, strangely enough. Barry suspects it's because they use more magic than can be comfortably manufactured for the public. "Doesn't he have... actual servants? Or any staff at all? This place looks too big for him to run it himself."

"I mean," Lup says, "I haven't actually met the guy before, so he's probably trying to send someone he knows he can trust to drag me through the lab."

Another minute of uncomfortable silence passes before the door slides open, revealing Lucretia on the other side. She’s in her full fairy form, all grace and power. Her faceted eyes stare unblinking, but kindly, at the two of them. One set of arms rest comfortably at her sides while the second pair of hands sit clasped in front of her. Her emerald wings lay folded against her back. Lup feels Lucretia’s natural royal aura wash over her, not strong enough to encourage a bow without a tie to a court, but demanding her attention and deference nonetheless.

The closest Barry's ever been to a high fae before is seeing one seated across the gallery in a public court. Lucretia’s posture is relaxed and she’s as unimposing as a high fae can be. Still, the sheer weight of her presence reminds him of powerful wards, though the sensation is entirely different.

"Hello, Lup!" Lucretia says. "I'm so glad you're here. You said something about...imploding your house?"

Some of the intimidation Barry feels falls away. Everything from Lucretia's face to her voice is jarringly inhuman, but their familiarity is obvious. He’s in awe of the whole situation. There are people who've killed to learn names of high fae, and no one from the public has ever been granted access to the Miller labs. He can't believe Lup's brought him here. They've only known each other about a week.

"I may have blasted a hole in the delicate magic holding my pocket realm together and then tossed a hair comb into said hole for the sake of seeing what happened," Lup says quickly, like a child who knows they did something wrong. Seeing Lucretia's unimpressed and unsurprised reaction pulls an embarrassed grin from her. "Can't blame me for science, Luce. Oh! And this," she gestures to Barry, "is Barry. He's a hunter friend of mine."

"Uh, nice to meet you, ma'am," Barry says. He thinks about offering a hand to shake, his sense of propriety warring with his sense of caution; Lucretia's of high status and acting as their host,
she's still a powerful fae. Plus his palms are sweaty. "I work under the--my hunter name is 'Bluejeans'. I sort of encouraged Lup to uh, toss the—toss the hair comb. That one's on me."

Lucretia laughs, light and inhuman. Her antenna twitch amusedly. "A good influence, then."

She motions for the two of them to enter, stepping to the side from blocking the door. "I assume you're here to discuss the formation of a new pocket dimension?"

"That's part of it, yeah," Lup says. She hesitates. The lab is so wholly separate from from the natural world, all concrete and sterilization. It's worse than the train station, but she sucks up her fear and steps in. If Lucretia can handle it she can too.

Barry hovers behind Lup, weighing the impulse to offer a comforting touch. He doesn’t know whether that would be welcome. Lucretia eyes Barry carefully and says, "I hope I'm not making you uncomfortable. I realize my full fairy form can be rather intimidating to humans." There's no aggression in her tone; she sounds genuinely concerned she's bothering him.

"I'm totally fine," Barry blurs, embarrassed. "I mean, you're fine." He frantically scans for a distraction—"I'm just excited to see uh, all this," he gestures grandly to...a storage area. Seems like the Millers didn't bother with anything so normal as a foyer. It makes sense, with the loading dock here, that the adjacent room would be dedicated to shelves and boxes of equipment. Barry thinks he spots an old combustion engine, but otherwise everything's either packed up or unrecognizable.

"The lab, I mean," he continues, "I've been following Maureen Miller's research for, well, my entire adult life. She's amazing.

"If you insist," Lucretia said, not seemed to fully buy that excuse.

She promptly leads the two of them through the lab. It's an almost labyrinthine place, endless paths that make no sense and unrelated rooms between halls. At times a seam or change in building material indicates where an expansion was added.

Barry scans the corridors with keen interest. The papers speculated on how surprisingly few people the Miller labs employ. Their operations are opaque; no technicians or household staff have ever come forward. He assumes they must pay their taxes and keep books, or else he would've heard about the scandal, but the more he sees of the lab the more things feel off. It's plain to see why the Millers don't typically admit visitors.

Lup doesn't like it. It's stifling, and the place almost thrums with a magic of its own. The winding hallways don't help her nerves, either. The lab feels like an old fairy trap; a place humans would be lured into and left to wander the rest of their lives. But she’s the one who’s supposed to know what she’s doing. She brought Barry here, and as unfamiliar as it is, she keeps her head up and works to tamp down unease. How Luce manages to cope she doesn't know.

There's no dust or signs of disuse. Even so, the lab feels eerily empty. Machinery hums behind some doors, and they catch glimpses of moving belts and rotating gears. If the Millers are running a fully-automated factory then that puts them decades ahead of the rest of the country. Lup and Lucretia might not understand what a big deal that is, but Barry desperately wants to see what those machines are producing and how. He can't think of any Miller-brand products that aren't manufactured in more public locations. The volume of activity sounds too large for private clients, and there's no way they could've automated machines for bespoke orders.

They eventually come to a split-level corridor, with stairs leading half a floor up and down. Lucretia leads them up to the first carpeted hallway they've seen since entering. There's a row of windows set into the wall above eye level, though little light reaches them through the dense forest.
It's almost dinner time, so Barry figures they must face east. The few doors in the hallway are featureless and identical. Lucretia pushes open the nearest one.

The office inside seems to be meant for receiving guests, the first indication that ever happens here; it's all polished dark wood, stately and imposing. The shelves are neatly lined with encyclopedia sets that don't look like they've been used. There are two potted ferns flanking the window, a richly patterned rug and matching curtains, framed degrees and awards on the wall, and otherwise no concessions to aesthetic. Lucas Miller sits in a large leather chair behind the desk with a coffee cup at his elbow. The only other thing on the bare surface is a single journal. The room is clearly not a workspace, and between that and the furniture outsized for Lucas's lanky frame, Barry's left with the impression that he's like a child playing at authority. He's never thought about Maureen's parenting before, but he's left wondering if Lucas has been spoiled by his inherited wealth and genius.

"Hello and welcome," Lucas says, gesturing with a limp arm like he thought about being grand but can't fully commit. "I hope it's not rude for me to jump right into this, but, Lucretia—why are your friends here?"

Lucretia's wings flutter lightly as she settles into one of the chairs. "You are welcome to ask them yourself, Lucas." Her gaze is amused and her words don't carry any magic.

Lucas grumbles something under his breath before leveling an unimpressed frown at Lup and Barry. "Why are you here? I didn't approve a visit."

"Not here for you, Miller," Lup says, plopping down on the couch. She curls her toes in the carpet; it's so much more comfortable than concrete. Yeah, she could make herself shoes, but screw that. "I need Luce to make me a new house. And," she turns to Lucretia, "see if you've heard anything from Taako."

"If I've heard anything from Taako?" Lucretia replies, sounding worried. "I haven't. Did something happen? I thought he was traveling with his show."

"Hey, before this goes any further—" Barry says, fidgeting uncomfortably, "I can't, I can't let y'all forget that I'm a licensed hunter. The expectation for discussions like this isn't, uh, confidentiality. Lu—Lucretia? I was assigned to a case in Glamour Springs because it...because it looked like Taako had killed a whole bunch of people. The audience of his show was poisoned. And then he vanished."

Lucretia's faceted eyes show nothing but the reflection of Barry's face. This may not be her territory, but Barry's acutely aware that he's an intruder. He has no idea where the lines of familiarity should be in this strange meeting, with names used openly and no pretenses. He's never dealt with fae outside of his role as a hunter. Few people have. Even with the local courts long gone, they're still unwelcome in human institutions, and seldom operate in the public eye.

He shouldn't be welcome here. But Lucretia gestures for him to take a seat across from Lucas. "What else happened?" she asks, tone commanding.

Barry doesn't do interviews and he knows better than to let a fae hook him with a compulsion. Dealing with high fae is the kind of danger you retain a lawyer for. But Lucretia's also...a woman who's worried about one of her friends. He's about to go completely against common sense and practice. He sits.

"We worked out Taako didn't poison his own audience. But he killed his assistant, the human who did. And, uh, we all know how it goes when fae try to plead self-defense in court. Plus the whole
thing was...public, and gruesome. Looks real bad. People in Glamour Springs will probably still blame Taako, even after the news hits."

Lup tries not to think about most of what Barry’s saying. She knew all of this already, but she hadn't heard it said so directly until now. She can’t help the way her ears flatten against her head. What if another hunter caught him? What if she can't find him because he's been killed or locked up in an iron cell?

Lucretia’s antennae rise as he speaks, twitching minutely. "And you, Barry Bluejeans, are supposed to hunt him down?"

"Supposed to," Barry concedes, and Lup can’t hide a tiny wince. "Yes, that's—that's right."

He wishes he could get a read on Lucas. Of everyone in this room, he's the one with the connections to get Barry in trouble with human authorities. Lucas has his elbows propped on the desk, hands folded and chin buried in them. Mouth covered, eyes narrowed, it's clear that he's listening intently.

"I haven't reported Taako's real name," Barry says abruptly. "Or Lup's." It doesn't seem fair, to give authorities a way to magically compel fae suspects and their associates. Authorities who largely wouldn't give a damn about Lup’s innocence or care that she's a good person. Sazed would've been treated more fairly. He would've gotten interviews, news articles, and been a whole spectacle. He could've sold the rights to his story and had years of notoriety before his execution. But, for killing Sazed, Taako's attracted the attention of a system that wouldn’t even permit him a trial.

Lup shakes away the thoughts of hunters getting their hands on Taako. Barry would have gotten word of his capture if that was the case. She would know if he was dead. He’s out there somewhere. But there’s still a risk. If another hunter finds him, he could still be lost. And she's been spending her time enjoying train food and laughing at dimensional collapses. Taako needs to take priority. The longer he’s missing, the greater the chance of him being found by someone else.

"I trust Barry implicitly, Luce," Lup says. "He's done a lot to help up to this point and has put himself at risk for my sake multiple times."

Lucretia watched Lup intently, still as a statue. "I trust your judgment Lup." She politely dips her head to Barry and says, "Thank you for helping. I'm sorry, Lup, but unfortunately I haven't heard anything from him for weeks. Until now I thought he was still touring."

Lup sighs and closes her eyes. Yeah. That's... about what she was expecting. Why would Taako go to Lucretia before her?

"We left Glamour Springs a couple days ago, and I haven't heard about anyone new being assigned to the case," Barry says, folding his hands. "And, frankly? It's likely no one else will be, unless something comes up. Most of Sazed's victims were getting better, and hunters don't really expect to be able to catch changelings. What with their shapeshifting. And it's on record that Taako's fully capable of blending in with humans."

There's no longer doubt in Barry’s mind that anything in this situation is a charade. He sweeps his gaze from Lup's concerned face to Lucretia's unreadable one, and Lucas behind his desk with half his mouth covered. Barry has to assume Taako's alive, and not only for Lup's sake. If there was a body in the woods he and Lup should've found it. The corruption shouldn't consume things that fast. "So...if we can't find him, and y'all can't find him...where the hell did he go?"

"That really sucks," Lucas says suddenly. He places his palms flat on the table and pushes himself
up from his seat. "But it doesn't sound like you guys need me for anything. If Taako has any sense he'll be staying out of his native form so hunters can't like, track him with his hair or toenail clippings or whatever. I've made great advances in tracking magitech, but it's not my primary focus. So I can't necessarily do better."

Lup's ears flicked forward and she turned to glare at Lucas. "Why would you want to do better? Most of those tools are used to catch fae that don't deserve it. The ones that do are rarely so hard to find."

Lucretia sits forward in her chair and gives Lup a hard stare. "Lup, Lucas is my colleague. Don't bring your own dislike of humans into this."

Lup's ears tilt back under the building weight of Lucretia's magic. Not yet strong enough to affect humans, but lesser fae are far more vulnerable. She doubts it was entirely intentional. "Sorry, Luce," she mutters, dipping her head ever so slightly.

When Lucretia looks away, Lup catches Lucas's slight sneer and glares. She very quickly makes the decision that she does not like this man. She doesn't trust him.

"I'll help you as much as I can with the search for Taako, but I need to stay here for the time being. However, I can rebuild your home. Give me a few hours to create a portal into the forest."

Barry would like nothing better than to watch Lucretia set up her teleportation circle. But high fae are notoriously protective of their magic, and she's doing them a favor to begin with. He hopes he at least gets to see it after she's finished.

"I guess I should probably do something about dinner while we wait, huh?" Lucas says, glancing at his watch. "Geez, I didn't realize how late it was. Do you eat human food, Lup? I can throw together sandwiches or something."

"I can, changelings are practically part human anyways, but I think I'll pass. If I feel like it I'll just pick at whatever you guys don't eat."

"Ok. Sandwiches for me and Barry. I'll get on that." Lucas gives the three of them a once-over before getting up and heading out into the hall. Lup watches him intently. She doesn't like that man. Sure, she didn't love Barry when she first met him, but it's not the same. Lucas puts a bad feeling in her stomach.

"He makes his own sandwiches?" Lup says, once she's sure Lucas is out of earshot. She's definitely not trying to start anything, nope. "Strikes me as the kind of guy who hasn't been in a kitchen in his life."

Lucretia sighs and rubs her face with two hands. "I wouldn't know. I'm really sorry to hear about Taako. I'm meeting with a prince from another court soon to discuss methods of beating back the Hunger. Perhaps I could speak to him about Taako? Spread the search a little?"

"From another court?" Barry blurts. "I mean, that—that sounds like a great idea. But, wow, how far away is this guy traveling from?" There haven't been courts in this county for some hundred years now. Not since the corruption that swallowed the forest that once housed them; the 'Hunger'.

Lucretia may stiffen, or it could be that Barry's just reading that in her posture because he doesn't expect her to answer any of his questions. She refolds one pair of hands in her lap, leaving the other on her chair's armrests. "He intended to travel by teleportation, so I never sought an estimate of the distance."
"But, like—from which country—"

Lucretia cuts him off with a shrug that rustles her folded wings. "I have no idea. We don't really give a shit about your human political boundaries. It's not as if any government claims us as citizens. And I won't tell you anything about the court he's from. That would be a betrayal of his trust, and it's not your business."

An apology slips from him before he finishes registering her words. He can dimly feel the force behind her air of authority, even though he has no affinity for sensing magic. He usually has to concentrate to detect strong presences: wards, hauntings, active runes.

She inclines her head in acknowledgment. "His work here is too important to invite any meddling. It may be that our ancestral forest never recovers its splendor, but the Hunger's steady expansion is as much of a concern for us as you."

Barry nods, riveted. Someone else should have gotten this opportunity to speak with Lucretia. Someone who's not terrified of saying the wrong thing, and who doesn't have a history of absolutely bungling interviews. He wishes he knew how he ingratiated himself with Lup. He can't begin to guess what Lucretia's thinking, or what he could say to put her at ease. "Were you—uh. It was, a terrible event. Really disastrous. Were you...there? When it happened?"

"No. I was, unfortunately, visiting with members of your human government and remained...unaware of the situation, until it was too late to assist." Lucretia's antenna droop ever so slightly.

"Hey," Lup says worriedly, "Don't say that, Luce. If you had been there you wouldn't be here now. You can't blame yourself for what happened."

Lucretia was always driving herself into a hole with guilt over missing the rise of the Hunger. The survivors are lucky she's still around and willing to help. As far as Lup knows, there are only three high fae from the old court system left. At least Lucretia was absent because she was working to further goodwill. The other two missed the carnage because they only involved themselves in court business when they had a chance to grab power, to hear Lucretia tell it.

Lucretia lowers her gaze to Lup before saying, "I appreciate the curiosity and respect that it seems to come from a place of interest, not underhandedness. Courts have good reasons to be wary of hunters. I hope Lup hasn't been giving away secrets."

"What secrets," Lup protests. "You don't have a true court right now."

Lucretia seems to consider that for a moment. "Touché. Seriously though. Keeping things in?"

Lup rolls her eyes, a gesture that would be imperceptible, with her lack of pupils, if it wasn't for the movement of her eyebrows. "I've been good."

Barry has a fleeting impulse to affirm that Lup's been very good. She doesn't really need magic to charm someone, does she. "Yeah, I am...sitting on a lot of burning questions, actually. It's, uh, really good to hear that you guys are still working on the Hunger issue. We were figuring we'd have to dig trenches and salt the earth around the towns that still border the forest, or else lose them inside of twenty years. It—people are scared. Refuge especially has been emptying out."

He blinks and sits up straight. "Wait, speaking of Refuge—a little over a week ago, before the Glamour Springs deal—some humans spotted a high fae passing through the outskirts of town. Any idea...?"
Lucretia's antenna lift in interest. "It's possible, though he would likely already be here if that was the case."

Barry takes a deep breath and tries to relax in his seat. "This is kind of wild, but—if I'm here when he shows up, or if—what I'm trying to say, is that if there's anything I can do to help out? Or my organization? Hunters definitely don't have, uh, the best track record for dealing fairly with fae. But I have a few trustworthy contacts. The Hunger's an issue for everyone—if y'all come up with a way to contain it, we should try to cooperate."

Lucretia blinks, deliberate and slow. "Thank you. I'll take that in the spirit intended. It's definitely something I'll keep in mind, Barry."

Hairs raise on the back of his neck at the sound of his name from her mouth. He hasn't fully internalized the magnitude of the risk he's taking. It's one thing to indulge in some daredevil tactics when hunting redcaps or ghasts, and another altogether to let a high fae have his true name. If other hunters knew he'd be pulled off fieldwork...indefinitely. Going forward, if Lucretia objects to him hunting one of her people? There's a lot she could do to control him.

God, what's wrong with him. He was entrusted with her name first. Humans aren't capable of the stronger forms of magical compulsion, but creating wards and curses keyed to a name is downright easy. In the hands of a skilled magic user, a name's enough leverage to extract favors and treat the poor fae like a bottled genie. With the kind of magic that high fae can do—teleportation portals, pocket dimensions, the things that Lucretia helps her friends with—there would be plenty of people who'd find it worthwhile to hound her. Lucas would have to beat away opportunists at the gates. Even if Lucretia tried to disappear, high fae operating in human society would have to endure vultures checking to see if a charm inscribed 'Lucretia' held any power over them for years.

They've chosen to trust each other, and they couldn't have gotten anywhere if they hadn't. Following hunter protocol means not treating fae as peers. No sharing of space or meals, no honest exchanges. Giving all that up for a chance of safety isn't worth it to Barry. He doesn't think Lup or Lucretia could grow to see him as a friend. But if he sabotages them from the start he'll never know. "You're welcome, Lucretia. I know I don't have as much of a stake in this, but thanks for helping me and Lup out."

Lucretia chuckles lightly. "I have always been an advocate for fae and human relations. And Taako's wellbeing concerns me as well." She rises out of the chair, wings fluttering lightly as she stretches. "I'm going to go start working on the portal. Lup, you are welcome to join me and lend some power, but it's not necessary."

Lup glances hesitantly between Barry and Lucretia. It would probably be polite to help, and, while this room is cushy, it would be nice to leave the building. But she thinks it would be incredibly rude to dismiss Barry. She'd like to spend more time with him. "I think I'll stay here. My magic's gotten kinda fucked lately and I'd rather not push it for a little longer."

"Ah, and leave the portal-making all to me. So very kind of you." Lucretia's tone is teasing. It's clear she knows Lup well, enough to joke with her. She huffs a laugh to herself before striding out of the room.
The Inventor's Secrets

Chapter Summary

Barry has lunch and Lup smells something strange.

Moments after Lucretia leaves, Lucas—not a servant—bursts back in with the whir of an opening door. Lup's ears perk in the direction of the motion. She exchanges a glance with Barry. The longer he's here, the more convinced he becomes that the Millers don't have any staff at their lab.

That should be impossible. A building this size is too much work for any one person to maintain, even setting aside that it's also a manufacturing center. If Lucas has somehow automated virtually all daily upkeep then he's got technology centuries ahead of the market.

And something about his tech sets Lup on edge. It's obviously powered by magic, but there's a distinctly inhuman quality to it. It doesn't carry the same signature as fae magic does, though. It is neither tied to nature nor the soul. She's never felt something similar, however faint it may be. It only adds to the discomfort this place brings her.

Barry doesn't just want a tour for the sake of his own curiosity now—there's something not right about this place, from the nonsensical floorplan to the empty showroom office to being told to abandon his luggage at the loading dock. He needs to investigate, if only for his peace of mind. Is anyone else here with them? Is Maureen? The news sometimes reports on her hosting academic gatherings at her Rockport townhouse, could it be that all her staff are there?

"Sandwiches are ready in the kitchen if you want them, Barry," Lucas says, rushed, before disappearing back the way he came.

Lup's never been in a human manor or lab, so it's the other oddities that stand out to her. She’s surprised someone so secretive would leave them alone... But then again, there are likely cameras all over this place. She would be hesitant to behave inappropriately without due cause. As far as she knows, Lucas could have as total awareness of his domain as a Fae Queen would have of hers.

Barry shoves his hand in his pocket and finds the silencing charm. Before he rises to his feet he slides a sliver of magic into the glass like a needle. It's as gentle as his magic can be; he really shouldn't be charging charms by himself. The bauble's already growing brittle months sooner than it would in someone else’s hands.

He dangles it for a second so Lup can see. She recognizes it, but glass baubles are so generic that Lucas wouldn't be able to identify the enchantment at a glance. That’s smart, she thinks, as he drops it back into his pocket.

"Before we run all over this place looking for the kitchen—does something seem kind of...off? To you?" Barry says in undertone, further muffled by magic to any observers.

"Yes!" she says, immediately lifting herself off the back of the couch into a more properly seated position. She glances around the room for cameras as unsuspiciously as she can. She locates two little glass eyes set into adjacent corners on the wall just like the one at the loading dock, and carefully turns both herself and Barry away from them. She doesn't want to risk Lucas being able to...
"Fairy Mother I'm glad you mentioned it," she says, quieter this time. "The magic in this place? weird as fuck. Ok so, magic always has a signature, right? Person-to-person magic is different, just like human magic is different from fae magic, which is different from natural magic. Something is wrong with this place's magic's signature."

She scratches behind her ear and huffs. "I didn't know humans could sense magic that acutely? How'd you know?"

The signature of Barry's magic gets described as "weird" and "uncomfortable" a lot, so the revelation that the lab’s magic feels even worse to Lup is almost bigger news than the fact that the lab has its own signature at all. "This was just observation, actually. I'm not great at sensing magic; it's news to me that the lab has enough built up to feel like anything. What I've been noticing is that this place is empty. If this was a regular country manor Lucas should have like, at least a handful of servants. Plus he's gotta have a factory's worth of equipment running. Who maintains all that? Why's he making his own sandwiches?"

"Huh. That's a good point. He does not strike me as a guy who would lift a finger on what he doesn't want to do unless he has to."

Lup takes another glance around the room, ears flattening to her head before she forces them back to a neutral position. She doesn't want to give the cameras any reason to question them.

"We should go find the kitchen," Lup says. "No need to make him suspicious unnecessarily. I'll keep my senses peeled for anything else off."

Barry heads for the door and holds it open for Lup. "You're right. We can't be too late meeting him. Plus the hallways are less likely to be under observation than this office. My charm's already low on juice again, but if you stick close it'll work fine."

Lup takes Barry’s suggestion and pulls in closer, casually reaching a hand out for his. He startles when her hand brushes his wrist. The look of wide-eyed panic he gives her sends an embarrassed blush creeping up her eartips, but then he seizes her hand and squeezes it tight.

The windows in the hallway are dim and gloomy with the approaching sunset. Electric lights dot the ceiling at regular intervals, unnaturally white and harsh. Now that Lup's mentioned it, Barry can't help but feel like there's something buzzing just out of sight. He can't tell if he's imagining the hum, or if it's the lights, or something else.

"Wish he'd given us any directions," Barry gripes, scanning the hallway. On the left are four unmarked doors identical to the office, and the right would take them back to the split-level staircase and the concrete corridors. "What would make sense is for the kitchen to be on the ground floor, somewhere along the exterior wall. If this place made any sense. At least it's a great excuse to snoop."

"And snoop I will," Lup declares, paying close attention to the minimal signage available, peeking through windows when they appear.

With a final squeeze, Barry drops her hand to cross the corridor and rattles a doorknob. It's locked, and so is the next door he tries. He turns back to Lup and shrugs helplessly. Picking locks doesn't come up often in his line of work, and all his tools are buried somewhere in his bags.

"I'm going to take a wild guess and say the path there is not going to be locked," she laughs. "On
Lup goes towards the other two doors. One of them swings open to show another mostly empty corridor. This one has multiple doors lining the path, but, thankfully, also happens to have signs. Why Lucas chooses to put signs on some areas is a mystery not worth the trouble of considering.

"Oh good! Let's seeeee," She wanders down the hall looking at the labels. Death Laser Trial Chamber, Anti-grav Attempt Chambers, Cleaning Supplies... Barry's eyes go wider and wider as they take in each sign. Lucas must have a strange sense of humor. He decides to focus on how weird it is to label servant stuff like the supply closet instead of dwelling on "death laser" and "anti-grav". At least until he badgers Lucas to let him into those rooms, because if those things really exist then Barry's gotta check them out.

"Score," Lup says, finding a door labeled Kitchen at the end of the hall. "Here it is!"

At least the kitchen looks normal. Tile stretches across the floor and halfway up each wall to frame two free-standing sinks below the windows. It’s too clean and polished for Lup, aside from the mess Lucas made of the prep table in the center of the room. It's all awful, but she much preferred the carpet on her bare feet.

The sense of wrongness here isn't quite as intense here but there's something else, the faintest hint of a smell she can't quite place. Lucas is hovering at the prep table, holding a china plate up to his face as he chews. The cast-iron stove and oven combination along the adjacent wall is scuffed from heavy use, but probably not by Lucas. It's top-of-the-line, gorgeous and modern, and after one look at Lucas’s sandwich Barry can't even picture him boiling water correctly.

Lucas grunts and gestures to the spread across the table. Lup makes an audible noise of disgust. The misshapen sandwiches piled on nice china are horrifying. It’s painfully obvious he doesn't usually make his own food (and if he does, and this is his normal diet, she’s even more mortified). The slices from the loaf of bread he hacked apart are stiff everywhere they’re not soggy, splotched with yellow mustard and excessively damp.

There are ingredients laid out on the table that look promising: honeyed ham, pickled onions, a block of white cheese. A tiny, dull knife sits in a puddle of red pulp on a cutting board, the gruesome remnants of a dismembered tomato. Lup hesitantly pokes at the tomato bits and licks her finger. It's quality. Which makes it that much worse that Lucas would desecrate it like this.

"Thanks," Barry says, trying to sound genuine. He skipped lunch, but seeing Lucas munching down on a sandwich that’s just about liquifying between his fingers is stomach-turning. There are no chairs in the room, so he grabs the plate and mirrors Lucas, wishing he could give Lucas the tongue-lashing his mom would if she saw this scene.

One bite tells him that the error was in assembly. The sandwich nearly falls apart. Runny condiments sluice onto the plate. It tastes like Lucas applied a boatload of strong mustard directly to the cheese, underused the ham, and entirely forgot to add texture.

Barry hasn't had this many opinions about a meal in his life. Or felt his sinuses clear so quickly. He blinks watery eyes. "Uh—so what's with the 'death laser' sign in the hallway?"

"Huh? Oh just an experiment I'm working on for some investors," Lucas waves his hand dismissively. "Concentrates stored magic into a safe-for-user blast. You wouldn't understand it." He takes another bite of his sandwich, grimacing ever so slightly. It only solidifies in Lup's mind that he’s not used to living like this.
Barry demolishes his sandwich before the rest of the filling escapes and goes to wash his hands. Lucas should really have brought up accommodations for the night by now. Propriety's dead and buried, bludgeoned by strikes such as 'barely introduced himself', 'abandoned guests in his office', and 'served food standing up in his kitchen'. Barry may be a simple farm boy, but Marlena Bluejeans didn't raise her son to wolf down bad sandwiches over the prep table.

Condescension on top of that is excessive. Here Barry was a huge Miller fanboy, having followed their research for years. Now he finds himself actively disliking Lucas. He wishes this meeting was more like his typical encounters with civilians, where they're either a distressed victim he can make a subordinate deal with or a suspect he can handcuff. He needs favors from this arrogant brat, and he has no authority to compel Lucas to do anything.

"Oh gosh," he says, fighting to mask the scathing tone creeping into his voice. "That does sound amazing. I'm so sorry to, to impose, but it's probably dark out by now. I have to ask about staying the night."

"We don't have guest rooms," Lucas says, wiping his hands on a dish towel with unnecessary force. "But I guess I can't leave you out for the wolves to eat. It'll take Lucretia hours to finish with your thing anyway." He squints at them, like it's their fault he built something the size of a mansion with no extra bedrooms. "I guess you can have my mom's room. It's mostly packed up, and don't touch anything that isn't."

"Dr. Miller doesn't visit anymore?" Barry asks, surprised.

Lucas looks away and waves a hand dismissively. "She's busy. Other projects. This lab was always mostly mine."

"So—her old room, for me and Lup to share?"

Lucas shoots him a withering look. "Fae don't need to sleep. If you're doing anything else I don't want to know about it."

Lup bristles at the dismissal of both herself and Barry's needs. No, she doesn't need to sleep, and they've shared a bed already, but he's still rude. If Lucas knew anything about fae he'd know changeling are among the most likely to lean towards human tendencies. Meanwhile Barry splutters. "Hey! That's not—"

"Geez, take a joke," Lucas interrupts. "Sorry I didn't expect you guys to show up out of nowhere and need things. We're not supposed to have visitors. Except Lucretia, I guess"

Who does Lucas mean by 'we', if not Maureen or Lucretia? Barry watches him walk to the fridge and dig around. Among the largely-untouched bags of produce and bottles of milk there's a cardboard box holding half a cheesecake. Lucas shoves the damp cutting board aside to make room. He lifts a piece to his mouth before he abruptly turns back to Barry. "How long are you guys staying for, anyway?"

"Oh," Barry says. He guesses it's not fair for him to linger. Lup and Lucretia would be better off looking for Taako without a hunter spying on them. "I guess I can leave tomorrow, if there's a way to get a ride back to Rockport."

"What what you mean 'singular I'," Lup says, pulling her withering look away from Lucas. Is Barry intending on leaving her? Why? They...they haven't found Taako yet. What if she still needs his help... What if she doesn't want to stop traveling with him. What if she enjoys his company.
"Hey Barry can we... Can I talk to you in the hallway real quick?" She gives Lucas a pointed glance. She doesn't want to talk about this in front of him.

Barry stiffens. "Uh, sure." He follows her out and shuts the door gently behind him. "What's up?" he says in undertone. Did she notice something else suspicious about Lucas?

"I don't—" Lup cuts herself off, and looks up at the camera in the hallway. Lucas probably isn't watching them right at this moment but better safe than sorry. Where won't there be cameras? Cleaning supplies closet. She grabs Barry's hand and drags him in with her, using her other to open the door.

Once they're inside she kicks the door shut with her foot and turns on Barry, bare foot tapping with a slight slapping sound on the tile.

"What the fuck, Bear? You're just going to leave me as soon as I get you in to see the cool Miller lab? Is that it?"

She doesn't want to acknowledge the hurt in her chest so she overrides it with anger. He's leaving her and she was stupid to think he ever cared. He only agreed to come because he wanted something. He's not special and she shouldn't have trusted him. Just another human who wanted to use her. She should have known.

Humans don’t care about fae, they either use them or turn on them as soon as they know the truth. Why would Barry be different? He’s a hunter, for Queen’s sake. More than anyone he’d know how to use a hurting fae to his advantage.

There's no mistaking the genuine hurt in Lup's voice. It fills the narrow space between the shelves, pressing into Barry like a weight. "I'm sorry," he says reflexively, before he's even sure what he's sorry for. Except that Lup's angry, and it's his fault, and the fact that he had the power to do that to her means he's completely misunderstood. "I thought—I don't have any more leads on your brother. And just having me around could—I'm supposed to arrest Taako if I find him. You and Lucretia, whatever you plan—having me around could mess that up for you."

He'd decided he was okay with Lup using him and carried that assumption around like a pocketful of loose nails. He was so preoccupied shoving down his own discomfort that he never extended her the trust she'd earned. At every opportunity Lup's demonstrated that she's a good person. It's deeply unfair to assume she'd discard him when he's no longer useful. To assume that she doesn't have her own reasons for wanting his company, that she's not reaching out for support like anyone else who just lost someone would. He was such an idiot to think she didn't care.

Lup's taken aback. She was prepared for a lot of things, for him to turn on her, for him to admit he never cared and leave, for him to start shouting like he should. Like other humans have. She wasn’t prepared for him to apologize, to care. Her ears droop from their flattened position, some of the defensive rage draining out.

"Ok. First," she stares Barry in the eyes, "that's not even true, that you can’t help me. You know how to navigate the modern human world far better than me. Leads or not, I need you for this. And second," she turns away for this one. Eye contact is too intense for this. "I—I want to—I enjoy. Fuck Barry I like traveling with you. But—I understand if—if you want to go..."

She refuses to let her voice crack with the last part. The closet is dark and she hopes it hides how red her face feels and how emotively her ears are behaving.

"Oh, shit," Barry says. "Lup—I'm sorry. I don't—I don't want to take off. I'm not gonna just,
abandon you." He swallows thickly, blinking to clear his eyes. "You've been great. I've got a good month before there's even a chance I'll be assigned to something, and—what I'm saying is that I'd much rather stick around than just, sit in a hotel somewhere. But just being around me means—I can’t stop reporting where we are. I don't want that to become a problem for you."

"Barry I don't care if—" Lup cuts herself off in surprise as she finally processes more about her surroundings than 'Barry' and 'hurt'.

That smell. Holy shit that smell. Lup fumbles for the light and flicks it on so she can see better. She can see alright in the pitch darkness but this is much improved.

As she sniffs around she shifts into a beagle to get the best range of smell. The room isn’t large—average, for a closet—but still. She puts her nose to the ground and circles around Barry's feet a few times trying to identify scents beyond the chemical sting of cleaning products. Hair raises on the back of Barry's neck as he watches. He straightens up and holds still while she circles the room. He's cursing himself for being unarmed before she speaks.

"Bugbear," she says suddenly, jerking her head up. "That's what I was smelling in the kitchen. This whole room is laced with it. And—" she sniffs at the air a few more times."There's more than one. Why would bugbears be here?" She searches Barry's eyes as if he could somehow have an answer.

"Bugbear?" he says, voice lowering to a whisper. He scans the room. Mop bucket, brooms, boxes and bottles of cleaning products, a bin of rags, tins of wood polish... The only thing that strikes him as strange is how cold it is. There's a vent high in the wall behind an upper shelf absolutely blaring chilled air. "Did...damn, if you hadn't said there was more than one, I'd think that maybe—maybe Lucas hunted one and had the hide cleaned. We need to get the fuck out of this closet."

Lup changes back to her true form and nods hurriedly. "Yeah. Yeah we do."

She practically pushes Barry out in her rush to leave. They both end up stumbling back into the kitchen. She can't help but stare at Lucas for a moment before she finds herself. Whatever's going on here, they shouldn't let him know they're suspicious.

She leans close to Barry's ear and whispers, "That's it. I'm snooping tonight. He needs to be distracted."

Barry moves his arms aside for Lup and whispers back, close enough to for her to feel his breath on her ear. "Yeah." He pretends to not notice Lucas watching them with narrowed eyes from across the room, slowly chewing a bite of cheesecake.

He steps back and ambles towards the table, doing his best to appear relaxed. Lucas's eyes manage to narrow even further. He swallows and licks his teeth clean. "You guys have a good talk?"

"Er—yeah," Barry says. "I don't think I'm leaving tomorrow after all, sorry."

"Huh, how about that," Lucas says, shoving the cheesecake box towards Barry. "Want some?"

Barry hesitates before picking up a slice. He supposes eating a sloppy sandwich was more risky for his bandages than cheesecake. "Uh, thanks," he says. It's actually quite good—dense, moist, and not overly sweet. No way did Lucas make this. Barry figures that it must be from a bakery before he spots the label on the box. Must’ve been delivered with the other groceries.

"Lup wanted you to stick around, huh?" Lucas asks, nonchalantly catching Barry in the middle of chewing a bite.
Barry swallows his mouthful and replies hastily. "Yeah, it's—for the best. Uh, and so long as I'm staying here, I was hoping I could...uh, get some help loo—"

"What kind of help?" Lucas interrupts.

Even Lup, lost in thought as she is, flicks her ears back in annoyance. She wants this conversation over with so she can explore. Barry manages to keep irritation off his face, unfortunately settling on a somewhat wall-eyed expression instead. "I meant help navigating the building. We, uh, nearly got lost, on the way down here."

Lucas tilts his head. "Really."

He doesn't sound remotely convinced. Barry decides to switch tactics. "Yeah, yeah, and—and to be honest I'm, already kind of a fan? I, uh..."

Lucas probably thinks he's an idiot, he reminds himself. Just another cop-turned-hunter, a wannabe spelljockey who uses the recommended kit like a good boy without understanding why any of it works. "I know I couldn't understand anything you do here," he continues, "but if it's not too much trouble, I'd be uh, really grateful if there was anything you think you could show me?"

"You want a tour," Lucas says, nose wrinkling.

Barry's completely out of his depth and the slice of cheesecake in his hand holds no answers. He wrenches his eyes back to Lucas. "I mean—while we're waiting on Lucretia... If you think that's a good idea?"

"I don't, actually," he sneers. "I suppose you wanna come along too, huh Lup?"

"Hmm?" Lup looks up, pulled out of her thoughts. "Oh. No I'm ok. I think I'm just going to head to the room? Sleeping's nice and I’d bet this place has nice beds. I've never had a chance to sleep in a real good bed like that."

Oh, she'll go to the room eventually, she obviously isn't lying. That doesn’t mean she won’t take a few detours. She smiles, hoping he lets her leave unsupervised so she can get back in the closet and into the vent. That would be a good way to get around the lab without being noticed.

Lucas’s eyebrows fly up above his glasses. "Really? Sure, that's fine. Lucretia should still have a key to that room, actually, so you can get it from her. I don't have mine on me."

He may be talking to Lup, but the whole time he's scrutinizing Barry. For his part, Barry does his best to look bland and inoffensive. He can't let Lucas suspect they're onto him; the last thing he needs is to get thrown out of the lab right after Lup asked for help. There's no denying that something's very wrong here and Barry refuses to leave her to face it on her own.

"Barry," Lucas says. "That's your name, right?"

"...Yeah?" Barry says, blinking.

"Right. Well, I thought about the tour thing, and I realized that I can't just leave you hanging out with nothing to do for hours, right? Haha."

"Uh—okay?"

"You can bring the cheesecake," Lucas says, darting to the counter. "Lemme make us some coffee. I don't wanna bore you with all the technical stuff, but I've got some neat doohickeys and
showpieces that you'll probably like."

"Sounds great?" Barry says, bewildered by Lucas's sudden change of heart. Lucas gets a machine on the counter to spit out hot coffee almost instantly and passes a mug to Barry. He sweeps towards the door with a sharp gesture for Barry to follow. With an apologetic shrug at Lup, Barry trails him out to the hallway.

Lup waves them off and says, "I'll go track down Luce. See you back at the room, Bear."
The Cleverness of Mortals

Chapter Summary

Barry and Lucas come to accord.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There don't seem to be any maintenance or servants' corridors. Or rather, it's like all the corridors are meant for workers. Stretches of bare concrete and overly-bright, utilitarian lighting. The monotonous grey of the concrete washes out to a soft hue like empty rain clouds, incongruous with the solid thud of their footsteps. Lucas moves like wolves are on his heels. Ripples slosh in Barry's coffee mug as he tries to keep up without spilling. He pauses to take a gulp of scalding liquid, lowering the level from the rim.

When he raises his eyes, rubbing his burnt tongue against the roof of his mouth, he catches Lucas's disapproving frown. "We in a hurry for a reason?" Barry asks. He feels vindicated by the little trail of spilled coffee soaking into Lucas's sleeve cuff.

"Well of course," Lucas says, chewing his lip. "I have dozens of inventions here. If we're going to make it back to Lucretia in time then we've gotta get the lead out. C'mon, over here."

Lucas leads him through a door into a densely-packed room. The walls are ringed with counters and glass-faced cabinets stuffed with books and papers. Four long rectangular tables are crammed in narrow rows, each one piled with even more paper; journals, manuals, pamphlets, and notes. There are a handful of of cleared-off spaces with half-finished projects, as well as twisted metal, loose screws, bits of glass and wire, and a single abandoned coffee mug. For all the clutter, the room's surprisingly clean. There's not a hint of dust anywhere, not even with multiple abandoned workstations.

This is clearly Lucas's real office. There are no unused encyclopedia sets here. Every book Barry can spot is a dense reference text that looks like it's been cracked at least once. Some of their spines are so creased as to leave their title illegible, but he recognizes multiple books on runic arts, ritual magic, and even combat spellcraft.

"Gimme a sec," Lucas says. By the time Barry turns around he's darted back into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

At least Lucas's chronic lack of manners has left Barry free to snoop. He's rifling papers and flipping open books before Lucas's footsteps recede. Most of it's what he'd expect to find; technical manuals and materials catalogs covered in scribbled notes, sketchy diagrams, and coffee rings. Lucas has the worst chickenscratch Barry's ever seen, and that's counting hunter apprentices he knew were illiterate into their teens. There are pages with margins so covered in notes as to be nearly black, with cramped lines oriented every which way, like Lucas was rotating the book as he wrote. In isolation Barry can pick out meaning from some lines, but as far as he can figure he's just looking at random bits of information. Nothing looks like a log: not for experiments, or supply orders, or even a to-do list. Either Lucas is completely irresponsible with his documentation or he's had the sense to organize his important records elsewhere.
Lucas seems to use this room primarily for tinkering. Projects both mechanical and magical dot the countertops like mushrooms, growing offshoots of materials and tools in circles around them. There's a half-finished gem grid with a voltmeter abandoned at the corner, a disassembled quartz clock sitting on a book of runelore, piles of loose metal shavings snowing under a balance scale, and a several more projects Barry would have to unearth from their paper trash tombs before he recognized them. The further he gets from the door the more cluttered the floor is. He picks his way through a field of tripping hazards—boxes of mismatched glassware, birds' nests of wires, stacks of books—and toes detritus aside until he can crack open a cabinet.

He knows he's onto something the second he sees that the boxes he's looking at are labeled. Neat looped cursive declares the different types of screws, nails, and bolts within. Barry assumes this must be Maureen's handwriting before he finds the first row of journals. Their paper spines line the cabinets in the furthest corner of the room. There's no chickenscratch here: Maureen uses shorthand and some esoteric color-coded sticker and bookmark system, but all her handwriting's perfectly legible.

This is a treasure trove of information. Barry could spend days reading these. But he doesn't have that kind of time. The first journal in the row dates back to when he was a kid, long before this building existed. He skips to the end.

Then, frowning, he backtracks. On the second pass he's sure. All of Maureen's several dozen journals, spanning almost forty years of her career, are neatly arranged in chronological order. Until last year. There's nothing at the end of the shelf except a conspicuous gap, not even dusty yet.

It's a shame. Maureen's older work will have been either cleaned up for publication or abandoned. What he hasn't seen is her latest work. Barry supposes she's still using those journals. He closes everything back up neatly and is leaning innocently against the counter by the door when Lucas bursts back into the room, weighed down by Barry's luggage.

"Give me a hand here," Lucas barks, before Barry's finished counting to make sure that's really all his bags. "Geez, this stuff is heavy! I dunno how you haul all this around."

Barry scrambles to his feet and helps Lucas lower everything to the floor. Lucas's sorry excuses for arms are no thicker than Barry's wrists. He's such a whining wet noodle of a man that Barry doesn't consider thanking him. Especially once Lucas throws open the flaps and starts rifling through Barry's things. "What the hell are you doing?"

"You've gotta have hawthorne in here, right?" Lucas says. "I need to see wherever you've been stashing your herbs—nevermind, found it." He unearths the slim wooden case and goes straight for the little muslin pouch of dried red-black berries and leaves. "What's this?" he asks, prodding at the thin bundle of browned flower clusters beneath.

"Angelica," Barry says, grabbing for his bag. "Do you need an exorcism? Give me my shit back!"

"Perfect." Lucas takes a double handful of herbs and shoves the rest of the mess onto Barry's toes. He darts to the abandoned gem grid and scoops up a few pebbles of amethyst. "Do you have schorl?"

"No," Barry says. "Lucas, what the hell."

"Black tourmaline?"

"Still no. I know what schorl is," Barry's voice trails off as Lucas practically vaults over the
counter, sending papers sliding to the ground, and deadbolts the door. "Again: what the hell is going on?"

"We're just gonna have a chat," Lucas says. He's attempting a friendly tone, but his jaw's set in challenge above his armful of amethyst and stolen herbs. "Sit down, Barry."

"How about no?" Barry says through gritted teeth. "I wouldn't sit on your floor even if you asked nice. And especially not after—whatever all this is!"

Lucas rolls his eyes heavenwards and sighs like he's entreating the ceiling tiles for strength. He makes no move to sit down either. "God, put two and two together. So much for the efficacy of the hunter training I pay all that tax money for, right?"

"Put what together?" Barry curls his hands into fists. He doesn't want to stab Lucas, but he can probably clock him and be out the door in a couple seconds flat. "You're—"

"How long have you known Lup?" Lucas says. "How'd she get your name? Is that even her real name?"

"You..." Barry says slowly, turning over the words, "think she charmed me?"

"Obviously," Lucas snorts explosively. He shakes the hawthorn satchel under Barry's nose. "You're carrying this in your bag, not even wearing it? You're a hunter escorting some random fae around? You're not answering my questions?"

Well, damn. Barry's fully aware of how bad this looks. He snatches the hawthorn from Lucas. "We met like, a week ago. That is her real name. We uh, we exchanged names when we were first talking about traveling together."

"Why the heck would you do something stupid like that?"

Barry bristles. "Look here," he says, almost hissing. He leans right up into Lucas's face. "I don't think I could explain something like, like manners or cooperation to you, with the reception you gave us. I decided to trust Lup. I know her and you don't, and she's a good person."

"Well why don't you just humor me, then?" Lucas says, crossing his arms. Some of the dried angelica flakes off against his elbow and sheds to the floor. "Do some charm wards. Or did she order you not to?"

Barry glances at the doorknob. He takes a deep breath, nostrils flaring, and wills his temper down. "The word you mean is ‘apotropaic’. Wards are for keeping things out in the first place. Give me the fuckin' amethyst."

Charms can only be removed by time or the fae that cast them. Apotropaic herbs and gems just restore enough conscious thought to the victim to make them aware of their condition and able to resist orders. Despite generations of research, prevention remains the best strategy: lines of iron nails and salt on windowsills to discourage fae trespassers, wards set in horseshoes or amulets or hammered into doorframes, diplomatic games of aliases and prevarication for anyone who can expect to encounter fae.

Lucas clears off some counterspace and drags over a lab stool for himself. He perches with his heels on the rungs and watches attentively while Barry lays out the angelica, hawthorn, and amethyst. Barry has virtually no ability in herbalism, but he needs to look like he knows what he's doing for Lup's sake. He's sure she hasn't hurt him. The one time he was charmed left him too foggy-headed to remember much of anything except stomach-churning panic. He knows his team
He remembers the moment he came back to himself. He'd been flopped on the bed like a sullen teenager, and he rolled over to watch Dav finish what must've been his twentieth crossword puzzle. Dav had his feet crossed on the nice upholstery of the desk chair. Murkily, Barry thought his posture looked uncomfortable. He turned that impression over and over in his head like a smooth pebble until he wondered why he was obsessing over something that small. Then anxiety washed over him. He bolted upright with the realization that he hadn't registered any of his own thoughts for days. But the first thing he asked Dav was whether the fae who attacked him was okay.

So Barry chews his lip as he balances a pebble of amethyst on the inside of his right wrist, nested between stitches. He slides the sachet of hawthorn into the breast pocket of Roy's old ugly shirt, over his heart, and crushes angelica in his left fist. He inhales and tries to feel for the edges of the leaves.

Modern herbalism holds that the cellular structure of plants are an emergent property of their intrinsic magic as much as their lineage. Their veins transport magic as well as water and sugar, and that passage wears delicate guiding pathways. Skilled herbalists coax their magic into mirroring the shape of those paths. Leaves, flowers, and berries act as a template, even dead and dried and powdered. The serrations of the hawthorn leaves were shaped by the protective magic of the tree, and can bend other magic to that track just as the horn of an anvil bends a horseshoe. Though his tutor discouraged Barry from using the horseshoe metaphor. She'd been trying to help him develop a more naturalistic, instinctual feel for the technique. It hadn’t worked.

“I don’t think you’re doing that right,” Lucas says into the silence. Angelica leaves crunch in Barry's fist.

“It’s not a showy—I dunno what you expect to see,” Barry says. Herbalism doesn’t look like anything even when performed by an actual Conductor, which Barry is decidedly not. If he does more than gently probe the leaves with his magic they’ll crumble to inert ash, so he sends a pulse into the amethyst instead. It catches and sparks with purpled light. Barry stifles a wince and pretends he meant for that to happen instead of worrying whether he hewed a hairline fracture at its core.

If he was charmed he’d know it by now. The edges of Lup’s magic would be peeling up like film over his brain and the staticky feeling of that would send his pulse into a frenzied panic. He tells himself he was confident in this outcome all along. “I’m sure I’m not charmed. Are you happy now, or you wanna do another round yourself?”

“I’d love to, but I can only barely do magic. Don’t be so pissy with me. I’m trying to help you,” Lucas says. “Since you’re a guest and all that.”

Barry snorts with disbelief. Lucas is a whiny, petulant child, and he’s done trying to please him. “Sorry if I couldn’t tell. You didn’t exactly roll out a, a red carpet for us. Caring about hospitality should’ve come before you had us eat standing up in your kitchen.”
“What we don’t stand on around here is ceremony,” Lucas says, glaring. “All that etiquette stuff is bullshit and you know it. Just a bunch of rules for showing off and rubbing your status in peoples’ faces. Sure, I’m wealthy, and I run my own company, and I think it’s even safe to say that I’m a genius. But I’m not gonna go and stick you at the end of a table and flash a bunch of silverware and porcelain. I don’t believe in that stuff. You’ll notice that I made you dinner myself, cuz I don’t even keep servants to do everything for me.”

That…almost makes sense. Barry would’ve been more uncomfortable to be seated for a formal dinner after showing up uninvited. Though following social norms would at least have let him know what to expect. “Look, sorry we showed up out of the blue. I promise we won’t impose on you any longer than we have to.”

Lucas waves off his concern. “I get that it’s an emergency for Lup. What I don’t understand is why you care. Does your boss really want this guy caught?”

Barry shrugs. “To be completely honest? When she said her friend Lucretia was here, I thought this might be my chance to uh, see your lab.”

“Well, I guess I did kinda say we were gonna do that, huh,” Lucas says, sliding off his stool. “And I don’t want you poking around without me—I’ve got dangerous stuff in here—so I might as well satisfy your curiosity. It’s all really technical though, you’ll probably be bored.”

“Try me,” Barry says, reaching for the doorknob.

Lucas squawks and shoulders him aside. “Wait! Don’t touch that.” He slides a ring off his finger, a chunky band of black rubber with a flat nub on top. He depresses it into the bolt to slide it free. “It’s electrified.”

“Were you gonna electrocute me if I tried to leave?!?”

“It’s not like it’d kill you. I was worried about whether Lup told you to stab me or something,” Lucas says, throwing the door open. Barry shuffles out after him in a huff.

“She wouldn’t do that. I told you she’s a good person. Not all fae are out to just, kill and mess with people. And that’s coming from a hunter.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Lucas says. “But they don’t see us as people, generally speaking. There’s no reason for them to care about our rules or laws. We’re pitiful next to them. They can pull shit like pretty much zombifying an entire region over their petty squabbles and there’s not a thing we can do to them over it.”

“They destroyed their own courts too,” Barry says.

“As far as we know, sure,” Lucas says. “But we don’t know what they wanted to do when they killed their forest. Maybe the monsters and the rot was actually the point. Maybe the courts are still in there somewhere.”

“But what about the survivors?” Barry asks. Lucas’s theory is crazy. None of the fae that survived the collapse have ever hinted that anything happened beyond the obvious, devastating catastrophe. Every account on record showed genuine grief and loss.

“Yeah, I do feel bad for them,” Lucas says with a shrug. He leads Barry back to the doors concealing the humming machinery that Barry and Lup passed by while searching for his office.

“It was honestly a worse disaster for them than us,” Barry says.
“Maybe back then,” Lucas says, furrowing his brow as he considers the doors like he’s deciding where to start. “Lucretia will get another court up and running someday for her and all the surviving fae to rally in. Meanwhile, that forest’s barely kept under control with regular burns. Eventually no one else will wanna live out there anymore. There’ll be no reason to keep the forest from eating abandoned towns, we’ll forget about the problem for a generation, and then oops, the forest will spread until it’s on the verge of swallowing even more towns and farmland.”

“That’s kind of up to us though. Whether we give that land up, I mean.”

“We don’t get to learn from our mistakes.” Lucas digs in his pocket and pulls out a surprisingly old-fashioned key ring. “Lucretia gets to sit around and be nostalgic over her court when it’s been gone for almost a century. She gets decades to rebuild. Meanwhile, everybody who remembers the villages that used to be in that forest is dead. Eventually everyone who remembers places like Glamour Springs will be dead too. We forget and move on, and fae get to take advantage of our short memories. They can wait us out, no problem.”

Lucas pushes a door open and gestures for Barry to follow him through. “Anyway. C’mon, it’s already dark out. We should check where Lucretia is with her ritual in a couple hours.”

Barry follows. He may not agree with Lucas, but he can sympathize. Hopefully the tour will show him enough of the lab that he can assuage Lup’s fears.

Chapter End Notes

Barry: Yeah I guess this guy seems legit

almost forgot: chapter title from here
https://www.worldoftales.com/European_folktales/Irish_Folktale_31.html
Lucas would be really into this folktale
The Hunting Weasel

Chapter Summary

Lup searches Lucas’s lab and finds ten new questions for every answer.

As soon as Barry and Lucas turn the corner, out of sight, Lup jumps into action and scoots into the closet. She immediately turns her attention to the vent set high up on the wall. With how cold that air pumping through the vents is she’ll have to take a mammalian form, or at the very least something not cold-blooded. Insectoid might be pushing it too. That means she needs to figure out how to get it open, because she’s not sure she knows a warm-blooded animal small enough to get slip between the slats. She starts by searching the supplies until she finds a screwdriver.

The closet’s a disaster, really. Cleaning supplies are scattered everywhere; she’s pretty sure open buckets of chemicals breaks some sort of rules and regulations. That’s not even mentioning the way tools are lying around loose on every surface. Some of them are tacky to the touch and she doesn’t want to think about what kind of grime might be on them.

The vent’s too high up for her to get a good angle in a humanoid form, and for some wild reason there’s no ladder, even though Lucas has all kinds of other crap, including about fourteen different wrenches. She's never done something quite this elaborate but...perhaps a bird? One of those parrots some humans own, maybe; those have dexterous feet.

She take the form of a red macaw and grips the screwdriver in one of her feet, flying up and holding onto the vent slats with her other foot and beak. It's tricky, and she ends up dropping the tool with a huff a few times, but she eventually manages to pull the vent cover off, letting it crash to the floor. Hopefully, if Lucas heard it, Barry can keep him occupied. She’s fairly certain Lucas wouldn’t take kindly to his fae guest poking around in his business.

She sits perched on the edge of the steel tunnel and contemplates. The best option would obviously be the mouse, but she has no interest in taking that form again any time soon. She settles for a weasel and starts scurrying her way through the maze, letting her nose guide her.

The vents get awfully tight at points, making Lup glad for the form she chose. There are a few instances where the path takes a sharp right turn directly up and she has to flit into a sparrow before continuing her track. It's so cold. Even with thick fur she feels chilled to the bone, and the icy metal sinks through her toes. She has to stop at several moments to just curl in on herself and enjoy the warmth her body brings. She considers using her magic a few times to create a tiny lick of burning flame, but that’s risky without proper dexterity.

The glimpses into other rooms are almost surreal. She sees everything from libraries towering with books to labs full of tables covered with various machinery. Some of the vent openings have large sheets of plastic covering them, likely to preserve the purity of the lab environment. Those are hard to see through and she doesn’t have time to poke around if there’s no reason to think there’s a clue to the bugbears there.

Some of those rooms have a strange glow to them. The feeling they give off sends the worst chill down Lup's spine she's ever experienced. It's like magic, but it's wrong. It's incredibly wrong, grating across her senses and sticking in her nose like a malign odor. She scurries past those rooms.
quickly. None of them have workers, further proving Barry's point. But she also doesn't see any machinery powering these rooms. Barry was right to be suspicious.

Some of the rooms she passes smell strongly of bugbear, too, but a quick glance reveals nothing. She's not sure what she wants to find. Bugbears in cages? Used for experiments? Bugbears kept as a foolish pet, fueling Lucas's fae interest? Bugbears who live here as strange friends of Lucas, untrustworthy and likely prone to kill him on provocation? She wracks her brain, but nothing makes sense. Why would bugbears be here? Does she even want to be right about this hunch?

The smell continues to get stronger as Lup crawls through the vents. Her paws are freezing against the metal and she really hopes she can find something soon. She wonders how Barry's doing. As much as the tour's a distraction for Lucas, she's sure he's enjoying himself. He seemed excited to get to be here at all. Hopefully Lucas isn't being too weird or asshole-ish.

She passes by a dark room that reeks of bugbear and pauses a moment to sniff through the grate, little paws gripping the slats. This room's the worst so far and it makes her fur bristle with an instinctual fear. She groans and squints into the darkness.

It's impossible to make out anything but vague shapes. Looks like she's gonna have to go in. Which...brings up another problem. How to get through this grate. She curls in on herself to quickly warm up some more before shifting into a large spider and scuttling through the slats before she gets too cold.

It's immediately much warmer in the room, closer to the rest of the lab, and as a spider she can't smell the horrible reek of bugbear anymore. She can't really see or hear much either, so she gets to the ground as quickly as she can before taking on her favored cat form.

As a cat, the low light provided from under the double doors is more than enough. Now the shapes have definition. It looks more or less like a large, one-room apartment. There's a small kitchenette space at the other end of the room, a couch, a couple chairs, a few toys and other objects scattered around, and she can hear breathing. Deep, ragged breathing. On the couch, the floor, and the chairs are four very much alive, very big, sleeping bugbears.

Lup's fur bristles as the bugbear on the couch's hot breath ruffles over her back. Its arm hangs over the edge, jaw slack and showing off a mouth of vicious teeth. For the life of her she can't figure out if she should remain small or shift into something more intimidating.

She doesn't get a chance to decide.

The bugbear on the floor huffs, fangs flashing, and a single eye slides open. Lup watches paralyzed as the eye’s second lid slips to the side and the creature's pupil dilates on her. She instinctively presses herself against the wall, fur raising, as the bugbear sniffs and opens its other eye. It slowly rises to its feet and stares down at her, eyes narrowed. Lup can't even think, can't concentrate enough to change shape. All she can do is let feline instinct take over and hiss, fur on end, tail twice its size.

Bad move. One in a chair wakes up and turns to see what's happening. Fairy Mother, even if she doesn't die here she's gonna have a really bad time.

She's ready to fight her way out the best she can or bolt for the door, hoping she can take a smaller form fast enough to evade them, when the first bugbear coos at her and starts to approach.

Lup glances around in a panic, slowly inching away from the bugbear's hand. In this form it would not be hard for the bugbear to crush her, but she isn’t doing it? Lup should register as prey right now. She doesn’t know what to do. One wrong step, one more second slipping past, and the bugbears could lunge and rip into her with their claws.

She settles on saying, "Uh...hi?"

"Oh my god you talk!" The first bugbear claps delightedly. "Pa, the cat talks!"

"Christy, I think that there's a fae, not an actual cat," says a second bugbear, larger than the first, stretching and adjusting himself in his chair.

“Oh wow!”

"What's goin’ on?" says the one on the couch, far too close to Lup’s face. She hisses without thinking, edging away along the wall. "Who's there?"

"Ma! There's another fae here." Christy turns to Lup and pats her head, sending a thrill of fear down Lup’s spine. "Are you work'n for Lucas too now?"

Lup can only blink confusedly as the fourth bugbear wakes up and scrutinizes her without saying anything. She changes into her true form and stands defensively against the wall. Christy pouts at this development and rests back on her heels, arms on her knees. Lucas's whole lab just keeps. Getting. Weirder.

"What do you mean...work for Lucas?" Lup says skeptically.

"Lucas found us out in the fae wilds and put us to work," the quiet bugbear says. "S'nice here. No more fight'n for food and such."

"He...put you to work?" An awful creeping feeling is building in Lup’s gut about this place, and it's not because of the magic, although now that things are calming down there is a certain magic to this room. She can’t quite put her finger on what it is.

"Yup. I should introduce myself," says the bugbear Christy called ‘Pa’. “I'm Arron. This is my dad, John," He gestures to the bugbear on the couch. "And that’s my mate, Jamie. You’ve met Christy."

Lup's mind goes blank. What do you say to that? There’s so much wrong here. Those are not normal names for bugbears, first of all. And the phrasing for their employment sets her on edge. Oh boy this is gonna be...interesting, and she’s starting to think it’s gonna end with her actually murdering Lucas Miller. She eyes the four bugbears carefully. She's never seen bugbears smile like that before. Usually if a bugbear smiles it's more menacing.

"Okay. Okay, hold up. Go back," she says. “What do you mean, Lucas found you in the fae wilds?"

John scratches at the back of his head. "Well that part's a little blurry tah be honest. We were searching for some food as a family and Lucas showed up. We were friends before we knew it, really. He’s a good guy, has a way of putting folks at ease. Moving in with him felt like the most natural thing. Never regretted it. Been much calmer around here."

Calmer. That’s what the magic in this room is, emotion calming charms. Lup berates herself for not realizing sooner. The charm sits so thickly in the air she can’t blame the bugbears for being docile.
But. It still shouldn’t go this far. And if they left the room they should quickly lose it.

"What kind of pay do you guys get?" Lup asks, probing deeper into this mess.

"What'd'ya mean?" Jamie asks and aw, jeez.

"Well, Lucas pays us with food and shelter," John offers. Lup is going to have a very hard time not killing Lucas after this.

She supposes this at least partially explains the lack of help around the lab. And he thought he could cover it up. Lup wonders what the general public would think if this got around. She's honestly not sure. Bugbears, like many low-magic fae, are considered aggressive and dangerous. And they are. Even towards other fae. But still, slaves? Really Lucas? Aggressive or not, bugbears are sentient creatures. They’re just as much fae as she is.

Lucretia's gonna be furious. Lup told her human-fae relations were futile. Humans have an entire institution for hunters who make a career killing fae. Hunters like Barry.

Okay, so maybe Lup doesn’t quite have the ground to stand on she used to, but Barry’s temporary. Probably. Just until she finds Taako. Besides, Barry’s not like most other hunters. Humans and fae don’t get along and Lucretia’s reckless optimism is going to get her hurt.

"Are you kidding me?" Lup exclaims. "I get things have been tricky since the courts around here collapsed, but you're bugbears. You guys don't need to rely on some stuck-up human with a weird lab! Why don't you just kill him and escape or something?"

The youngest, Christy, actually gasps at that. "We would never kill Lucas!"

"Lucas helped us," Arron says. "We're not all hyped up on violence and aggression anymore. We live nice, quiet lives here." He smiles, an awkward thing to see on the fanged snout of a bugbear.

Lup groans and runs her hands down her face. What's wrong with these guys? They're not acting like bugbears should. They're more altered than can be explained by the calming charms she knows. And there's something so incredibly off about them besides the uncharacteristic cheeriness. It almost reminds her of—

"Wait. You're a real nice bunch of bugbears, right? And I swear I'm not saying all bugbears know each other here. It's just. The only other bugbear I've met that's been even close to as pleasant as you—well not pleasant, exactly, he did almost kill my friend...but he made tea and was friendly enough." She shakes her head out. "I'm getting off track. You don't happen to know a bugbear that particularly likes tea do you?"

All four of them visibly perk up at that.

"Wait, you met Klarg!?" Christy gives Lup this hopeful look, claws clasped together in front of her chest, that makes Lup’s heart melt a little, bugbear or not.

"Maybe?" Lup shrugs. "Never got his name."

"Did he have a nice little blue ceramic teapot?" John asks, sounding just as thrilled.

"Uh." It was really hard to see in that cave. Colors were kind of a no-go. "It might have been blue?"

"Oh, I bet it was him!" Jamie says enthusiastically, clapping claps his paws together. "How's he doing? He getting along okay without us?"
"Klarg's my son," Arron offers. "He ran off from the lab one day and well...we never did see him again."

Lup's ears flatten empathetically. That’s why Klarg had been alone. Bugbears travel in family packs and don’t split up for anything less than crises. It’s no wonder he’d been so upset when his dog was killed by humans, it was the only pack he had left. That’s awful. "Why don't you go after him?" she asks.

"Well, we like it here," Arron says. "Klarg, well. He never much did. Lucas couldn’t manage to mellow him out like he did us so he was always a little aggressive."

“Wait. What do you mean mellow you—“ And then it clicks, why the bugbears are so strange, why they’re so openly friendly, why Lucas would feel at all comfortable having four bugbears wandering around.

They have way too much of a magical signature. Bugbears are technically lower fae. They have extremely limited magical capabilities, aren’t even able to charm humans. The most they can do is slightly divert attention away from themselves or their burrows or caves. And even then it’s flimsy and easily ignored. But these bugbears? They’re giving off waves of magic. The layers of it aren’t their own, but are blanketing their minds. Altering them. It makes Lup want to be sick.

There’s obviously the ethicality of the situation. It’s horrifying for her to think about. But also? Humans don’t have that kind of magical power. Even the strongest human mages can only give light suggestions. This is fae magic. This is powerful. And she can’t help but wonder where Lucas got that kind of power. Lucretia would never help him do this. Does she even know?

She needs to find Barry. There is something deeply wrong here.
A Meeting in the Woods

Chapter Summary

Everyone regroups with Lucretia and turns in for the night.

Chapter Notes

SparkleDragons: Hey all! So I just wanted to say real quick that I'll no longer be responding to every comment. I adore all of you and deeply, deeply appreciate you taking the time to leave us a message. I swear I still read every one, but I just don't always have something to say that I haven't said a million times before. <3 thank you so much for taking the time to read

Lup clambers back to the vent as fast as spider legs will carry her. She shifts from spider to rat with zero hesitation to scrabble through the vents. Why hadn't she been keeping track of where she was going? This place is so complex and awful and the vents don't make any more sense than the tangle of hallways. She needs to find Barry.

No.

She likes Barry, she trusts him, but this is fae business. Lucas is tampering with fae magic and she needs to tell Lucretia. Even if Luce knew about the magic, she would not have approved of brainwashing the bugbears to turn them into servants for housework. There's just no possible way.

She pauses her frantic scramble and takes a deep breath. She's mostly met with the thick smalls of cold dust, bugbear, fizzing magic. She takes a moment to force her nerves and anger down and… there it is. A hint of pine flowing in from outside.

She follows the smell. It's slow going. It's so faint for such a long time that she takes multiple wrong turns, but eventually she reaches an outside-facing grate. The steel abruptly melds to stone where several feet of chiseled runework rim the grate, chilling the passing air. Just beyond, she can feel the ambient magic radiating from the trees. Lucretia's at work building the portal. Good. Hopefully she has extra power for wrecking Lucas's shop.

She slips through the wide gaps between the stone and hits the ground as a deer, darting into the trees.

The courtyard between the lab and the wall is pitch black, the stars completely blocked out by the thick trees overhead. Barry's struck by how loud the living woods are. Cicadas thrum from all directions and a constant rustling betrays the movement of small rodents through the grass. Tiny eyes reflect the light from Lucas's halogen lamp. Barry has the absurd thought that it's Lup before the mouse skitters away.

They're exiting the lab by way of the mudroom behind the kitchen. It's well past Barry's bedtime, far too late for coffee, but he couldn't say no to a hot toddy after Lucas demonstrated that he's way
better at making drinks than sandwiches. A fantastic end to an amazing tour. Lucas warmed up to him after realizing Barry could follow his technical ramblings. They spent two hours sweeping what felt like every nook and cranny of the building. The lab isn't just chock-full of technology not yet on the market; it's also entirely self-sufficient. Even the septic system was exciting (and vastly superior to the outhouse Barry grew up with). Most of the devices Lucas makes are custom commissions, but his machining rooms turn out uniform screws, plates, and other basic materials in small batches.

Barry honestly got so distracted by the lab's infrastructure that they ran out of time to talk about the magical side of Lucas's work. At least he understands why Lucas doesn't have servants now. He has honest-to-god robots manning his equipment. They were all charging in the garage for the night, so he didn't get to see them in action, but Lucas demonstrated the articulation in their multi-jointed arms. Once he works out how to make programming tasks into them approachable for laypeople, he's going to make a killing. They'll put the stevedore union out of business even if they're only smart enough for heavy lifting. For now, though, they apparently have no ability to 'hear' or 'see' their environment, and they'll blithely crash into each other if not choreographed down to the inch. Lucas said he's still got work to do on his cameras before he can integrate them with the robots.

Barry's feeling favorably disposed to Lucas as they trek through the woods. Searching for a fae in the dark is routine and Barry armed himself out of habit once Lucas surrendered his luggage. But he's not gonna need his dagger. The most powerful fae for miles around apparently enjoys Mint Juleps, so he's got a chilled tin cup to bring as an offering. He almost can't believe he's gonna catch a glimpse of her opening a portal. That experience will put him in the company of preeminent magic experts whose grants enable them to pay off high fae for this privilege.

This evening is shaping up to be one of the best in his life. He can't wait to find Lup. Hopefully she hasn't been too bored, running around the lab by herself. Barry doubts digging up dirt on Lucas kept her occupied for long.

He sees the light before he feels the magic. He's not used to feeling any magic; his own power is raw and often destructive. It doesn't weave with ambient magic so much as shear through and sweep it away, so extending his senses tends to obliterate the traces of whatever he wants to examine.

What Lucretia's doing, though—that's charged the air like a coming thunderstorm. She stands in the thick of the trees with her wings spread and all four of her arms held wide. The birch in front of her bows its head, foliage trailing across the ground. Under the arch of its curve, air shimmers and flows, so thick with magic that the currents leave shadowy afterimages. Barry and Lucas stop short of walking up to her. Their awe is as palpable as the power in her magic.

She's bending space. Or punching a hole through it, or—doing any number of impossible things that humans simply don't understand. High fae magic manipulates natural laws like wet clay. The feats Lucretia can perform are unequaled. Barry can almost see hints of color sparking in the portal, ribbons that seem to bleach the hanging bark an even starker white. When Lucretia's hands fall the space under the tree resolves into a wavering picture, a flat cut-out of another forest pinched and drawn into this one. A rush of wind expands and hits the neighboring trees, rustling them cacophonously. Barry and Lucas almost lose their glasses; Lucas's curly hair whips around his head.

The magic dispersing from Lucretia’s ritual is a palpable tide against Lup, only just getting close, not yet able to see the clearing. It forces her to slow her pace. It flows into the trees, the ferns, the bushes, the soil, returning to its source. It’s clear that Lucretia’s ritual is finished, or at least at a
stopping point. The power leaking away is enough to reinvigorate drooping plant life and send hails of dead leaves spiraling to the forest floor. It's a lot to push through.

Lucretia faces Barry and Lucas smoothly, chin rotating ahead of her shoulders uncannily. She doesn't have a hair out of place despite the winds. Barry's tense with nerves, almost holding his breath, but she just smiles graciously and folds her hands in her robe.

"Got you a mint julep," Lucas says, nudging Barry. "How's it going out here?"

Barry thrusts the cup forward into Lucretia's hands. "Thanks," she says, and takes a gulp. "Damn, that's good. You didn't wang up the bourbon this time."

Lucas rolls his eyes. "So happy to please you. Has Lup been out here yet? It's real fucking late for crazy magic."

The overload of fae magic masks all other ambient traces. Lup can't sense Barry, or even the lab. She crashes out of the bushes into Lucretia's clearing. Instinct drives her to shift to her base form, head bowed as she approaches.

"Lucretia, I need—" she catches sight of Barry and Lucas and stops short. Damn it, she can't call Lucas out while he's here. She should, but at this point she doesn't know how he'd respond. Would he lash out, run, try to cover it up? It's not a worthwhile risk. She'll need to find a better opportunity.

"Speak of the devil," Lucas mutters, just loud enough for Lup to hear.

Fairy Mother she wants to hit him. Or rend him limb from limb. One of the two… or something in between. "Lucas," she acknowledges through bared fangs.

"Are you alright, Lup?" Lucretia asks. She sounds tired. "You seem like you're in a rush."

"Just," her pupil-less eyes flick to Lucas and back near imperceptibly, "excited to get back to searching for my brother."

Lucretia chugs the rest of her drink. Barry's a little awestruck by how fast she puts it away and takes a second to respond when she waves the empty cup at him. He grabs it out of her hand and she turns back to the portal.

Lucas steps forward and scrutinizes the portal with a pinched expression. "Hey, that looks like it's almost done. You think we can wrap this up soon? The humans here need their sleep."

"I'm getting very close indeed," Lucretia says. She clicks her tongue and raises her hands again. The image in the portal eddies with her motion and then settles. "Sorry to keep you awake, but it's imperative that we get this out of the way quickly. This kind of magic is no trouble for me to power through. I'm far more worried for Taako—I've already sent a few messages to our mutual acquaintances, discreetly. We can't expect a reply as soon as tomorrow morning, but we can hope. Eliminating potential leads might be our most fruitful option for a while."

"Did you use my teleprinter?" Lucas asks. "That should speed things up." Lucretia jerks her head in a nod, distracted by something Barry can't perceive. She hums idly while Lucas continues. "Though how many of your fae friends get telegrams, really? We really need a faster way to send messages for when you're busy with stuff like this."

"While that's a good idea—and I'm sure we could do something about the brevity of the messages as well, I'd enjoy more in-depth correspondence with Maureen—I need a quiet moment to
"concentrate."

The chagrined expression on Lucas's face verges on pain. Lup's ears flick back in irritation. Getting back to finding Taako is more important than anything right now. "We should leave Lucretia to her work," she says, carefully, considering every word.

Lucretia's antennae flick in acknowledgment, her attention almost entirely focused on the portal.

"I'm going to stay out here," Lucas says, setting himself down on a log coated in fresh, damp fungus. Moss and mushrooms fed by the leaking magic are spreading across the fertile earth around them. "You guys can head upstairs and grab a quick nap if you want."

Lup side-eyes Lucas. She no longer wants him alone with Lucretia, but it's more of an irrational nervousness spurred by the things she's seen tonight. If Lucas was planning on hurting Lucretia then he likely would have already. And she's far too powerful for him to handle.

"You gonna give us directions this time, nerd lord?" Lup asks, really hoping they're not going to have to poking through the lab again to find a single room.

"Uh, yeah. Go back in where Barry and I came out and take the first right, then a left, then ignore the next two hallways that cross before you take another right. Then go to the third door on the right and that'll lead you through a space I'm not using right now. You'll end up in another hallway and you're gonna go left down that to the end. Keep going till you reach the end of that hallway and the last door on the right is Mom's."

Lup can only stare at Lucas after his ridiculously complicated directions given in little more than three breaths. His lab is so awful that it's making her appreciate the forest more. Her toes curl in the mossy earth at the thought of going back. Whatever runework Lucas has in there makes the ambient magic feel almost aseptic, or like copper on the tongue. Compared to the forest, it's headache-inducing. How does Lucretia spend so much time here?

"Right... Come on, Barry." Lup lightly tugs his hand towards the lab. If she can't talk to Lucretia about the bugbears yet, Barry's the next best option. He can at least deal with the human side of things. She just needs someone else to know what sort of shit Lucas is up to.

"Hang on," Barry says. "I'd actually really like to stick around and see this." He can't give up a rare opportunity to view a fae portal. And Lucas's accusation niggles in the back of his brain. He's not charmed or bound to Lup's orders, and he won't raise suspicion by acting like he is.

"It's not like it's gonna take all night," Lucas says. "She should be almost done. It'll probably be ready before you can get back from tucking Barry in, so you might as well wait"

Lup's ears flick downward in irritation. Sure. Fine. Good. She can let Barry nerd out for a little longer. Lucas's little comments, on the other hand, are really starting to play at her nerves. Her spiny hair bristles, rustling just slightly, and she only just keeps herself from snapping at him.

Barry turns an eager smile on Lup. "I'd be fine staying up until dawn if that's what this takes. I can always crash later."

She huffs and moves to Lucretia's other side, away from Lucas. "Sure, sure. But you really should sleep sooner, babe. You need stuff like that."

Barry can tell Lup's on edge, but the endearment she uses melts away his anxiety away. "I will, absolutely." He wants smooth things over between her and Lucas. Sure, Lucas is annoying, abrasive, stuck-up, arrogant—come to think, that's a long list. Lucas is also their host, though, and
he's spent his life creating innovative technology for the public good. Barry respects that.

He hovers several paces behind Lucretia and gawks. It's too bad his senses are so limited. He needs to ask Lup what she sees, later. For now, he pushes his glasses up his nose and watches intently.

Lucretia's hands and fingers slowly shift forward and back as she channels the magic. With each press towards the portal another wave washes over the immediate area, churning the air. The swell of power tugs at Lup's form just enough to rustle her hair, leaving Lucas and Barry unaffected. With each new rush of magic, the plants and fungi give a soft, responding pulse of energy. Each time Lucretia forces more magic into the dense film encircled by the tree the image becomes clearer.

Lup can respect the marvel of Lucretia's work. Teleportation requires a precise warping of space. Only high fae are powerful enough to seed the other end of a nascent portal from afar, forming a bridge between them on a level imperceptible to most.

Humans used to be caught by this trick often. Lup grew up with the stories; arches of wood or stone set up in two nearly identical locations to confuse the victim's senses as they blundered through. They would be oblivious to the distance they traveled and continue on, unaware that they were growing more lost with each step.

Somewhere in the old fae woods, another tree of equal proportions is being warped in the same manner, hooked by Lucretia across a vast distance. If Lucretia cared to, and expended the extra effort, she could thread her fingers into the ambient magic of both locations at once and weave them in parallel. The living things caught in her net would warp to mirror each other, shifting everything just enough to make the change in location imperceptible. Lup wonders whether that would bring the Hunger here, or just a shadow of the devastation it causes.

The curved wood starts to groan with protest against the magic, but Lucretia isn't phased. The forced shape of the tree encourages its naturally weak magic to cycle back through the roots when expelled by the leaves, amplifying it into a vessel to contain the impossibly dense fae magic of the portal.

The next pulse sends a shiver down Lup's spine and forces her eyes shut as she feels the magic solidify. When she opens them, the image on the other side has snapped into perfect clarity. The space within the arc of the tree would be indistinguishable from the surrounding forest, if not for the rot coating the foliage on the other side. It's like looking into a color-speckled grayscale of the world. Seeing the contrast between healthy growth and the Hunger in such a definite way churns Lup's gut.

Lucretia drops her hands and lets out a long, unnecessary sigh of exhaustion. "Well that's that shit squared away. Give me some time to recover and we can go fix your place up, alright Lup?"

Lup nods numbly and glances at Lucas. He's sitting and watching the portal transfixed, even after its completion. She can't place the look on his face. It isn't wonder like Barry's.

"It's incredible how much magic you can generate, Lucretia," he says flatly. Lup glares. Something about how he said that has her hackles up.

Barry steps between Lup and Lucas and puts a steadying hand on Lup's forearm. "That was incredible," he parrots, bright and enthused. Whatever Lup's problem is needs to be defused now. They're in the middle of something important and the middle of the night. Precious minutes ticked by while Lucretia worked. His exhaustion is creeping up on him. "When do you want us back out here, Lucretia?"
"When I feel up to more amazing feats of magic," she says. She stretches her upper arms above her head and pops her shoulders. Her wings flex, membranes rustling softly. "I'm going to kick it out here. You boys should get some sleep before dawn. And eat breakfast—I wouldn't mind more time to recover, and I don't want to deal with any hungry crankiness."

Lucas side-eyes Lup and steps away without turning his back on her. "Yeah yeah, I won't forget to eat. Let's go—wait! Do you have Mom's spare key on you?"

"Nope, because I'm not in charge of keeping track of random shit. It should be in the top drawer of your fancy desk."

Barry's struck by how...informal Lucretia's vernacular is. Maybe she's making a deliberate effort to put the humans at ease. Whether or not that’s so, he finds himself liking her more and more. Her collaboration with the Millers is unprecedented. They're going to change the world together, and Barry feels lucky to have gotten a glimpse behind the scenes.

"You coming inside or staying, Lup?" Barry asks. He lets go of her arm. He hopes she does stay with him; he doesn't want to be alone, and he could use some help redoing his bandages before bed. But he won't pressure her. She doesn't sleep, so he expects she'd rather spend her time catching up with Lucretia.

Lup closes her mouth and forces her hair to lay flatter. It doesn't reduce the tension in her shoulders or the steady glare she levels in Lucas's direction. She barely hears the conversation, too focused on her own spinning thoughts and Barry's hand on her arm. She's not aware of how she leans into the touch, how much she needs something steady right now.

Taako's been gone for days. She's miles further from the fae forest than she's gone in decades. Lucas is a lying, untrustworthy rat keeping faefolk as practically slaves. It's a lot. It's more than she's had to deal with in a long time. Things had been so steady for a while there. She and Taako had found their way back to their sire forest a little after the Hunger hit. They were maybe the least affected of the fae. They had never seen the collapsed courts in their glory, had nothing to compare to.

Things had been alright. The corpse of the forest was safe, safe enough to use as a home base. She didn’t even need Taako’s support every day, and he’d been able to start traveling among humans again. But now…

She takes a moment to collect herself, processing what Barry said. She doesn't want to go back into the lab. But she also doesn't want Barry in there alone. Lucretia is leaning against the base of the arched tree, sitting cross-legged with her hands resting in and on her lap. She clearly needs to rest.

Barry trains a concerned look on her. “Hey, you feeling okay? You’re being real quiet.”

"I'll come in," Lup sighs, reaching a hand for the one Barry dropped from her arm. Lucas heaves himself off his log and trails after.

The luggage is right where Barry left it in the hallway. Lucas rummages in his office for a while and emerges to slap a key into Barry's hand. He heads to his own bed with barely a goodnight, leaving Barry and Lup to haul the bags inside.

Maureen’s old room is lived-in, stacked with books and clothes, vanity covered in hair supplies and jewelry. There's so much clothing in the wardrobe that Barry can't tell what season Maureen last visited or put anything of his own away. He gives up unpacking almost immediately. It's well past midnight. Not even Maureen's books hold his attention. His bandages are crusty, his eyes are
puffy, and if he doesn't sleep soon he'll spend tomorrow with a headache.

He's glad for Lup's company, but he regrets that his own isn't more entertaining. He's too out of it. He finds himself seated on the edge of the bed, spacing out as the gears in his head whir and slip on the logistics of changing his bandages and brushing his teeth and taking off his pants for sleep.

Maureen's room has a convenient bathroom attached. That somehow fails to get his legs moving. "I need to sleep," he says. As if asserting the obvious will help. Weeks of travel on the road served up with a side of blood loss and a set of stitches have left him strung out. He may be used to all-nighters, but he's been pushing his limits for too long.

Lup moves numbly to curl up in a chair by the dusty desk and watches Barry's weary moments carefully. Maybe she chose wrong. Barry's in no shape to deal with her issues right now.

But then she looks at his bandages, remembering how crusty and gross they felt when she grabbed his hand. She can't help but feel she did the right thing coming back into the lab with him. "Let me help change your bandages."

"Oh, shit, yeah—uh, I was gonna ask, thanks," Barry says. She uncurls and leads him into the bathroom, grabbing his supply bag on the way.

Barry unwinds the old bandages and balls them up to throw away in Maureen's empty trash can. Lup leans against the counter as he washes his hands and digs foil-wrapped antiseptic wipes, salves, and fresh bandages out of his bag. "Thanks for helping out. This'd be a pain to do one-handed."

He wipes his wounds self-consciously, sweeping away the old, crusted salve and fluid. His left palm is red and raw with new skin like one huge popped blister, and his right wrist is pale and waxy around the stitches. Nothing's bleeding, at least. He's healing up as well as can be expected. Lup's burn wounds never looked this gross, though. Healing by magic sure must be nice.

Lup can't help but grimace. She's never really seen human wounds in the process of healing before. She blunts her claws down to more human nails so as not to hurt him accidentally. Reaching for his skinned hand, she hums and lightly turns it over in her own a few times to inspect it, careful not to force the joints to move too much.

"It supposed to look like this?" she asks, delicately tracing the edge of his palm with a finger. She uncaps one of the salves and sniffs it once before pinching and rubbing some between her fingers.

"Yeah," Barry winces. He sort of gets why fae used to spirit humans away to keep trapped and cosseted in their courts. Humans are messy and fragile and vulnerable. Like toddlers, they need to be wiped clean and protected and walled off from anything that might hurt them. Lup applies the salve to his palm with infinite care. Goosebumps rise on the back of his neck. "It'll start looking better in, uh, a couple weeks. I'm really wishing magic healing agreed with me."

Lup nods. That's so long. None of the humans she knew when she was younger managed to get this hurt... At least she knows how to care for human wounds. She hasn't used the knowledge in a long time, but it's just something housewives needed to know when she was younger.

As she starts wrapping the bandages she asks, "You have death magic, right? One of the very few kinds only humans get." She can feel the strange, weak magic that flows under Barry's skin as she dresses the wounds. It's so foreign and unnatural. The way it moves is completely at odds with the ambient current, noticeable even closed up in Lucas's steel trap of a lab.
"Oh man, I try to not let people call it death magic?" The salve's starting to feel nice. Cool and soothing, the charm taking hold just enough to dispel some of the tight heat from his swollen skin. "The academic term's 'inimical'. It's just that, uh, I do a lot of exorcisms, and folks usually hear 'death magic' and think of like, that edgy neighborhood kid who blew their own fingers off, or the cultists or whatever who actually—uh, provoked some ghost or ghoul in the first place. Sorry, I'm rambling."

Usually, if someone finds out their kid has inimical magic, that spells the end of any attempts to train their talent up. They won't ever be good at channeling, the core of useful disciplines like divination and herbalism. And, since inimical magic's common as mud among humans, everyone's seen the gruesome injuries people get from experimenting. Barry privately suspects that training beyond suppression would go a long way towards preventing those injuries. He's lucky that he's as smart as he is stubborn, or else he would probably be down a finger from teaching himself.

Lup's ears flick back apologetically. "You're fine. Sorry. I guess it makes sense why you wouldn't want it referred to that way." She does her best to pin the bandages in place. It's somewhat sloppy work, out of practice as she is, but hopefully adequate. "Are magical injuries like that and," she gestures to his hand, "this common for humans?"

Barry gives a small, shy smile to his fingers. "You see them sometimes, with kids who uh, decide to be a little badass and try throwing bolts of energy without a focus. Pretty much everybody's seen somebody who screwed up—it's the hands, usually, humans almost always channel magic through their hands cuz that's just how we're used to, to manipulating things. There was a girl in the village me and Ma did all our shopping in who lost three of her fingers when she was...I wanna say nine? People talked about it for ages. Swear that kept the other kids from screwing around—I was uh, the only one I knew still practicing that kind of magic, after."

Lup hums to confirm she's listening and continues to delicately play with Barry's hand. Strange. She's never seen a fairy injure themselves so severely with their own magic and no humans she knew had any in the first place. Sure, she and Taako had a few burns and bruises with no one to teach them, but nothing so extreme. Humans are too delicate for magic, she thinks. Even the tiny traces they possess can prove too much for them.

Barry watches her with a sleepy, bemused expression. It takes a moment before Lup realizes she's probably being weird and lets his hand go. He blinks confusedly when she releases him.

"You should sleep. I'm not sure how early Luce will call us back out."

"Hey," Barry says, reaching out to catch her hand. Then he realizes he didn't plan anything to say—he just didn't want her to let him go. "Uh," he tries. "Um, if you're not—if you're not going back out tonight, feel free to, to read on the bed or something. Cuz there are books and—and the chair doesn't look comfortable."

He'd be blushing if he wasn't bone-tired. Even though the bed's plenty large and they shared a mattress last night. It was nice, is the thing. It was nice to have company at night, to fall asleep listening to someone's breathing and wake up for breakfast with them. He hadn't been letting himself miss that as much as he does.

Lup pulls her shoulders up uncomfortably, hair bristling ever so slightly. It's not that she doesn't want to share the bed. She wouldn't be opposed to the company. But Barry doesn't even know what's going on. There's only so much comfort he can offer when she doesn't want to tell him why she's anxious until he's rested enough for his brain to re-engage.

One night can't hurt. Lucretia’s resting too, safely ensconced in the forest, next to a nexus of power
under her sway. "I don't think I'll read but...alright."

Lup leads Barry back into the bedroom before pulling her hand free. She circles around to climb into the opposite side of the bed. She doesn't bother with the sheets, just sits cross-legged at the head of the mattress and turns her attention towards the door. She can keep a watchful eye out for Lucas and any other awful things he might have hidden here.

"Gimme a sec," Barry says, practically at a mumble. The last thing he wanted to do was make Lup uncomfortable. He ducks back into Maureen’s bathroom and finishes his bedtime routine. Lup shouldn’t have to be alone all night, but he’s not awake enough to make conversation. He’s barely awake enough to brush his teeth. He's glad the Millers have the luxury of a second-floor bathroom, because if he has to go downstairs again he might collapse.

He doesn't undress. He shoves his way under the sheets, giving Lup a wider berth than he meant to. Minutes of awkward silence stretch on. Barry stares at the ceiling with the feeling that he's neglected something important.

Lup doesn't move her gaze from the door. She keeps her eyes glued to the same spot as Barry’s breathing evens, realizing that he’s asleep only after she turns to look at him.

He looks peaceful, she thinks, like he’s not in pain. She hesitantly reaches forward and trails her fingers lightly over one of his bandaged hands, just wanting some contact. She leaves her fingers resting in his palm and turns back to watch the door. She doesn't move from that position for the rest of the short night.
The Empty House

Chapter Summary

Lup and Barry take a quick trip back to the corrupted forest and receive an interesting message.

Hours after sunrise, Lucas wakes Barry by banging on the door and acts like they're in a tearing hurry to get out to Lucretia until they pass through the kitchen, at which point all urgency is forgotten in favor of bread and jam. At least it's a breakfast even he can't screw up.

Lup can't help but glare at Lucas as he bustles them around the lab. She would have declined an offer of food anyways, but when he serves Barry without asking her at all she lets a few fangs show before schooling herself back to a more neutral expression.

Barry hadn't realized how late he slept in until they walk out into an unseasonably muggy day and find the sun directly overhead. It must be noon, and he didn't even get a chance to snoop in Maureen's room or talk to Lup.

The forest is beautiful today and Lup relishes in the warmth of the sun. Her ears flick to catch the sounds of birds and rustling leaves. It's almost peaceful enough to make her forget what's hidden in the concrete and iron building behind them.

They meet Lucretia out by the portal tree. The incongruity between the two woods is far more obvious in the light of day. Filtered sunlight renders the trees around them verdant, and the dead husks on the other side of the portal are dark with rot and hazy with spores.

"Yuck," Lucas says on first glance. "That looks like a shitty place to live."

Lup bristles and turns to Lucretia, who flexes her shoulders and refolds her wings. Barry reads the movement like an eyeroll and fully sympathizes. "It's our ancestral home, Lucas. Potent magics and all that."

"Yeah, that's so great for you," Lucas says, digging around in the bag slung across his back. "I really don't plan on breathing those 'potent magics', so..."

He produces a protective mask far superior to the ones Barry's used to. The straps cradle the back of the skull and connect to goggles that sit above the mouthpiece. The filters are large and pristine. He gives Barry a scrutinizing look and offers him a second mask. "Do you not have your own? I thought you said you spent a lot of time in there."

"No, I do," Barry says, pulling the mask over his head. The straps sit comfortably and the goggles are large enough for his glasses. "I just left 'em in the room—usually short trips are fine without gear. That uh, that level of spores is unusual. I normally wouldn't go in on a day like this."

"Well, at least that sounds relatively sane," Lucas says. "Alright, how about you ladies? You good? You can keep that mask by the way, Barry."

"I'll be fine," Lup says, lips curling to show the points of her teeth.
Lucretia gives Lup a cursory look before saying, "I will also be unaffected. You three should go through first. If the worst happens, I can stabilize it."

Barry hesitates, remembering the scrape of bark in his sinuses and the terrifying implosion of Lup's old tree. Lucas moves towards the portal and Lucretia holds out a hand to block his path. "Lup should be first through, but I could be convinced otherwise?"

Lup sighs at the prolonging of this process. She is curious as to what Lucretia wants, though, so she absently rests her head on Barry's shoulder to observe. The tension melts from his shoulders and he takes a steadying breath. "I'm alright for going first if you guys don't want to." He tentatively rests an arm on Lup's waist in a half-hug. "I uh, trust Lucretia did a good job."

Lup catches Lucas eying her and Barry skeptically and flashes a snarl.

"Lup, please" Lucretia scolds. Lup untangles herself from Barry and steps aside, forcing her face into a neutral expression. "I'd rather have Lup go first, so there's another fae on that side before you both cross. She may trust you, Barry, but I only know you as a hunter and a voyeur, here to observe magic that you normally wouldn't be allowed within fifty feet of."

"Right, right," Barry says, giving Lup a worried glance as he steps back from the portal. He'd been thinking of Lucretia as—just a person, Lup’s friend and maybe even his, by extension, instead of the high fae she is. Of course she has no reason to trust him.

But Lucretia said that Lup trusts him. High fae are the most bound to the strictures of the old courts that demand honesty and contracts. So if she says it, it’s the truth, or at least the truth of how she sees things. That trust is something for him to think about. Something Lup’s given him that he refuses to lose.

"How close should I follow behind Lup? I uh, I'm being—dumb here, definitely, but...it's hard for us humans to not think of the forest as dangerous, so I don't—don't especially want to leave her alone on the other side." Though at least Lup going first will momentarily separate her and Lucas. Is she normally this hostile towards humans? She seemed more wary when they first met.

Lucretia levels a look towards Barry, a small, sly smile appearing on her lips. "There's a reason humans fear the forest." Her wings rustle behind her, stretching out to a fraction of their full extent, just enough to impose.

Lup hums and smiles at Lucretia's showing off. She pats Barry's shoulder as she passes him. As much as she appreciates his concern, that forest is dead. The most dangerous thing in there would be her or another fae. "I'll be fine."

She doesn't give him another chance to hesitate before passing through. Even for fae, teleportation is disorienting and the significant shift in scenery doesn't help. For a split second, the dense magic that makes up the portal draws her in every direction. Her vision swims as her feet crunch in the dead underbrush. Lucretia's magic prickles under her skin, circling through her body as it slowly drains away, filling her with a buzz of momentary power. She takes a moment to reorient herself, the sharp scent of charged air curling around her when she turns back to look at the other three through the portal.

"All good, babes!" she calls, throwing a thumbs up.

The portal doesn't feel like anything when Barry walks through. It isn't until moments later, when Lucas has had long enough to follow after and start toeing over clumps of dead wood and fungus, that Barry shakes himself out of a daze. His senses roar back to him; suddenly he's aware of the
cool fug in the air, the sterile chemical scent of his mask, the humidity clingng to his brow, the
spongy ground beneath his feet.

Whatever effect Lucretia's magic had on him isn't something he can parse, and he suffers a pang of
anxiety before reasoning that it's only been a few seconds. Whatever trance he shook off was
harmless. If Lucas is similarly affected, he can't tell.

"Hey," Barry says, gravitating towards Lup. "Do you—do you think you'll be able to get any of
your stuff back?"

She runs her hands over the brittle leaves of ferns and tree bark. It leaves a familiar ashy dust on
her fingers and she sighs, the contrast between this forest and the last fresh in her mind. She
doesn't turn to look at Barry. "Probably not." Her ears flick this way and that, hoping for the
sounds of animals that isn't going to come from anywhere but through the portal. "My guess is it all
got destroyed in the collapse."

"Damn, I'm sorry," Barry says. "I wish—I wish we could've gotten some of your stuff out." He also
wishes there was a store nearby. He played a part in the destruction of her home and he owes it to
her to make it right. He can't rebuild a pocket dimension, but he could buy her some housewarming
gifts.

"Eh, you did the right thing by leaving it," Lucas says. The mask enhances how nasally his voice
is. Barry hopes he doesn't sound that goofy. "You know how emergency evacuations work. It's
better to lose your stuff than your life."

Lup hates agreeing with Lucas. She keeps her gaze fixed on Barry. "It was mostly Taako's things
anyway. I'll just be out a few bits of older clothing."

Lucretia steps through the arch and says, "Let's get this ball rolling. Lup, do you want a new place
entirely? Some free real-estate? Or do you want me to reconstruct the previous pocket?"

Lup hums. Having a new place would be nice... But what if Taako wanders back and finds their
home gone, collapsed?

What if that already happened while she was gone? She pushes the last thought away and says,
"Same tree. Nothing like sticking to what you know."

The tree itself looks remarkably okay. Alive, still, when so little besides the all-consuming fungus
is. Barry ends up hanging back with Lucas as they approach. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder as
Lucretia circles, examining the splintered, oozing bark, and probing where the bulges of Lup's old
furniture protrude from the trunk.

Lucas is uncharacteristically quiet. At one point he removes his mask to clear fog from the inside
of his goggles. Barry glimpses red, darting eyes before Lucas buries his nose in his sleeve and pulls
the straps back up over his ears.

Barry had forgotten how terrifying the corrupted forest is on first impression. It's a deeply
unsettling place, made worse by the surety that dangerous creatures lurk within. This has to be
Lucas's first visit; a wealthy family like the Millers has no business with the half-empty ghosts of
farming villages that wither on the forest's border. And if the Millers conducted or sponsored any
research into the 'Hunger' Barry would've heard.

A thud sounds in the clearing and Barry looks up with a start. The tree's rustling, limbs swaying as
if in a gale, and Lucretia's slammed all four of her hands into its bark. Her wings snap up and fan
out. The bulges on the tree begin to subside, smooth and soundless, as if they were sinking into water instead of solid wood.

The twisted bits of the tree start to uncurl into their original shapes, minus the entrance. Bark seals over, oozing patches of hardening sap slough off. Dead leaves literally shake loose from the branches.

This form of spatial magic is more direct and bursting than the slow, leaking waves of portal construction. Still, the eddies of power seeping away are strong enough to send a shiver down Lup's spine.

The tree starts to creak as new life is forced into its bark, indicating Lup's cue. She stretches her arms up over her head and goes to the opposite side of the trunk. She presses her hands against the bark, adding her own magic into the mix. She wishes Taako was here. Their magical signatures are extremely similar, but it's always better to have all residents add their own touch to the pocket dimension. She tries not to think about it and instead focuses on the new-growth leaves budding and unfurling on the branches.

Barry circles the tree, so caught up in watching every minute change that he strays maybe a little too far into the girls' workspace. Lucas calls him back a few seconds later—by name, so he paces over intending to share a piece of his mind about the stupidity of using true names here, of all places. But when he gets close he sees that Lucas's eyes are red and puffy beneath the mask. He's lifting it at the edges to scrub fingertips through tear tracks.

"Are you okay?" Barry asks. His initial assumption is that the spores have gotten into Lucas's eyes and that lifting his mask is making it worse. But his own mask feels tight and secure against his face and Lucas nods firmly.

Lucas snorts back mucus and clears his throat. "You work out here a lot, right? You're Bluejeans, and you're first author on basically every report from out of here for the past ten years? The cartography stuff and mold composition?"

"Yeah. I had no idea you followed...any of that stuff." Lucas hadn't given any indication during last night's tour that he was familiar with anything Barry's done. He only talked about his own work.

"What about it?"

"I'm just," Lucas sighs, frustrated. He turns back to the tree. For a moment they watch the buds unfurl from the branches. They're growing fast enough that Barry might be able to identify what kind of tree this is in a couple minutes. "I guess I'm worried about us being attacked. It's dangerous out here. People die."

Barry almost barks a laugh at how absurd that is. "We're gonna be fine. We've got two fae right here—one of them's a high fae! And I, uh—I've killed a lot of monsters. This is basically as safe as you can get in the forest. And she—" he gestures at Lup, "she lives here!"

"Oh, you know how it is," Lucas says breezily. "You grow up hearing horror stories about monsters snatching people, and ghosts 'n stuff, and it gets to you. How true are those, anyway?"

Lucas's gaze seems to bore a hole in the back of Lucretia's head for a moment. Barry frowns and elbows him. "Old stories usually have one or two—kernels of truth to them, you could say? I mean, there were a lot of fae in these woods, once upon a time. More humans in here too, with the logging camps and the roads and little homesteads. That's—that's a lot of chances for interaction—deals, and feuds and disputes."
"No, I mean the new old stories," Lucas says, cutting him off. "Not the stuff from the era of the courts. The stories about monsters oozing out of the trees to drag people in to be devoured by the fungus. Or of loved ones reappearing as ghosts to beckon victims to their doom."

"Oh, well that first thing absolutely happens," Barry says emphatically, relieved that he's following Lucas's thoughts at last. Seems like Lucas has been actually reading quite a few stories. His descriptions sounded like he was paraphrasing some of the better-known accounts. "Uh—but like, usually near the overgrown roads? It seems—we have eleven recorded incidents this decade, and they seem to be triggered by lone humans making repeat visits to a given spot in the forest? Like a tree, or mound. Or especially the streams, gotta watch out for those."

"Old conduits of power," Lucretia says. antennae flicking in their direction. Her hands remain planted firmly on the bark as she glances over her shoulder at them. "The Hunger can make use of them to manifest its will, just as we once could. Why the continued interest in ghosts?"

Lucas huffs a breath and hunches his shoulders. He plods closer to Lucretia and Barry follows him beneath the widening crown of the tree. Fresh green leaves form starbursts over their heads and cast choppy, angular shadows. "Look, I think it's everyone in this country's best interest to pay attention to the forest that eats people. It's got all the power of the old courts—it could have the minds and knowledge of those fae, too! With those resources it could plan—"

"I don't know on what basis you think the Hunger might plan anything, or have any kind of brain," Lucretia snaps. "And I don't appreciate the implication that the Hunger might derive any will, or agency, from its victims. The allegation that the Hunger's driven by some internal collaboration of the remnants of my people is grotesque in the extreme. Far more fae died in these woods than humans." The bark under Lucretia's hands softens with greening moss and thin, reedy shoots. She curses and wipes until sturdy bark reasserts itself. Angling her head towards Lup, she asks, "How often do you have to roast some monster ass?"

Lup hums in consideration, not looking away from the tree. "I think the last time I had to deal with one was about a month ago? I was tracking down a minor personal entry portal to the dead courts and it popped out at me. Little shit was like a pixie on steroids. Nearly took my eye out."

The roots start to creak and split, beginning the formation of the entryway for the pocket space. Lucas takes the moronic opportunity to poke his head far too close to the expanding doorway for Lup's comfort. The last thing she needs is him sustaining some massive damage to his face or something. Frankly, she doesn't want him anywhere near the tree.

"Hey, nerdlord," she hisses, "back off from the tree and I wont kick you in the face, hmm? Thanks."

Lucas huffs under his mask, but steps back again, closer to where Barry's standing. "It's not our fault you screwed up your magic so bad you fucked over your courts," he mutters, barely audible behind the mask. For Lucretia and Lup the sound gets lost in the hum of magic.

"Yes, safety first," Lucretia says. "By which I mean, please don't incur any maiming we'd have to explain to your mother. Let's be civil here and not fight like assholes, hmm?" She shoots a pointed look at Lup.

Lup hunches her shoulders and goes back to work. Either Luce really is okay with what Lucas has been doing to the bugbears, or she definitely doesn't know. Hopefully Lucretia wouldn't ask Lup to be civil if she knew. She should have aired his dirty laundry last night, exhaustion be damned. Now she has to wait.
Lucas's eyes flash with genuine anger before he turns away. "Yeah, whatever."

Barry backs up several paces from the tree with him. The doorway into the trunk ripples and settles into an inset like a huge knot, almost up to Barry's chin. The bark parts around Lucretia's hands like water. Barry's not taking the danger for granted though, not after he and Lup collapsed her first home.

"She thinks of me like a fucking kid," Lucas mutters to Barry. "That's the problem with fae. They live so long they can't really see humans as adults."

"Aren't you—friends, though?" Barry asks. "Or at least collaborators?" Nothing Lucretia's done has struck Barry as condescending towards Lucas. Lup's apparent vendetta is a completely separate issue.

"We met through Maureen when I was, like, ten," Lucas says, clearly done with the topic. Then he raises his voice, "Are you guys almost finished?"

"Lup, back up for me," Lucretia says, antenna rising high. Lup nods and does as asked. Her fingers trail the bark as she breaks her connection with it.

"Now let me just," Lucretia says, and she sends out a powerful pulse of magic that rustles the leaves of the newly restored tree. Her hands slip off the trunk and her antennae and wings drop back to a neutral position. "Yes, Lucas. We're done. Is there something you need to get to in such a rush? You didn't have to come."

Lup smiles and looks up at her newly formed tree. It looks healthier than it's been in a while, all full leaves and green-brown bark. "Am I good to take a look?"

Lucretia waves one of her hands and says, "Yes, you’re all clear."

"Sick. Come on, Barry." She reaches for his hand before thinking twice about inviting him in so freely. There wasn't a reason he had to be in there, but she thought he might appreciate it. Or something.

Barry grabs Lup's hand and lets her drag him into the tree. The transition is less jarring than last time, either because his senses are dulled by fatigue or he's adjusting. He's relieved she invited him; not only to see the damage undone, but also to get a moment away from Lucretia and Lucas. The last thing he hears from outside is Lucas's nasally voice fading as he makes a snippy rejoinder to Lucretia. If she really does treat Lucas like a child sometimes then Barry can’t blame her.

Lup mirrors his relief as the sound from outside fades. Lucas can’t follow them in without her permission. Lucretia could join if she wanted, but she wouldn’t leave Lucas alone in the forest.

The ensconced room looks incredibly similar to how it was before. There’s more ivy climbing up the wooden walls. The table has a bit of moss at the base, as does the floor. Two nooks for small beds sit on either side of the table, padded with woven fibers but bare of blankets or pillows. Lup curls her toes in the moss before flopping onto one of the beds.

"Claimed!" She smiles sadly. Taako isn't around to argue about switching beds. She looks around at the empty cabinets and walls. She's gonna have to get so much new stuff.

"Man," Barry says, rubbing the back of his head. His scalp's kinda sweaty under the mask's straps, but he doesn't want to take it off when they're probably headed right back out. Can't leave Lucas and Lucretia waiting. "It looks great, but it still really sucks about your stuff. Maybe—should we leave a, uh note for your brother? In case he makes it back here on his own."
"What do you think of Lucas?" Lup asks. She can leave Taako a note later.

The question clearly takes Barry off guard. "I think—well, he's brilliant? It's hard not to respect him—the Millers are, well, they're a real important family. I grew up reading about his mom's work. They're responsible for...geez...millions in patents? Like, they probably moved technology along a couple decades by themselves. And Lucas is like fifteen years younger than me—that's, for humans, that's a lot. He's barely getting started." He shoots her a nervous grin. "So I'm kinda inclined to forgive him for acting like a brat. At least he's not one of—one of those spoiled-heir types just leeching off their family's money."

Lup groans and rolls over on the bed to face the wall. "What else would you forgive him for?" She doesn't mean to be snippy. She's just really pissed off, even though she knows it's not Barry’s fault that he only saw Lucas’s good sides. She turns back to face him in a huff, swinging her legs around to sit on the edge of the bed. "He doesn't see fae as people, Barry. We're just sources of magic to him...and when that's not an option, labor." She stares Barry down with her void-filled eyes, gauging his reaction.

"What makes you say that?" Barry asks, frowning. He's visibly unnerved. A pit of dread sinks into his gut; they've been out of synch almost since arriving at the lab and he doesn't like that he can't guess why. He needs to know if Lup can cope with human settings if he's going to help her travel, but he almost wishes seeing Lucas was a sign of her not being able to cope. "He and Lucretia—pretty much live together? If he's really like, uh, that, then why would she put up with him?"

At the same time, he does trust Lup's judgment. He's just thinking back to whether she or Lucas were ever alone long enough for him to say something nasty to her when Lucretia knocks sharply and glides through the entrance.

"Everything looking good in here? I hate to hurry this along, but the day's stretching on. Lup, if you want anything remodeled, now's better than later. I've still got more shit to get done."

Lup sighs. "No, it's fine, Luce. I like the moss and ivy. It's nice." Her voice is empty. Barry's wonderful, but he doesn't understand. How could he. Humans lie and fae are too trusting of spoken words. Lucretia more than most. Lup needs to make her accusation. But now? A day after she found out, saying it almost feels too real.

Lucretia glances between Lup and Barry once before ducking back out. Lup follows quickly after, leaving Barry behind.

Lucas is standing just outside, arms crossed in a huff. "I don't see why I couldn't come."

"Because you weren't invited," Lucretia says. "We're going back."

"Geez, is—is it that late already?" Barry says, emerging from the tree. Lup doesn't meet his worried gaze. He'd think her leaving him in her house was a sign of trust, if not for how unsettled she seems. Before he can catch up to her, Lucas falls into step with him. They proceed back to lab in two distinct groups, humans and fae, and Barry wonders whether he made any mistake except to hope they’d all be friends.

The walk back is brief, prolonged only by Lucretia's need to close the portal behind her after assurance from Lup that she wouldn't need it for now. Taking it down is a much swifter process, requiring only the disruption of the circulating natural magic hemming the distorted space. They have to break the tree, which Lucretia accomplishes with a swift, magically-enhanced kick to the trunk. The rest of the tree immediately shatters into splinters, its strained support weakened. A
massive blast of magic pours from the spot in a powerful wave, nearly knocking Lup back.

They head straight to the lab afterwards, much to Lup's displeasure. She's so sick of this awful place. She'd rather move on quickly. But Barry needs to collect his things and they both need to regroup and figure out what they're going to do next. They have no leads.

Lucas takes them back to the lounge room and sets himself down with a book while Lucretia excuses herself to continue her work. "So where're you headed now?" he mumbles, not even looking up from his book.

"Do you care?" Lup snaps from where she's curled up on the couch, as far from him as she could get. Barry leans on the couch’s other arm, a middle distance between her and Lucas.

Lucas glares and shrugs. "Not really. Just trying to make conversation."

Lup doesn't engage him anymore after that, just sits and stares at the wall, wishing he would leave, wishing she had an answer to his question. Barry glances between them, looking helplessly frazzled and wide-eyed from the reddened indents where the mask’s rim and straps pressed into his face.

Only a few minutes pass before Lucretia comes into the room, robes hiked up around her knees in her rush. "Lup, you should read this," she says, holding out a paper. "It came through Lucas’s teleprinter while we were out."

Lup gives her a skeptical look, not really understanding what Lucretia’s talking about. If it's a thing of Lucas's she can't imagine why she would care. She takes the paper regardless, not looking at it yet. "What's a teleprinter?"

"Newer human thing," Lucretia says. "You know telegrams? It allows them to send printed messages over long distances. Quite impressive, actually."

"They don't usually print on their own, but I rigged something up cuz I don't have time to constantly check it," Lucas adds, nose buried in his book.

"Just read it," Lucretia says.

Lup hums and reads over the blocky text.

DEAR MAUREEN

I HOPE THIS MESSAGE FINDS YOU IN GOOD HEALTH. I WOULD LIKE TO FORMALLY APOLOGIZE TO BOTH YOU AND L FOR MISSING OUR MEETING DATE. IT IS DEEPLY REGRETTABLE. I HOPE YOU DON’T THINK I WOULD DISREGARD MY COMMITMENTS FOR SOMETHING TRIVIAL.

DURING MY JOURNEY I DESIRED TO TRAVEL BY FOOT FOR A TIME. I WISHED TO SEE SOME OF THE COUNTRYSIDE AND THE HUMAN SETTLEMENTS THAT REMAIN ON THE BORDERS OF THE HUNGER. IT’S CERTAINLY A GOOD THING I DID SO. I CAME ACROSS A GRIEVOUSLY INJURED CHANGETLING.

RATHER THAN LEAVE HIM BEHIND I OPTED TO TAKE HIM BACK TO MY HOME IN HOPES OF SECURING AID. AFTER THIS MATTER IS RESOLVED I WOULD VERY MUCH APPRECIATE RESCHEDULING OUR MEETING.
MY DEEPEST APOLOGIES

K

Lup’s breath catches in her throat as she reads the words. Taako. It had to be.
The Twinned Trees

Chapter Summary

Lup and Barry pursue a lead.

"News about the missing brother already?" Lucas asks. He looks up from his book but makes no move to leave his chair. "Which one of our acquaintances came through?"

"Not one that I expected," Lucretia replies. She hands the page back to Lup and straightens the stack of papers in her lower pair of hands. The teleprinter's clearly been left unattended for a while; there are dozens of telegrams addressed to Lucas, as well as a few short responses to Lucretia's recent missives.

"Remember the high fae who's over a week late for our meeting? The preface from your staff said he apparently tried to send us a letter by post the day of, all the way from Port Wick. Obviously the postmaster elected to open it for scrutiny, but they telegraphed it over to Maureen's townhouse after they decided it passed muster. We were forwarded the text a few hours ago. It seems our intended guest went and poked around the Hunger on the way to meeting us."

"Ugh, teleportation," Lucas says. "No wonder we couldn't figure out where the hell he'd gone. He seriously hopscotched across the whole damn country? Geez. Court fae are nuts. What's his excuse for ditching us, then?"

The only thing keeping Lup from snapping at Lucas is the paper in her hand. She just keeps reading it over, and over, and over. It's Taako. It has to be Taako. A high fae took her brother. Saved her brother? She needs to find this... K. She needs her brother back.

"Wait, what happened?" Barry asks, dragging his collection of bags into the lounge. He's changed out of Indrid's ugly old shirt and looks worlds better for it, even though his new button-down shows the telltale creases of having been washed and wrung dry hastily by hand. Lucas never did offer laundry services.

His baggage is somewhat diminished; he left a small mountain of trash heaped in the wastebasket under Maureen's desk. Hoarding tendencies are worlds more embarrassing when Lup's waiting for him to corral his stuff. He didn’t really need all of those knives, or his gross old clothing, or mostly-empty packs of herbs, or wrapped odds and ends. Or that entire backup saddlebag with the fraying patch and crusted dirt. Or that old canteen he doesn't even use because it smells funny and is overdue for a wash, or three orphaned socks with holes in the toes... He crowned the mound of trash with the twisted remnants of his enchanted lantern and felt better for having seen the loss through.

"It seems a court fae I correspond with encountered an injured changeling on the way to visit us. It could be a coincidence, but the timing's promising, and there aren't that many changelings running aound," Lucretia replies, flicking through some of the other messages. "And so far nobody else has heard shit."

"It's not 'on the way' once you overshoot the meeting place by what should be several days of
travel," Lucas says. "So what, he's playing nursemaid?"

"Taking the changeling—"

“It’s Taako ,” Lup interrupts. “Not ‘the changeling’. He has a name you know. Use it.” She knows what she’s asking, the weight of using another fae’s name without their presence or consent, but she doesn’t want to keep hearing her brother referred to like some creature.

Lucretia eyes Lup, unreadable, before turning back to Lucas and rephrasing, “He’s taking Taako to his court for treatment. Portal travel is handy like that, if you can bring yourself to take advantage of it. Fairy Mother knows we would've been embarrassed when he showed up to find Maureen so egregiously delayed. It would've been nice if he could've gone and picked her up for us—"

"Well uh, actually, that would've been not great," Lucas interjects. "We don't know if she's off her boat yet! So it would've been a hard time tracking her down without tangling with all that bad running water. Next time I get a letter from her you'll be the first to know. I can stand in for Maureen at the meeting, if he makes it back down here."

Portal travel may make immense distances trivial, but Barry's not sure on the politics of inviting foreign fae into a court. He wasn’t aware they ever allowed visitors. "Is this...is this like a kidnapping? Taako would've wanted to tell Lup where he was going. And is it possible to portal after him?"

"We don't know how extensive Taako's injuries were," Lucretia says. "He might have been too out of it to say much either way. If that is what happened, Taako got lucky he wasn't lying around injured when the hunters came for him." She glances pointedly at Barry. "I can portal you closer, but I'll need time to build a new one, and won't get it all the way there. These things have limits, and I don’t have a court backing me up."

Lup doesn't want to wait when she's finally got a lead. And she doesn't want to spend another second in this awful lab, or anywhere near Lucas. But she also wants to get to Taako faster, and in the long run, this is the way to do it.

"Where's K's court?" she asks. Maybe the time lost by leaving now wouldn't be too bad. But then again…

"Pine forest up north," Lucretia says. Which is probably as much detail as they're going to get out of her. Lup turns to Barry. Hopefully he knows what Lucretia’s talking about, because she’s never been far from her home forest.

"All the way across the border in, uh, Vandellia,” Barry offers, catching Lup’s glance. "Technically. It's more like a no-man's land, since not even politicians are stupid enough to make —make pretenses about owning the courts' territory. I think there are two of them up there? I've been nearby, but uh—we always sailed up the coast and gave the forest a wide berth."

He and Davenport would set up a telescope on the deck to watch the forest pass by until sunset. There had mostly been leagues of austere, bristly pines trees, interrupted only by glimpses of creeping shadows and enormous wheeling birds.

Hunters who petition for support venturing into that forest don't get grants. They get disciplinary hearings and psychiatric evaluations. Sometimes the locals can sneak around just inside the forest's border, but no hunter's ever walked back out under their own power.
There's a thrill buzzing in the tips of Barry's fingers, creeping up his spine to coil at the base of his skull. "Would they even let us in... Would they let Lup in, if her brother's really there?"

Lup's hands curl in the fabric covering one arm of the couch. "They don't get to make that choice," she snarls. Fairy Mother help anyone who thinks they can keep her from Taako, human or fae.

"You need to be careful, Lup," Lucretia warns. "The queens of those courts are...defensive, to say the least. Especially K's Queen, of the Winter court."

Lup finds she doesn't particularly care. She's always been reckless, why stop now? "How long would it take to get up there by train?" she asks Barry. She doesn't like trains, she's decided, but they're better than spending another day in the lab. "Luce has been making portals and things for almost a full day now. I don't want to put more strain on her."

"Takes more than that to take me out," Lucretia says quietly. "Though I will not lie, I have had to put off a lot of my very important work to help out like this. Another teleportation that far would set me back at least another day."

Lup can tell she's joking a bit, but she makes a good point. Lucretia has better things to do than help Lup jump around the world for two days.

"Yeah, damn," Barry says, doing the math. "Okay, it took you...what was it, seven hours? Seven solid hours, to save us a journey that was...shit, we fought a bugbear in there. Can't believe that was the day before yesterday. Okay, almost an hour on foot to get to from Lup's tree to Glamour Springs, and then three hours of riding to Berston, and then a coach to Bonneville to catch the train..."

Lucas rolls his eyes as if he's annoyed by how long it's taking Barry to puzzle this out. "Glamour Springs is about nineteen hours away from the lab by train. So Lucretia's portal really only shaved off twelve hours."

Barry blinks at him, unsure where to start with how uselessly simplistic that answer is. "The train doesn't go to Glamour Springs, or anywhere near. Or come out here! That's not—shit, we had to ride horseback, take two carriages, and an overnight train to get here. That was more like twenty-eight solid hours of travel, not even counting breaks and meals and layovers. It took us most of two days to get here!" Lup doesn't know enough about modern travel to pitch in, but she appreciates anything that knocks Lucas down a peg.

"You need to be thinking with portals, Barry," Lucas says, waving his hand dismissively. "It's an optimization problem."

After a few seconds of consideration, Barry realizes that Lucas probably doesn't have a thing to teach him on this topic. He's talking out of his ass. "Okay, well, so—Port Wick's something like the full distance from Glamour Springs and half again, and that's as north as the train goes."

"You'd do well to take the train, then," Lucretia says. "I can't possibly start on constructing a portal sufficient for that trip until Monday, and doing so would take at least ten hours. The train would have you arriving at virtually the same time, without eating my entire day."

"And without you guys being stuck here all weekend," Lucas says. Lup holds back a snarl of how much she'd also hate that. "If it's the ticket price you're worried about then I'll comp you. Hell, I'll
give you my card and traveler number so you can put your tickets on my tab. Friends of the family and all that."

That's...very generous of Lucas, Barry thinks. Even if he really just wants them out from underfoot. "That sounds good to me—thanks, really," Barry says, turning to Lup. "Any objections?"

Lup really doesn't want to be associated to Lucas in any way, much less as a ‘friend of the family’. Lucas would never really see her as a friend. She's just as much a monster in his eyes as he is in hers. The only difference is one of them deserves it. But, despite her churning stomach, she can help but admit it's the best course of action. At least she won't be stuck here anymore. "Yeah, that sounds fine. Can we go, like, now? The sooner we get there the better."

She's positively itching to see Taako again. She needs to see him, to make sure he's ok. Well, of course he's not okay, but...going to be. She has to trust ‘K’ at least that much.

"Yeah, can we—call a carriage, or something?" Barry asks.

Lucretia slaps her pile of papers down on the coffee table. "I can do you one better than that. Lucas, you coming?"

"Nah," he says, leaning forward in his seat. He digs out his wallet and produces a business card and pen, then scribbles two numbers and offers it to Barry. "You can call us on the phone if you need Lucretia for anything. Don't give the number out. And we'll send a letter to your HQ for 'Bluejeans' or something if we hear more about Taako. I'll sort the mail, Lucretia, and see you later. Bye, guys."

Lucretia leads them out of the parlor and back through the hallways, all the way past the storage bay to the loading dock and out onto the gravel path. The white pebbles are bright under the beating sun, and Barry finds himself squinting to read the traveler number on the business card.

They stop just off the side of the road, in front of a beautiful, petite crepe myrtle. The fluted stems of its trunk form a hairpin shape like a narrow doorway, and the violet blooms festooning its branches stand barely taller than Barry's head.

"Maureen and I planted these together," Lucretia says, fondness in her voice, "though we can't take full advantage of the tradition—I'm the only one who can operate this portal, as she lacks the necessary magic."

She gently grasps a stem in each of her hands. The tree shakes, shedding paper-thin blossoms, and a sensation heavy with pressure and static like a thundercloud rolls through. Then the air stills abruptly and dim light spills from between the branches.

There's a neatly-kept conservatory on the other side. The wall visible through the portal is constructed from narrow panes of glass set in white-painted steel. There's a kempt stone path winding through beds of gorgeous ferns and flowers. Lucretia dips one finger into the portal and a bell starts chiming on the other side. "This is a fair bit easier," she says to Barry, "than opening a portal hundreds of miles away in the midst of all those corrupted trees."

"That's real gorgeous, babe," Lup says, gazing through the portal into the green of the conservatory. There's plants she's never seen before and she wants to examine everything, feel out the magic in each strange plant. Before she can ask, a small fae appears just in view of the portal, arms crossed politely behind her back.
"Hi there, Lu!" she chirps. She looks like a brownie...almost. The stature and floppy ears are what Lup would expect, if it wasn't for her feet and the fact that she's out during the day. Brownie are nocturnal. And her magical signature isn't quite right for a Brownie. "Who's this you got with you?"

"Hi, Noelle. These are Barry and and Lup. Lup's a friend and Barry's a friend of hers. They could use some direction through Rockport, if you wouldn't mind."

"Well, you know I'm always happy to help!" Noelle says, moving aside and gesturing for Lup and Barry to come through. "It's nice to meet y'all. I'm Noelle, a brownie in service to Maureen Miller. I help keep things organized and runnin' smoothly while she's out."

"Sorry if this is insensitive but, what's a brownie doing out in the day?" Lup can't help but ask.

"Oh, nothin' wrong with a question! My mum was a halfling, so being seen by humans and the light doesn't bother me none. I tend to take after my Pa, though."

Noelle ends up helping Barry yank the largest of his bags through the narrow gap in the crepe myrtle. When he finishes raking flower petals out of his hair he looks around to find his bearings. They really are in Maureen's townhouse, just a few blocks north of downtown Rockport. Her matched tree is just as vibrant, though not quite so large, and the double doors facing it open into a sensibly-appointed parlor.

They say goodbye to Lucretia and then two other servants, human by all appearances, help haul his bags through the house and back out to the garage. There's no sign of Maureen beyond the personal touches of her home; portraits and family photos, books and curios and trinkets. The rooms they pass through look inviting: couches and curtains patterned with flower; colorful, vibrant waterpaper in emeralds and golds and pinks; framed landscape paintings hanging from elaborately-carved picture rails; a scrubbed-clean fireplace inlaid with mirrors and brass; plush rugs that mirror the patterns on the ceilings above.

Barry doesn't know where the heck Lucas came by inspiration for the concrete industrial monstrosity he calls a lab. Maureen's home is elegant and clearly well-loved. The staff seems cheerful and relaxed, and they've kept at least all the public rooms in excellent condition while she travels.

Noelle walks straight past two diesel engine cars in the garage to an older, steam-powered model. A fourth car sits against the far wall, disassembled pieces neatly secured under clean tarps. The porters load Barry's luggage into the trunk while Nolle cranks a lever under the driver's seat. Barry cranes his neck to see that the gas and brake pedal are extending and he's still surprised when she clammers in. It's not unheard of for families to have fae servants—downright common, for old countryside homes—but they're much rarer in cities. And fae that perform duties outside their employer's house are rarer still.

As if she knows what he's thinking, Noelle turns and gives him a wry smile. "Are y'all goin' directly to the train station, or am I takin' you on any errands first?"

Barry mirrors her smile a bit sheepishly. "I—really do need to shop, if you're sure it's not, uh, too much trouble?"

"Naw, it's all on the way. Lup, though, if you're comin' along you're gonna want to magic yourself
up. I've got my nice uniform and the Millers's reputation and there're still some shops 'round here I'm not welcome in."

Lup smirks and shifts to look human. She checks her reflection in the rearview mirror and thinks for a moment, tongue between her teeth. If she goes out looking like her usual self in a city there's a chance she'll be mistaken for Taako. She's not sure how far news spread, but she knows his show was mildly popular. Even if people don't recognize her as a supposed murderer they might recognize her as Justin, the extravagant traveling chef. He has a reputation for changing his hair and clothes frequently. Maybe the no-frills outfit she invented for herself is too unfashionable to be mistaken for something he’d wear, but it doesn’t hurt to be safe. She combs her bangs to frame her face, closes the gap between her front teeth, widens the distance between her eyes, shortens her nose, and erases her freckles. That should do it.

"That's unfair," she says to Noelle, once she finishes scrutinizing her reflection. Barry’s craning his neck to see the mirror, eyebrows knit. She flashes him a quick grin. "It's one thing to be connected to the Millers, but you're part brownie, part halfling? Not exactly the ultimate evil of fae folk."

Brownies are less common these days, but they'd always been helpful fae, finding humans humorously incompetent. As long as a human gave something in return they'd help around the house, doing little chores and fixing things. Halfling are a happy folk, always ready to share a meal or a story. They mostly keep to their own villages, giving humans little reason to fear or hate them. That someone like Noelle is being denied entry to shops simply for being fae speaks to rooted ignorance. Before hunters organized, before cities ballooned in size, all humans had to know the difference between fae to stay safe. Now most humans can go their whole lives thinking of fae only as nebulous boogeymen.

"Ah well," Noelle shrugs and starts the car. "I'm used to it. Been in the city a long time now. So what kinda shoppin' are y'all doing?"

Barry makes the snap decision to avoid the shops he’s most familiar with, the chains hunters usually source supplies from. Instead, Noelle navigates the car through heavy traffic to the department store across from the train station. The clattering of the engine and bustle of the streets drown out all conversation. He settles back into the plush leather seats and picks at his bandages, watching pedestrians amble past as the cars creep along.

Noelle pulls up next to a valet. There's a tense moment where he's obviously taken aback to see a fae clamber out of the driver’s seat, but once she drops Maureen Miller's name he trips over himself to be helpful. She watches him drive away with a frozen smile.

"Okay," she says, leading Barry and Lup through the glass revolving doors, "I've got an order of stuff to pick up for the house. And then I figure I may as well run and buy y'all's train tickets for ya, since Lucas said he was payin'."

Some of the shoppers are openly staring. Noelle doesn't even look that obviously inhuman, apart from her short stature, the ears, and the feet. A few of the store clerks seem to recognize her; they greet her warmly, and heads turn away soon enough. Barry catches himself drifting towards Noelle protectively, as if he can repel unwanted attention by hovering. Lup openly glares back, driving a few gawkers to turn away uncomfortably.

Eventually, Barry realizes some of the stares are for him; he doesn't look great, with his wrinklely clothes and bandages. Not to mention how few of the shoppers are men. "Thanks for grabbing us tickets," he says to Noelle, resolutely ignoring everyone. "We've just got to...I figured lunch? And I
need to restock my kit, but so long as we're here, I figured we could get clothes and stuff... When should we meet back up?"

"Here, just lemme..." Noelle rummages in her pocket. She produces a spool of black sewing thread and gestures for them to follow her. They head past the grand lobby and turn a sharp left into a department for housewares. She takes them around crowds until they reach an empty aisle between shelves of crockery, then ducks in and turns to Lup. "I can do a quick Find-Me," she says, tearing off lengths of string with her teeth. "This way I can get back to y'all after I check the timetables. Give me your hand, hun?"

Lup raises an eyebrow at that. The last time she used a Find-Me spell was with Taako, over a century ago. It’s long since worn off; the spell is closer to human magic than fae. Normally she would refuse. She doesn't like the idea of someone being able to track her whenever they please, but she supposes Noelle doesn’t mean harm. She couldn't do much to Lup even if she wanted to.

Lup offers up her hand and Noelle ties one end of the string to Lup's ring finger and the other to her own. She drags her free hand over the thread and it vanishes, leaving tiny black marks ringing around their fingers. Lup can feel the little pinpoint of magic where the thread was and shakes her hand out.

"Alright then! Ping me when y'r done and I'll find y'all with the tickets." She starts off, but quickly darts back. "And don't worry bout you're luggage there, Barry. I'll handle that too since I'll be down by the train anywho." And then she's gone.

Lup turns to Barry and asks, "So where to, babe?" She looks around the shopping center with interest. It's not quite as industrial as the train station but definitely different from the last shopping place she visited, around twenty or so years back. The crowds are less hectic, which is a relief. Not as much pressure on her. Still, she's looking forward to finally getting to a fae forest again, even if it's not her own.

"Clothes," he says promptly, before certainty ebbs out of his voice and posture. "Uh, as in, we need to not look homeless. And you deserve to have your stuff replaced and. I'd like to uh, help with that...if I may?"

He's never been in here before, but between the abundant signs and the uniformed clerks he's sure they'll figure things out. The most important thing is that he has the cash to spend. The sooner they get into more appropriate outfits the fewer stares they'll attract.

"Oh fuck yes!" Lup claps her hands together. She lost the shirt Merle lent her a while back when she shifted out of it... Barry's pants too. Both were probably still back in the cleaning supplies closet in Lucas's lab. Oops. Well, the bugbears could always tell him that they met, and she doesn’t mind making Lucas sweat the knowledge that she’s onto him.

She's ready to wear real clothes again. Something with a nice texture that actually keeps her warm. "Thank you, Bear. I really appreciate it. I'm sure just a shirt and some pants is enough. I can build the rest up later."

She looks Barry and his real, fabric-and-stitches clothes over and yeah, she can see what he means about looking homeless. Little bit ratty. Of course, if he ever showed interest in washing his clothes properly he'd be in better shape.

Barry flushes faintly and clears his throat. "You know what? Let's go nuts. We should both get
started on new wardrobes. I've been putting off clothes shopping for...well. Um..." he trails off, realizing that it's been an embarrassingly long time.

He’s glad that Lup’s excited. He’ll never be able to enjoy shopping, but having her along will make it bearable. He’d been sure that she was too preoccupied with worry for Taako to want to bother. But they are stuck waiting on Noelle to get their tickets, so the timing’s as good as they could hope for. “Anyway. The men's and women's sections are separate, so…do you want to split up and save time, or should I stick with you?”

"No it's fine. I mean, I can wear whatever’s good. I don’t really care about fashion, and I don’t have to care about fit," Lup says. She trails Barry out of the aisle and back to the thoroughfare leading to the main lobby, craning her neck to see the tiers of decks and the skylights high overhead. It still feels weird to her that all this space is just for shopping. She always figured most of the humans’ bigger buildings were living spaces.

Barry grins. "I mean, you could...you could pull off a flour sack, if I'm being totally honest. But you'd look amazing in something nice. And, you know, I've never actually been in a department store before either? There isn’t one anywhere near my mom’s place, and it seemed kind of weird, going by myself..."

Lup can't help the look she gives Barry at the 'flour sack' comment. That's one way to compliment someone. She hasn’t worn flour sack clothes since she was little. "Yeah, I mean, I know Taako loves this stuff but...wow, it's big. Lead the way, I guess?"

"Right," Barry says intelligently. "Okay, right." He offers his elbow to Lup before they brave the crowd in the main lobby. If he's gonna escort her around then he's gonna do it right. And having her at his side helps with his anxiety, if he's being honest.
Barry and Lup go shopping and have a discussion over lunch.

Lup snickers and takes the arm Barry offers. It's a cute gesture, polite. She appreciates that. The store's amazing. The center room towers up to the ceiling, making her feel so small in comparison. At least it's open... and doesn't smell like smog and coal. The crowd is a lot, though.

Stepping back into the main arcade is like being hit by a wall of noise. It's getting on towards dinner and the store is packed. Crowds throng under skylights that stretch across the ceiling overhead. Lup notes women hauling shopping bags and laughing children competing for space on the escalators. There are more here than there were at the train station. Her gaze trails after the erratic movement of the children darting between the large, lit-up boxes. If it wasn't for Barry pulling her along she could have watched them for hours. Children have so much more innocence and trust than adults. Children haven't yet learned to properly lie.

Barry cranes his neck and squints to read the signage, rotating in place. He only has the faintest idea where to start. The signs ringing the arcade advertise makeup, dining, and entertainment. Lup's nose catches the smell of food from all directions, further disorienting her. Unlike the train station, the crowd meanders in all directions, set on dozens of destinations. Immediately beside them is a confectionary. Barry's hungry, but he'll be more comfortable eating here once he's not dressed like a hobo.

He only gets a few moments to scan the shop before a clerk spots them and heads over. "Just getting our bearings!" Barry says preemptively, leading Lup to the stairs adjacent to the escalators. He thanks the woman to turn her away and is relieved when their retreat puts them in view of a haberdashery and a men's shoe department. That's almost clothing, so they must be getting closer.

When he was younger, Marlena mostly made him shirts from flour sacks. At the time it was embarrassing, but as Barry and Lup ascend the stairs he can't help but prefer those to braving this madhouse.

One of the kids breaks away from his harried mother and runs up the down escalator. A clerk bursts out of the crowd to corral the kid, and between that hubbub and the gawkers it's an excruciatingly long time before Barry and Lup manage to shoulder their way up a second set of stairs and to the start of the women's departments on the upper level.

As Lup's eyes wander she catches the gaze of a well-dressed woman. Her neck and wrists are laden with pearls and gold. The woman doesn't break eye contact and Lup can feel the magic radiating from her, stronger than a human, weaker than a human could notice. Fae magic. Lup continues watching after the other fae looks away. She knows some fae have established themselves with wealth in human societies. She doesn't understand that; doesn't understand the desire to fully abandon their roots.

Barry lets the crowd shunt them towards the balcony railing just to get some breathing room. Immediately ahead of them are a jeweler, a millinery, and a women's shoe department, all broad, partitioned rooms totally open to the balcony and attended by ever-present clerks. There are at least
four more departments with signs Barry can't read from his vantage. Then there's yet another floor above them advertising more women's clothing, and a floor above that. He knew the Millers brought a lot of money into Rockport, but this store is palatial. Barry's entire village could rattle around in here with room to spare.

"Is this too much?" he asks Lup, as quietly as he can and still be heard above the crowds. "Should be better once we get where we're going."

Lup almost misses the question in the sea of noise. "Huh? What? Oh. Uh. It's fine. It's just so big. And there's so much going on."

"And we're short on time..." he says, scanning the storefronts. His mom would've headed straight for the draper rather than buy expensive off-the-rack clothing. She’s been saying he has more money than sense for years. He definitely has more money than time. Someday he'd like to take Lup to a proper tailor. Right now they'll be lucky to get any hems adjusted before they have to leave for the train station.

Barry ushers Lup up to the third floor. Lup looks at every storefront as they pass. There's just so much. There are rooms full of fabric, coats and skirts and gowns draping off wooden mannequins. Rooms full of shoes and others full of jewelry. There are virtually no other men left in the crowd. Barry's pretty sure that the only things above them are children's departments and the kitchen for the elevator-exclusive rooftop restaurant. They bypass the fur department and interior design gallery before arriving at a stretch of rooms arrayed with mirrors and shelves heaped with folded clothing.

Lup lets go of Barry's arm to investigate a pile of folded pants, all brand-new and expertly stitched. She watches human women pulling things off shelves and racks to pose with in front of mirrors. By some obscure process, they choose some items to put back and others to fold over an arm or put in a basket. How can they possibly tell what will fit? The last time she shopped, even pre-cut fabric had to be assembled or altered at home, if you couldn’t afford a tailor.

"You wanna ask a clerk for help?" Barry says. He points out a woman in a crisp, long-skirted uniform, orbiting a watchful distance away.

"Yeah, for sure," Lup says, more of a mumble than actually talking. She abandons looking through the racks of clothes in favor of approaching the clerk.

The clerk patiently helps her navigate the racks, nodding as she fumbles to describe what she’s interested in wearing. It's strange, being able to pick something out and have it ready to go. Though nothing fits quite right. In the privacy of changing rooms, she finds it fun to shift just enough that each outfit sits better on her frame.

Even with Barry's kind offer to get her anything she only picks out one pair of pants, a shirt, and a light overcoat. She doesn't want to have to carry much. But it's nice to wear real fabric instead of an illusion. It’s warmer, and the weight is comfortable.

"Thank you, Barry. What else do you need?" Lup asks as they leave the store. He was in a brand new outfit and waiting for her with the clerk at the register when she came out of the changing booth. Aside from the cuts, bruises, bandages, and messy hair, he actually looks like he belongs in society again instead of in a ditch in the woods.

Barry's frankly impressed by how well Lup's doing with the department store. He made an awkward fool of himself when he dashed downstairs to the men's section. The first clerk who found him almost threw him out, and he ended up with only one new pair of pants, two shirts, and a
bunch of socks and underwear. He let the clerk toss his old outfit in the trash. His new pants are pinned at his ankles because he ran out of time to get them hemmed; it's like clothing manufacturers assume any guy with a gut is also a giant. He'll have to fix it himself, on the train later.

"Food," he says, arm linked with Lup's as they ride the escalator down. He's enormously pleased that they can be out in public and look like a normal couple. Not that they're a couple at all. They're just—inco. That was why he nodded and smiled when the cashier took his payment for his 'wife's' purchases, even though Lup was a bit thrown off by the assertion. It's a weight off his shoulders that no one seems to think they're out of place. "But I can wait. I still need to hit up whatever homemaker's anti-fae stuff they have around here, just to see. They'll have herbs and blank charms even if the rest of their selection is crap."

Lup frowns at that. Logically, she knows most average fae-repellent isn't effective against her, but the idea of a store crowded with the stuff still makes her uncomfortable. "I'm gonna have to opt out of that one, babe," she says, rubbing at her neck. "I get it's important, but I'd rather not be around bundles of hawthorn and iron if you don't need me to be. Least you keep your stuff in your bag."

Food on the other hand does interest her. She’s not hungry, of course, but she hasn't eaten since before Lucas's. Actually, she's pretty sure the last thing she ate was on the train three days prior, and that had ended up rather... spoiled.

"How about I do a quick run on the home security store while you," Barry says, digging out his wallet, "take some cash and buy us snacks for the train?"

He points off the side of the escalator. The confectionary below is just a stone's throw from his destination. Just visible through the window, a taffy-pulling machine clicks away behind an elaborately stacked rainbow of hard candies. Lup eyes the shop with interest. Processed sugar is a delicacy in courts, and while she and Taako had never lived within one, that didn’t mean they had easier access. Sweets are expensive and stuff like that is hard to make from scratch. Of course, she’s had her fair share through thievery, but it's still a nice treat.

"Get me some of whatever has anise or orange or ginger in it and I'm happy," Barry says. “And uh, whatever else you want, of course. I'm happy to buy. We can meet back up at the café afterwards."

With a wide grin, Lup takes the offered money and darts towards the escalator. She eyes the shop critically as she descends. She hopes they have something with honey, or fruit, or chocolate, or all three.

The neatly folded stack of ones Barry handed her is enough to buy candy for an entire train car. He doesn’t mind if she spends it all. Candy doesn't really go bad, and he hasn't indulged in forever. He's about to treat himself to some new gear, too, but all that's reimbursable by his organization. He can more than afford the expense.

The shopkeeper greets her warmly as she enters and Lup flashes an award-winning smile before poring over the displays. She ends up with a handful of caramels, some orange chews, some bars of silver-wrapped chocolate, something called 'bit-o-honey', caramel creams, baggie of anise squares, and two chocolate BB bats. Admittedly, she goes a little overboard, but there's so much and it's all very exciting and she does still get some change back when she's done. Not a lot, but definitely some.

As she leaves the shop, she decides to save a little of everything for Taako. She’ll find him soon. She’s heading out on the best lead she’s had, and Barry’s been extraordinarily helpful.
She chews at the bit-o-honey as she heads towards the cafe to wait. It's definitely not quite the honey-flavored, but it's still delightfully sugary.

Barry's loitering just inside the open doors, full shopping bags in hand. He greets her with a grin as the host steps from his podium to lead them into the dining room. The cafe's done up in sunny yellows and brilliant white, with aluminum fixtures and waxed birch wood. The sconces on the walls beam bright and steady against the darkening windows. A waiter's doing a circuit of the room, pulling back sheer undercurtains so passersby can see the modern opulence of the dining room from the plaza as the sun sets. There are a few handfuls of people at the tables: a young family, an elderly couple, and several groups of women.

The waiter makes to offer them a table and Barry heads him off with a request for a more private booth. They end up tucked away in a cozy corner, shopping bags shoved onto the padded benches between them and the wall. Lup's candy haul looks impressive. She hands him back a bare handful of loose coins for change and he tucks them away, still grinning. He can't wait to go through her purchases. Rude or not, he might even do that while they're still dining. Barry orders both of them water and flips open his menu. "Hey, are you gonna eat food?" he asks, unsure. She didn't eat at Lucas's. "Wanna split an appetizer?"

Lup glances at the bag of candies at the question. She's still sucking on the honey and nut chews, but she might as well see what's being offered. The deviled eggs do look pretty nice. As do a few of the salads.

"I could eat," she says, closing the menu. "I'll defer to you on the appetizer." She appreciates how secluded the booth is. A silencing charm wouldn't go amiss, but she'll make due with what she gets. "Hey, can I talk to you about something?" If they're being put on a train and then in a court's forest soon, she might not get another chance to talk about the lab situation.

"Of course," Barry says. What would Lup like? She ate that bread, back at Glamour Springs' inn… stuffed mushrooms, maybe? Bruschetta with tapenade? "You think we're doing alright on time? Does Noelle have a—some kind of magic way, to message you if she needs...?"

"Noelle will get things finished," Lup waves off his concern. "She can message us, if she needs, but we’ll let her know when we're done." She glances around the restaurant again to be sure. The Millers are famous and well-loved. This is a big bombshell to drop, and she doesn't want to be overheard accusing them of slavery. "Look... You know when I investigated the whole bugbear situation at the lab?"

"What did that come to?" Barry asks, largely unconcerned. Lucas gave him a convincingly thorough tour. But then he looks up from the menu and sees the serious expression on Lup's face. "I, uh, I did keep an eye out—he definitely didn't have any hunting trophies around."

"Yeah, try trapping," she near-hisses. "He's got a whole family of bugbears hidden away." She taps her head and says, "Got them on some kinda fucky mind altering magic to make them compliant, and I don't know where he got that. They do stuff for him. Cook, clean, garden. One's his fuckin’ tailor! And you know what they get? Fed. And kept in a room when they're not convenient. And permanently mentally fucked." She struggles to keep her voice low. Her fingers grip the edge of the table until her knuckles turn white. Her body feels too small: human and constraining.

"Wait, what do you mean by 'mentally fucked'?" Barry asks, shocked. He'd thought Lucas's robots took care of everything! He didn't... Lucas was a brat, sure, but he was Maureen's kid. And a certified genius, who's done more for society than any hundred other guys put together. Barry had —Barry had wanted to trust him. Barry'd felt like they'd bonded, during that tour. He doesn't have a reason not to trust Lucas.
But Lup—who he also trusts, who he likes personally—Lup's furious. More passionate than she's been since the time she wrecked her home. He clenches his fists, alert for any lashes of magic. He doesn't have a wand, she's so much stronger than him... He was oblivious to the danger she could present. "Lup, it's—I agree it's sketchy, but— it sounds like they have, normal jobs?"

Lup feels herself freeze. She was so sure Barry would have her back on this. He can't see it's wrong? He can't even think for a second why mentally altering a fae to do work for you is wrong. Normal job? They're like his pets. She has to force herself to calm down when she feels her anger starting to take physical form. She can't stop looking human here. She can't appear as an angry fae in the middle of a restaurant.

"He altered their brains, Barry," she growls, food and candy out of her mind. "I don't know where a human got mental magic, but they aren't bugbears anymore. They're pleasant and chatty and happy to do whatever Lucas asks them to. It doesn't even bother them they're being kept in a steel room whenever Lucas doesn't want people to see them. It was... unsettling." Lup curls in on herself, anger still burning, but sadder now. "They're slaves."

"You can't just—what did you actually see? Humans don't have mental magic... you talked to the bugbears? They told you all this?" At least she hasn't dropped her glamor. None of the other patrons have noticed something's wrong. If Lup lets fire loose... they're on the far side of the room, furthest from the door. She wouldn't hurt the other diners on purpose. They should escape safely.

Lup digs her fingers further into the wood, the faint smell of burning forcing her to move them into fists at her side. Black, smoking fingerprints marr the finish where she heated up too much. She thought Barry trusted her judgment. It still feels wrong not being able to physically manifest her anger.

"I know that!" Lup draws some looks as her voice raises. She can't help the snarl that pulls from her throat as she forces her voice back down to a reasonable level. "Of course I talked to them. They were very pleasant. They didn't even seem to understand how fucked up it was! Their eyes looked so... so... blank."

"Okay, I agree that Lucas should pay them, if they're uh, working for him..." Barry says, eyes darting between the smoking indents on the table and his water glass. He can't subdue Lup in the middle of a restaurant. He has to trust she can control herself, but he just feels his stomach knot and shrivel. "Lup, bugbears are... They get shot on sight, because they're feral. If Lucas—if he's figured out a way to, to calm them? If it was as fucked-up as you say, then—what about Lucretia? Wouldn't she have done something?"

"Lucretia doesn't know everything, Barry. And that doesn't matter! It's what they are. What about Klarg? The bugbear we fought in the cave? Apparently he was their fucking kid, but had enough sense to leave that hell hole. And he's still recovering from what Lucas did. They're violent, not feral. Humans hunted them first. They have every right to fight first and ask questions later. They're as much fae as I am!" Lup stands up and slides just enough out of the booth, her fits tight and burning. Why doesn't Barry understand? She's been sitting on this for a day and he doesn't have the decency to think over what's wrong here? What if it was her Lucas 'calmed' and tamed?

"Wait—the bugbear with the tea—" Barry's openly shocked, then angry. "Whatever Lucas did to them probably saved my life, then," he hisses, shoving his hands on the table, palms-up, openly displaying his bandages. "And Caleb's, and that girl's! They're not like you—they kill on sight, always, period, unless we get them first. They don't cooperate, they don't build things, they just roam in packs. That 'hell-hole' is probably the closest they've ever come to having a real home!"
"It doesn't matter! They are like me! They're sentient and being held and manipulated against their will! Klarg probably wouldn't have even been near the village if Lucas didn't do what he did! Bugbears aren't supposed to be alone like that! " Lup's no longer keeping her voice down. It's taking everything in her not to spout fire or shift here in the restaurant.

"Miss, are you leaving?" a waiter interjects from several paces away, practically sprinting towards their table. Everyone in the room is turned towards them, and all other conversations have stopped. The waiter definitely thinks he's heading off a couples' spat. He has no idea how serious things actually are. "Or are you ready to order?"

"Uh—yeah," Barry says. There's no way for him to get between the waiter and Lup. He never should have walked around with her unarmed. "The—stuffed. Bruschetta... Actually, I think—we were leaving?" He doesn't dare take his eyes off her.

Lup takes some deep breaths with her eyes closed before sliding back into the booth. "No. No it's fine. You need to eat." She doesn't meet his gaze, leg still shaking in anger. "Sorry for... causing a scene." She can't help but hiss the last part between her teeth. She's really not all that sorry. But she can save it until they're not in public. Whenever that is. She is not just letting this go.

Barry orders the stuffed mushrooms and breathes a sigh of relief when the waiter leaves. "You can't do that," he hisses. "I'm sorry if you're upset, but you have to control yourself! If you're gonna—if you're just gonna go off, then I have to get you out of here. None of these people deserve to get involved."

Lup feels her anger flare again and she glares at Barry. He doesn't say that he can't let her hurt anyone. He doesn't even want to suggest the possibility. He wants so badly to think she's better than that.

"I think I controlled myself pretty well, actually, considering you're trying to justify slavery to me. I have a right to be upset about that. I didn't set anything on fire? I didn't lose human form? I'm sorry I yelled, but you're being a narrow-minded fucking hunter." She hisses the word like a curse, now really seeing what that means. He honestly thought she would have the lack of self control to hurt someone. He can't see things from her perspective. He can’t. Fae will always be, in the end, something dangerous to him, nothing else.

"Okay, no. When the hell did I justify slavery? I said they should be paid! I just don't see the problem with them being able to live peacefully with humans."

"That’s not--"

"Did they say they were miserable? Were they prisoners?"

"I don’t--"

"Tell me with a straight face that a pack of bugbears couldn't tear Lucas to shreds and escape whenever they wanted! Klarg left!"

She’s sick of him cutting her off. "Sure they could! But think about how mental magic works for a second, Barry. There’s no way it was consensual! They can’t make any choice except what Lucas wants! Humans always have an issue with fae charming them. But as soon as it's the other way around, then it's okay?" At least when fae charm humans, they often take good care of them, treat them like a treasured pet, keep them safe from a world out to hurt them. Not just force them into menial labor.
Barry openly glares at her for the first time. Lup just compared taming a ravenous, murderous beast to stealing people from their families. Her being a changeling is something he's been able to ignore—especially in this day and age, when they're increasingly rare, unable to create new changelings without a court's power. But Barry knows the old stories. Everyone does. "How do you know they were forced to— get their aggression turned down, enough to not eat you when y'all had your chat? It sounds to me like Lucas gave an employment opportunity to an intact family. That's a far cry from stealing and brainwashing children."

Lup's eyes widen momentarily before narrowing again, a low, feral snarl tearing from her throat. Oh. Okay. Now she understands. She does not think about the guilt in the depths of her gut over that, over what her existence means, what it meant in regard to Taako's life.

"I'm going to the train station," she says abruptly, getting out of the booth. "I'll let Noelle know to meet you here. Have her find me whenever you're done." Lup runs magic through the mark on her finger to alert Noelle to this location before grabbing the candy bag and leaving.

She still needs Barry to find Taako, but she can't be around him right now. Not after that.

Barry deflates when she walks out of the restaurant. He was really looking forward to a nice meal with her. The waiter comes with the stuffed mushrooms and refrains from commenting on Lup's departure. If anything, he's relieved that their fight is over, sympathetically offering the wine menu. Barry declines, orders a steak, and digs into his appetizer. The mushrooms aren't even good—chewy, kind of soggy, and way too earthy. Barry's never liked mushrooms. He dissects them for the filling and chews morosely.

Accusing Lucas of slavery was out of line. Barry doesn't regret arguing against that. He's been charmed before, when he got caught alone on a hunt by his quarry. He knows what it feels like to have impulses and emotions written for you, strings of power hooking into your brain and jerking you around. Even so, he rotted his attacker's face down to bone and watched the shock kill them. Now he's worried about whether he's gonna read in the paper that Lucas got mauled to death in his lab, if the bugbears decide they're done being his servants.

The application of fae magic to adjust emotions could be revolutionary. Barry can easily imagine the bugbears cooperating of their own free will. Years ago, he read an article about a wealthy corporate owner paying a fae to experiment with charms engineered to reduce his crippling anxiety. The article went on to bleat about all of his stocks diving after investors panicked about him being 'mind-controlled'. The potential of the core idea stuck in Barry's head ever since. If not for his career—and the exorbitant cost—he may have tried it himself.

He's not used to even thinking of bugbears as people. But they do talk, apparently, and if he's going to charitably assume they value peace—if he was in their shoes—he'd want his murder-rage issues solved so he could have a normal life. He doesn't get why Lup was so upset. She didn't seem to care that they'd probably both be dead if they'd encountered normal bugbears.

Not that he's ever heard of bugbears attacking fellow fae, he realizes. Just that they're ‘creatures most volatile, long in tooth and claw; shaped for violence, mind and body,’ and thus live far out in the wilderness, never among humans or within the courts. Maybe Lup wasn't in danger the same way he would've been.

He shouldn't have brought up her changeling nature, he realizes, stomach sinking now that his anger's ebbing away. That was cruel. They've never even talked about whether she mourns for the family she was stolen from. Barry worries a linen napkin in his hands, wishing it was paper he could shred.
He's relieved when Noelle walks in. She's conspicuous in her plain work dress and child-sized compared to the other diners. He sees the host stop her at the door and gets up from his booth to head off any trouble, waving. The host spots him and lets her pass. Some of the remaining diners turn and stare. Barry supposes that a strange man in bandages who enters a fancy restaurant with a woman who's by all appearances his wife, fights with her until she storms out, and then welcomes a halfling maid to his table is quite the spectacle. He doesn't care to know what they make of this scene.

They greet each other pleasantly and Noelle clambers into the booth. "Do we have enough time to eat before the train leaves?" Barry asks. "My steak isn't out yet, and uh, I'd love to treat you—you're doing us a big favor."

Noelle settles in the booth as comfortably as she can. It's a little big for her, but sitting on her knees is enough to be at the proper level for using the table. Frankly, she'd probably be better off in a booster, but that's a rather embarrassing situation to be put in and it's clear the waitstaff aren't about to insult her by offering.

"Just coffee with lots of cream and honey please," she says to the waiter before turning to Barry. "Where's Lup? Thought she'd be here if she pinged me?"

"She stormed off to the train station," Barry huffs. "I mean, I… I made her angry. I would think she's leaving without me, and wouldn't blame her—except she doesn't have her ticket"

"Oh goodness," Noelle says, hand going to her mouth. "What happened?"

"Do you—do you work with any bugbears, Noelle?" Barry asks, aware of how crazy he's going to sound if she doesn't know anything about this.

Noelle pauses and thinks for a moment. "Not that I know of?" she says, giving Barry a weird look. "Why do you ask?"

Barry picks at his bandages. "Lup met a family of them at Lucas's lab. She was—they had some kinda mental magic done to 'em, probably for, well, the safety of… everyone, since they're apparently working for Lucas? She was real upset about the whole thing. Worried that they were being coerced."

"Hmm," Noelle hums. "You're sure Lup said bugbears? If Lucas is keepin’ magically altered bugbears in his lab, I should let Maureen know. That… Well, that'd be real upsetting, to say the least."
Lup bides her time on a bench outside the train station, idly sucking on candies, not especially wanting to deal with the overwhelming crowd. She keeps playing the argument over in her head, along with everything else she knows about Barry. She'd thought he was starting to understand, to question the anti-fae propaganda he'd been fed by other humans and hunters. Fae aren't as dangerous as he's been lead to believe. Not even bugbears. Their violence isn’t mindless, It’s self defence from centuries of hunting. Ancient life spans means fae remember old wounds and hold old grudges much longer than humans. There's a certain irony in saying bugbears kill on sight when they are in turn killed on sight.

Sitting and stewing on their argument probably isn't the healthiest thing she could be doing. Before long, she can only think of Barry's last comment about changelings. It was targeted, is the thing. He made sure she had no misunderstanding over his real opinions of her. She thought they were becoming friends, but apparently views like that die hard. She just wishes it didn't hit as deep as it did.

Everything going wrong has been her fault. Taako's life is her fault and Barry threw that in her face, intentionally or not.

She's curled with her feet up on the bench when Barry and Noelle finally arrive. Barry’s relief is obvious on his face. He'd hate for her to have left on bad terms, even if he's still not sure what he could say to make things better. By now her anger's dissipated into wallowing and she avoids Barry's gaze as Noelle hands off the tickets and lets them know about the accommodations she arranged for. Their luggage is already in the compartment they'll be sharing. It made sense a few hours ago, but Lup thinks she might just stay awake in the passenger cars this time. It’s not like she needs to sleep.

Goodbyes with Noelle are brief and tense. They quickly commence the awkward task of boarding a train without talking or looking at each other. Lup doesn't even enter the sleeper compartment. It's not as if she has luggage to check on. She's entitled to her anger and clearly wants space, so Barry unpacks his shopping bags and sits down on the bunk to struggle through changing his bandages. Lup heads right towards one of the public compartments and takes a window seat at an open table.

Barry arranges Lup's purchases in a bag next to the bunk. There's space for that, with so much of his garbage thrown out and her staying up in the parlor car. He'd planned to store everything in his bags for her, but now he doesn't think she'd want that.

The room feels too quiet without her. But he should be used to sleeping alone; he had years of that before a handful of nights with her. He lies back onto the scratchy sheets and watches the lights of Rockport recede through the window. They'll be at the border just after dawn tomorrow. He needs
to quiet the anxiety thrumming in his pulse and sleep.

He couldn't reach Lucas about the bugbears. He called from the guest office at the department store, using the number on Lucas's business card, but the phone rang unanswered. It's not likely that disaster will strike overnight. Whatever arrangement Lucas has with the bugbears has clearly been going on for a while. Barry still feels responsible. Why couldn't Lup have said something before they left the lab? If only he had a way to contact Maureen himself. He's going to have to count on Noelle and pray that any future news is good.

The sense that he's balanced on the precipice of some disaster keeps him awake for hours. He ends up taking a sleep aid from Indrid's pharmacy so he can doze, frustrated with the awareness that there's nothing he can do tonight and listening for Lup’s footsteps in every small sound from the corridor.

Lup stays put in her parlor seat, doing her best to not attract attention from the other passengers. She watches the countryside roll by out the window, the few stations and towns crouched low amidst a sea of golden-brown, threshed fields.

She ignores the passengers around her but doesn’t want to be alone with her thoughts. She tries to focus on the way the sky grows darker and the stars come flickering out. She likes to watch the colors as the evening shifts into night and the moon climbs higher. Other movement in the parlor slowly dies down until the other passengers have retreated to their rooms or are dozing upright in their seats. Over time, it becomes calming to her frayed energy. The night is peaceful, if not comfortable.

Logically, she should have known this would all collapse. Barry didn’t actually trust her. Humans never trust fae, no matter what kind of bonds were forged. She was a fool to let herself forget that again.

Late into the night someone enters the compartment, drawing Lup to look up in surprise. Everyone else is sleeping in their seats. She didn't expect anyone to come through this late at night except maybe an attendant, but the man looks like another passenger. She smiles wearily at him and he abruptly turns and leaves again. It’s strange behavior to be sure, but she doesn't question it.

A few minutes later he returns, holding a scraggly bundle and a flashlight. He shines the beam directly into her face before she can make out what the bundle is.

"Hey, what the fuck man?" she groans, trying to shield her eyes with one hand. It flicks off abruptly and she goes back to staring out the window. Asshole.

She hears the sound of someone striking a match and groans again. She doesn't need some dude filling the room with the smell of cigars right now. Barry should be asleep, so she may as well sneak back into their room. Her privacy's been compromised anyways. But when she gets up to leave, she finds herself with a smoking bundle of \textit{bad shit} right in her face.

She immediately gags on the smell, picking up St. John's Wort and the acidic reek of holly and rowan berries. It's an anti-magic cocktail. She stumbles back, knocking everything on the table over as she grabs at the cloth for something to hold onto. The smoke is setting all her instincts on overdrive to flee.

\textit{Hunter}, her mind supplies as the man shoves the torch in her face, forcing her back into her seat. He's a hunter. Someone else in the compartment screams, jolting the other passengers awake.

For Barry, the first sign that something is wrong isn't the pounding of footsteps in the corridor. It's
that, when he pulls back the blinds to let the sunrise in, there's nothing outside but starlight and black hills. Breakfast isn't for hours. There's no good reason for people to be up and about in the dead of night.

He doesn't hesitate. He rolls off the bunk to grab his bag and throw it open. The new wand he bought is a swishy, delicate thing, unsuitable for real spellwork, but there's a solid ten inches of pristine elderwood extending unmarred out of the lacquered handle. It'll have to do. He tears the packaging apart and seizes a small knife, then throws open the door to leap into the corridor in socked feet. Not the first time in his life he's grateful he didn't undress for bed.

A woman in trousers and a buttoned blouse is hurrying a panicked child along the hallway. The door to the next car hangs open behind her, letting in the clatter of the wheels outside. Barry runs straight towards whatever she's fleeing, ignoring the bystanders peeking out their compartment doors.

The next car is in even more of an uproar. Barry shoulders his way through people clogging the corridor and uselessly wondering where the conductor is instead of trying to find help. Meanwhile, smoke seeps from the open door ahead. There's no time to go back for the mask and goggles Lucas gave him. Every step's a fight against the flow of traffic, desperation mounting even before he's sure it's the parlor car ahead.

He rushes headlong across the gangway and bursts into the parlor. The tableau in front of him is terrifying. More than half the seats are abandoned under a thick haze of smoke. A man looms over Lup in the middle of the compartment, shoving an acrid, smoking torch in her face. She's trapped, light-headed, unable to muster the strength to reach up and push it away. The world around her blurs at the edges.

A couple of the other people in the car are prone and choking. Barry charges towards the man and slaps the torch out of his hand. Fragile bits of dried herbs spill, smoldering on the carpet. Even after it's knocked to the ground, the cabin's already so full of smoke that Lup just sinks lower into the seat. Her limbs feel heavy and her eyelids droop, her entire body numbly protesting being in the presence of these magical repellents.

The man whirls around with a twisted snarl. When he sees Barry standing there he pauses for only a second, icy blue eyes narrowing. "Looks like it got you, huh? S'fine. I'm not so easily caught off guard." He holds up a tiny woven satchel hanging around his neck. "Four leaf clover. Catches them before they even know their cover's blown. Could learn a thing or two from me, Bluejeans." He grins wickedly before pulling an iron knife from his belt and rounding on Lup with intent.

"Fuckin'—stand down!" Barry snaps. Grimaldis, code name Brother Grimm, is a fully-licensed hunter he's worked with once before, in a group so large that only his obnoxious cockiness made him memorable.

Grimaldis acts like he didn't even hear Barry. He brings the knife towards Lup's chest and Barry steps in close and slugs him in the gut. Barry makes to grapple him and takes a kick to the inside of his knee. His leg buckles and he goes down, a fistful of Grimaldis's shirt tearing loose from his grasp. He lands hard and slaps his palm down on the torch, grinding it into the rug. Burning pain bites at his hand. "We don't execute people, Grimm!" he shouts, fighting back to his feet and grabbing for Grimaldis's wrist.

"Name's Blue Eyes now, Bluejeans," Grimaldis says, struggling to pull free and bring his knife to bear. "And it's not a person, it's a changeling. Executing them is our job. You're charmed!" He snarls. "Just,"— another wrench of his wrist—"Let! Go!"
Lup hears the fight like it's through a filter. Is that... Barry? Huh. Could have easily gotten rid of her like this. Wouldn't even be his fault. Her thoughts trail off into the rest of the haze and she blinks heavily in an attempt to clear her vision.

Grimm and Barry are still grappling when a uniformed attendant barrels into the parlor. "What in hell's name is going on in here!?” he shouts, waving away smoke. By now the cabin's empty aside from Barry, Lup, Grimaldis, and a couple of dazed-looking passengers.

"Hunter business!" Grimaldis yells.

"A big fuckin' mess," Barry says firmly, twisting Grimaldis’s’s wrist to force him to drop the knife.

Grimaldis yanks his knife back. "Shut up. You'd be on my side if you were in your right mind." He turns to the attendant. "This changeling snuck onto the train and has clearly charmed my associate. I can have this handled in another minute and we'll all rest easy knowing the threat is gone."

"There was no threat until you went off half-cocked!" Barry snaps, before his brain catches up with his mouth. They're in deep trouble. Lup looks barely conscious. And, in a way, Grimaldis is right. Barry has no leg to stand on, stopping another fully licensed hunter from handling a fae as he sees fit. Judgment is for after-the-fact reporting and internal investigations. Second-guessing in the field gets people killed.

The attendant, a stocky man in a red coat studded with a row of shiny brass buttons, stares at them open-mouthed. Barry stamps out the last embers on the carpet and speaks quickly. "Our job is to keep the peace, Grimm. What the hell do you call this?"

Grimaldis looks around the train car with a critical eye and pauses to cough into his fist. The smoke might be designed for fae, but it’s hardly good for anyone else. The acrid smell coats Barry’s nostrils and sticks in his throat. "I'm making sure this feral, brainwashing, child-stealing creature doesn't hurt anyone. That's what I call this." He readies his knife, blocking Barry with one arm, and is stopped when the attendant seizes his wrist.

"That's enough," the attendant says, glaring at Grimaldis. "Unless she attacked someone, we don't permit hunting on this train. Not to mention the fire, damages, and harming the other passengers."

Grimaldis is so stunned that he doesn't even fight when the attendant twists the knife out of his grip and starts dragging him towards the back of the train. "I'm placing you in holding until we can get a constable to deal with you. Honestly, it's three in the morning," he mutters the last part under his breath as he opens the far door and disappears with Grimaldis in tow.

Barry slumps into himself. Other attendants will come, soon, to help settle the panicked passengers. All this mess because Grimaldis looked at Lup and saw only a threat. He was seriously, genuinely, wrongly convinced that her presence meant that she was about to hurt someone. If he hadn't been—well, Grimaldis—and instead exercised a modicum of restraint or forethought? If he'd pushed aside his need for reckless grandstanding and ambushed her between the cars or in a washroom, with no witnesses? Barry wouldn't have found out until the morning. And there would've been no legal recourse, not unless someone wealthy decided to sue on her behalf.

A different hunter would've probably exercised more discretion, but Barry can't say they would've stayed their hand. And that's without even knowing that Lup's involved in the Glamour Springs case. The only thing that got Grimaldis in trouble was his method, not his intent.

Speaking of trouble, the first attendant's barely out of the car before two more people rush in to take his place. They're both disheveled and only half-uniformed, clearly roused from sleep: a young
conductor with all the buttons on her coat hanging open over her blouse, and an older attendant with socked feet, like Barry.

The old man swears and runs to the side of the closest passenger. Grimaldis used a potent anti-fae herb cocktail in his torch. The residual smoke still prickles in Barry's mouth and makes his throat clench. The other two affected passengers look as human as him, but their vulnerability speaks to fae ancestry. Grimaldis clearly didn't spare a thought for collateral damage.

They're both stirring more than Lup. She groans and shifts, heavy and slow, lungs only just starting to clear as the worst of the smoke filters out of the car. It’s hard to push through and form any coherent thoughts.

The smoke won’t kill her. It's not good for her, but even if she'd lost consciousness it wouldn't have killed her. That doesn’t make feeling drugged out of her mind any better.

Barry pries open the window latch and the conductor’s gaze slides over him with a frown. She heads for the door and shouts to the crowd packed in the corridor of the next car. A moment later, the overhead loudspeaker comes on and affirms her instructions, tinny and crackling: "We are opening the dining car to address an unexpected hiccup! Please remain calm; all of us serving the Port Wick line are awake and working hard to let you all get back to sleep, we promise. Passengers are reminded at this time that smoking, or fire for any purpose, is not permitted outside of the designated cars."

They're trying to smooth things over. Good. One of the other victims staggers to her feet. The attendant helps her stumble to the door as the crowd in the hallway starts dispersing. The conductor turns back towards Barry. He squeezes Lup's hand. She weakly squeezes back without comprehending whose hand she’s holding, having to fight to get her fingers to do even a fraction of what she wants them to.

"We can move you to somewhere the air is more clear," the young conductor says, "but I need to talk to both of you about what happened here. Well. One of you, at least until she’s less out of it."

"Yeah—of course," Barry replies. Her professionalism stops him from swearing. The attendant opens another window as Barry hefts Lup like a sack of potatoes. Every fiber of his being vibrates with relief that she's waking up. He's not letting her out of his sight again.

The woman introduces herself as Jane. She's the day shift conductor. She leads them after Grimaldis, one car over. This car's subdivided into sleeper compartments smaller than Barry's and completely deserted. They're very close to the back of the train. There are schedules and bulletins tacked up on the wall; the crewmembers must sleep here. Right now everyone's up and out of bed, dealing with Grimaldis' mess. Barry doesn't care where they're holding him so long as he's gone.

Jane pulls open what must be her own room. There's no space for a chair, just a bunk, a tightly-packed wardrobe, and cloth storage bags shoved up against the wall. "I can take you to first aid in a minute, but that crowd's in the way," she says. "And I think we'll be keeping you away from that hunter fellow."

She motions Barry inside and directs him to lay Lup down on the bed, with her feet towards the window and her head on the pillow near the door. There's no space for Jane to follow them in. She leans on the threshold, bracing herself against the swaying of the train as it powers onwards. "Does she have a history of fainting, or respiratory issues?"

"Uh," Barry says. "I don't know?"
Jane leans over and checks Lup's breathing. Satisfied, she gives her shoulder a squeeze and straightens up. "I can't imagine why she wouldn't wake up soon when everyone else seems to be stirring. She should be just fine. For now, I'm going to need to ask you what happened."

"I'm a hunter too," Barry says, fumbling in his pocket. He comes up with his wallet and pulls out his license. His photo is printed in black-and-white on the front of the dogeared, water-stained paper. Above that are his license number and codename. The indentations from the stamp are nearly worn flat, but the certification statement and his physical description are still legible. His signature's not, but it never was. "I—think my colleague made a, a judgment error, and I'm very sorry for the trouble he caused."

Now that the immediate danger is gone and the air around her is clear, Lup starts to relax into the bed. Her thoughts are still sluggish and she doesn't bother trying to move around. It's incredibly hard to understand what's actually going on around her. On a certain level she can hear what the others are saying, but she can't make sense of it. They might as well be speaking in another language. It feels safe, though; she trusts at least one of the voices.

Lup sighs as her magic retreats into her skin to let her body focus on healing. The illusion she wears for a human face melts away. She heavily opens her eyes a crack, but can't make out much. Unhelpfully, someone's standing directly in front of her line of sight. She lets her eyes close again, enjoying the clean air.

"Any idea why he might have attacked her at all?" Jane asks, craning her neck to get a look at Lup. "In my experience, hunters are a tad more careful about mistaking people for fae."

Before Barry gets a chance to stammer out a convincing lie, the other attendant shouts "Jane!" from down the hall. He appears in the doorway behind her, breathing hard. "The hunter, Blue Eyes, is claiming the woman's a changeling. He keeps insisting he was 'protecting the public.'"

Barry fails to block Jane's view of Lup. He's been a step behind the crisis all night. Too tired, too stressed, too slow to stop Grimaldis, and now too slow to remember that Lup's human face is a construct she has to sustain before she suddenly can't.

Jane gasps. She saw everything: sharp teeth, knife-like ears, and a glimpse of void-filled eyes. "Oh my god." To her credit, she doesn't step back. She grips the doorway and squares up like she's going to stand between Lup and the rest of the train. Her eyes dart around the room; Barry recognizes the way he searches for improvised weapons.

"I have this under control," he says, the most egregious lie he's told since meeting Lup. Maybe the only lie.

"Shit, she’s actually a changeling?" the attendant asks, voice rising in panic. "Don't tell me that psycho was right—"

Jane cuts him off. "Who's watching Blue Eyes? Don't tell me you left Carl in charge, get back down there, now. Have him call the trainmaster for a detailed manifest!"

"That's a lot to demand from them before dawn!"

"We just need to know exactly how many children we have on board," Jane says grimly. "And where they all are."

"Should we make an announcement?"

"Absolutely not! The last thing we need is more chaos. Don't even let Blue Eyes talk to the other
passengers, keep a lid on him until he's not raving. We already have a great reason to do a headcount—use it! I want attendants checking every seat and room—nobody's getting any more sleep tonight."

"Yes ma'am!" he says, already running, and then his footsteps fade away.

"And tell the trainmaster everything!" Jane shouts after him. Then she sags against the doorway and pinches the bridge of her nose. She looks up at Barry. "Explain. Who is this woman?"

Lup groans and curls in on herself to escape the shouting. She finally manages to piece out Barry's voice through the din. She pushes a hand off the bed in an attempt to get his attention. He's the only familiar thing she has right now and her addled brain decides that means she very much wants to make sure he sticks around. Instead of grabbing his hand or pant leg or something, her arm just flops heavily off the side.

Barry watches Lup flounder with wide, concerned eyes. There are so many consequences to balance if he considers the choice he has to make. Instead, he takes the plunge. "I'll vouch for her. As a hunter. We're—we're, uh, traveling together, and I promise she didn't harm a single soul on this train."

"Barry..." Lup slurs out, not really up to putting in the effort to convey more than that.

Jane gives Barry a skeptical look. "'Barry' doesn't sound like a pseudonym. It's going to be awful hard to convince a constable your word is good when the changeling you're vouching for knows your real name. In fact, I'd love a reason why I shouldn't lock you both up with the other guy."

"Do you—do you even have a brig?" Barry asks, heart racing. They are so far past the point where he can obfuscate what's going on. The only thing left is to at least make sure Lup escapes the consequences. He's looking at an inquiry, maybe probation; a decades-long record of service and a good reputation will soften the blow for him. But not for Lup. Her fate would be left entirely to the judgment of senior hunters, and there are more of them like Grimaldis. There's no presumption of innocence or due process for fae. There are no laws or protocols protecting her at all.

"I'm sure I can whip something up," Jane says. Her hands are firmly on her hips, but her poise is undermined by how often she has to bend her knees balance against the train's motion.

Barry looks down at Lup's outstretched arm. He takes her hand and holds on tight. "I have no problem being confined to a compartment while, while you guys sort this mess. But I've got something I want to make very clear. I'm not charmed, or coerced. It's not—my organization is aware that I'm traveling with a changeling, related to a case. Everything here's above-the-board, and there wouldn't have been trouble if Blue Eyes hadn't tried to stab a woman in the middle of a full car."

"Not. Not paying—paying.... not paying attention," Lup mumbles, feeling a need to explain herself. She's been around long enough that something as stupid as a smoker shouldn't have taken her out so effortlessly. She's gotten less wary of humans.

As her head clears, she can only assume Barry was the one who got that thing out of her face and the other hunter away from her. Even after she shouted at him, he was still willing to risk himself to help her. Lup's too exhausted to process, with the thick fug of smoke still clogging her lungs and the flow of her magic. She slips into a light, uneasy doze.

Jane huffs and eyes Lup over, seeming to weigh the situation. "We'll be sure to check that claim once we get to Port Wick. You're a hunter. You must understand how sneaking fae onboard poses
a massive danger to our passengers. What are we going to do if we find out she charmed or hurt someone? What if she took a kid and hid them somewhere? There are babies on this train, Barry."

She's frowning and glaring at him, but some of the heat has left her voice. She's tired, like everyone else, and the adrenaline of the situation is starting to fade. "You know it's not exactly within code, but if you'd let someone know when you bought the ticket, maybe we could have worked something out."

"I... Lucas Miller bought our tickets," Barry says slowly. "I don't know whether the, uh, representative he sent—she's fae, too—whether she said something, at the station."

He doesn't even know what names Noelle gave for them. All he'd cared about was their compartment number; he went straight there and crashed. He digs the boarding passes out of his pocket and unfolds them for Jane.

Jane's eyes widen. "Oh gods, you're associates of the Millers?"

She hands Barry back the boarding passes and he finally reads them. The ticket seller typed out "Lucas Miller, Associate, between Stations Rockport and Port Wick" on both. No identifying information about Lup or Barry at all, and that's definitely not standard. In retrospect, it makes sense that Lucas would have that kind of clout. Barry wishes he'd realized that on his own. Lup may hate the guy, but they're damned lucky to know him.

While Barry is still reading, the attendant returns, red-faced and huffing. "They're doing that headcount. So far nothing out of place. What—uh... What's the plan for the changeling?" He stumblest with the train's motion and catches himself on the wall.

"We're going to find a better place for them to stay, first of all," Jane says hastily. "And then we're going to make sure Blue Eyes doesn't come anywhere near them. They know the Millers."

The attendant's face pales and he nods slowly. "We're so sorry about the confusion. We'll get this sorted out right away." He takes a breath and dashes off again.

"She's still out," Barry says, gently placing Lup's hand at her side. "She should be okay when she wakes up, but uh, let's not move her yet."

"Yes, she can stay here as long as she needs," Jane agrees. "Would you like to sleep? I can have your things moved to a more secure cabin, as a courtesy. Anything we need to do to make amends for this."

"You really don't want to have to tell your bosses they're getting sued, huh," Barry bites out. "It's not—what Grimaldis tried was fucked-up, period. She doesn't deserve special treatment or extra help because of the Millers—she deserves it cuz she's innocent, and she was attacked on your watch."

Jane nods mutely. "I—I need to go help with everything else, if you're staying here. Don't worry about, Grimaldis? That's his name? Don't worry about him, he's under guard. Would—uh," she glances down the hallway. "Would you like me to send someone to keep an eye out in this car? Just in case another passenger gets any ideas?"

"I think we'll be okay in here," Barry says. "I'll stay up. Just—just close the door, will you?"

Jane swallows hard and dips her head before shutting the door, leaving Barry alone with an unconscious fae.

There's nowhere for him to sit. So he presses his back against the door and slides down to the floor.
Everything from his head to his toes feels like a leaden weight. Too many short nights and long days. He's exhausted down to his core, slow and stupid with it.

He can't sleep here. Not only because he's extremely uncomfortable; he's the only person standing in between Lup and everyone else on the train. He has no doubt in his mind that they would've been thrown off already, if Port Wick wasn't the next stop. Though that might actually have worked out. They need to get away from Grimaldis and whatever allies he may have at their destination. But what could they do, jump out the window? Maybe if he was healthy, but he's not. He itches under his bandages and thumps his head back against the door.

Sitting puts his head level with Lup’s prone form. He should try to wake her up. She can turn into a bird and escape out Jane’s tiny window. He shouldn't try to wake Lup up. He knows what Grimaldis did to her. Those herbs a potent soporific for fae, and she'll be disoriented and drowsy until her system has a chance to clear itself. She can't shift like that. Rest is what she needs.

As a kid, he often wondered if he had fae ancestry, somewhere on his father's unknown side of the family. The strength—if not the utility—of his magic was a cut above everyone else's. The prospect seemed exciting, for a while. He wanted to be special. Then he was apprenticed to a hunter after acing the qualifying exam, and the anti-fae animus among him and his buddies left Barry so embarrassed by his childish fantasies that he never said a word about them.

It says a lot that Grimaldis can stand beside Barry, an equal in their organization's eyes, when he'd be so profane as to claim that their job is to execute every fae they stumble across. It says a lot that Barry has to be worried that he'll be punished for stopping him from publicly murdering an innocent women. He hates that whatever consequences fall on his shoulders depend entirely on what connections Grimaldis has, and what kind of spin the narrative ends up with.

He hates that he doesn't agree with a single damn thing Grimaldis stands for, and for a moment they sounded the same. He would never call a changeling ‘feral’. They're different from bugbears—but maybe not that different. And does it matter? He talked over Lup and stood by his opinion. Tonight proves that her anger and fear are completely justified. He was so caught up in his supposed expertise that he forgot this is her life. How often does he make her feel unsafe?

At least he can guard her for now. They're so close to the finish line. He watches her chest rise and fall as dawn breaks and dim grey light gradually filters through the window. Every set of footsteps in the corridor draws a tense line between his shoulders. There's no peace or comfort he can take, except in the certainty that, even if she’s still furious with him, he'll keep fighting for her when she wakes.

Chapter End Notes

struck with the realization that we missed an opportunity to have Davenport ship out of "Port Dave" instead of "Port Wick"
The train's about forty minutes out from the station when Lup blinks drowsily awake. She glances slowly around the room, trying to remember where she is for a solid minute or so before it comes back to her. She's immediately picking herself up in bed, claws and teeth sharpening, ready to defend herself. When she sees Barry leaning against the door, pausing his writing to look at her, she calms down. Right. Right he brought her to a room—what room is she in?—and got the other hunter away from her. She's safe, and also suddenly aware of the persistent pulse of magic in her sore body.

Lup sinks down to a more neutral position and rubs at her eyes. "Hey, Barry," she mumbles. "What-ah. What'd I miss?" Her thoughts and memories are still slow to come to her, but she's gradually absorbing her surroundings, even if her whole body aches. It must be early morning; faint, blue-tinged sunlight filters through the tiny window.

"Oh geez, you're awake!" Barry slaps the papers down in a neat stack and then immediately slips when he makes to stand and accidentally plants a knee on them. He catches himself against the bedframe and shuffles forward on his knees until he can see her face. "You—you didn't miss much. They've got the asshole who attacked you penned up somewhere. How, uh, how are you feeling?"

Lup snorts a laugh, immediately regretting it as the magical ache pulses over her body again. "Like I just got hit by a train. Where, uh, where are we? This doesn't look like the cabin." Though she can't quite remember what the cabin looks like. Why can't she remember that, she would have gone to the... oh.

Right. They had a fight. Lup tries to smooth her features into something not irritated; Barry saved her, after all. And then that makes her aware that she's in her true form and not human and sends her into another panic. "Oh Fairy Mother, I look like fae. Did anyone see?"

"Ye—yeah," Barry says, haltingly. "Uh—I would frame this as, good-news-bad-news, but it's mostly kinda bad. One of the conductors saw you. And an attendant. So they know you're here. But we're okay for a second! They think we're some of Lucas's people cuz he bought our tickets, and they're sitting on Grimaldis until we get to town. They uh, eventually saw reason about him... trying to murder you."

Lup's ears flick every which way as she processes this, trying to figure out how she feels. She's not thrilled about being associate with Lucas. But she'd rather that than be punished for being attacked.
"Ok. Ok that's... not greeeeaaat but we can work with that." Lup puts her head in her hands and groans. "Or I mean. I can? I can handle it... I guess." Barry might have saved her, but she can't imagine he'll want to keep traveling with her after she'd screamed at him like that. Even if she's fairly certain it was justified, maybe she shouldn't have let her emotions get the best of her like that. She'd almost paid dearly.

"Grimaldis will definitely need handling. So I thought we might escape out the window instead," Barry says, not missing a beat. The hand he extends towards her is chilly from poor circulation after hours spent on the floor. "But uh, I checked, and the ones in this car are locked. Cuz that'll stop people from smoking in here, right? And I wrote a report—it's basically done—that uh, that tells our side of the story. For the hunters."

Lup gazes quizzically at Barry. Is he that eager to help? "What—uh. What exactly is our side of the story?" She tries to glance over Barry's shoulder at the papers on the floor. "If the crew's on our side, why do we need to use the window?" Lup feels like she's playing catch up and it's not any fun.

"I really, really don't wanna fuckin' deal with whatever goons Grimaldis drums up when we hit Port Wick. The crew can only keep him on lockdown till the train arrives." Barry leans over and scoops up the papers. The stationary and pen were stolen from Jane's things. A forgettable offense, in light of everything else. "Our side of the story is that Grimaldis tried to execute you for the offense of being a changeling and traveling on a ticket Lucas Miller bought, in the middle of a car full of passengers. Even fae-hating nuts are gonna have an issue with his methods, at least. If only cuz there'll be a heap of trouble over the ruckus."

Lup's ears flattened slowly as Barry laid things out. She hates all the caveats required to make her murder wrong in the eyes of hunters. Is this what it takes for Barry to be upset for her? If she'd been killed discreetly, would he have cared? If she was a bugbear she'd already be dead at his hands, apparently. Even if nothing she'd done changed.

"Why are you helping me? I'm dangerous, remember?" she gives in. "I should be dealt with, like the bugbears? One less child-stealer?" She can't meet his eye, tears pricking in her own.

"I'm—" Barry swallows hard. His vision's blurring in sympathy; the hand he rubs over his face comes away wet with tears. "I'm sorry. I was—I'm sorry I ever said shit that made you feel like I felt that way. Cuz it's wrong. I was wrong. I was so—so caught up in how we were fighting in public, that I didn't even listen to why you were upset. You had—you had every right to be worried for the bugbears."

Lup's drooping ears lift ever so slightly and she glances up at Barry. She'd expected him to come to his senses, to defend himself... not... that... She can feel the tears in her eyes well to a breaking point, too overwhelmed with anger, and fear, and sadness, and fading adrenaline. She sniffs hard and leans over to rest her head on Barry's shoulder as she starts to properly cry.

"I-I'm sorry I yelled so much. I-I'm sorry I l-l-lost control of myself. I should have explained better. I-s-should have... I'm sorry I put us in danger c-cause I w-was sulking." Some part of her felt bad she was probably getting his shirt wet, and also probably going to fall off the bed at this angle, but it was a distant worry. Right now she just needed to cry and let out the cocktail of emotions that'd been building in her for the last week.

Barry steadies her against his shoulder, carefully reaching a hand up to smooth her hair. He repeats the motion for long moments before he speaks. "The thing—the thing is that you, you should've been able to just sit and sulk in a fuckin' train car without getting attacked. That was—that was messed up. I'd be angry too, if I had to worry about that shit. About whether Lucas is giving a great
job opportunity to bugbears or taking advantage of them. Cuz—cuz I think I get it, now. There aren't many people who could—or would—stop him. At least, not for the bugbears' sake."

Lup sniffs against his shirt, sinking into the touch. It's soothing, something vaguely familiar, but new and comforting nonetheless. When she finally thinks she can talk without further upsetting herself she says, "I just. You didn't see it. It was so wrong to see a whole family of bugbears without even a hint of aggression. They didn't even have bugbear names, just puns based on their job." There's a long pause where she just takes a moment to breathe shakily. "I wish I could help them."

"We will," Barry says. "Noelle's gonna talk to Maureen about it. Lucas will listen to his mom. And I trust Maureen, she's brilliant. She's always—she's always been a force for good, y'know? She's been in philanthropy since before I was born. She made Rockport what it is, and she's always done right by people—she even releases some of her patents, time to time. We got a nice new tractor with a knockoff 'Miller' diesel engine for cheap, when I was a kid, cuz she gave up all those profits she could've made just so more folks could have 'em."

Lup admittedly didn't understand a lot of what Barry just said, but that's fine. They were both having an exercise in listening right now. "She sounds like a very nice woman. I wish I'd met her... I know what you said about the bugbears being willing. But... I really don't think they were." Lup sighs and pulls herself back up onto the bed, curling her legs in to make space for Barry. "Bugbears don't... Bugbears don't do alone. Klarg wouldn't have left if he was okay with what Lucas was doing. He would have stayed with his pack."

Barry sucks in a breath. "I didn't think about it like that. I guess—I knew they lived in packs, but it's always framed like—like pack hunters, not like families? But you're right. And he seemed—pretty reasonable? Either he was still... charmed, and fighting it, or..." Or maybe Angus shook a bugbear's hand and walked away unharmed, no mind-altering magic needed. Maybe that whole encounter would've gone differently, had Barry not rushed in expecting a fight.

He can see why Klarg didn't ask for help. Especially after that caravan shot at him. Were all those deaths avoidable? How'd he forget the pride and awe he felt, meeting Lup in the forest and calmly talking it out, trusting that she wouldn't burn him to a crisp? Would he have handled that differently—poorly—if he'd gone in knowing that she was a changeling?

"Well he did attack you first." Lup huffs. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt that bugbears are aggressive towards humans. But humans were the instigators. Hunted them for furs, for attacking their livestock. They learned to attack first, avoid the risk." This whole thing was so complicated. "But they aren't savage."

The intercom in the hallway blares on, announcing their approach to the next station. Lup swivels her ears away from the noise. "So... What needs to happen to get off this train without having a bunch of cops and hunters on our tail?"

"Oh shit, let's book it," Barry says. He folds and addresses his report, stuffing it into an envelope stolen from Jane's things. Then he throws open the door to the corridor, waiting only long enough for Lup to rearrange her features into something convincingly human. It's amazing how drastically her face can change and still be gorgeous.

The people in the parlor car recognize them. Barry was hoping that car would still be closed, but the smell of smoke has completely dissipated and half the seats are occupied again. An ashy, burnt streak of carpet is the only evidence left of what nearly happened. He matches his pace with Lup's, anxiously scanning the room for all the eyes on them. They're almost to the end of the car when someone speaks up; an unassuming man, younger than Barry and equally unremarkable. "Glad
you're okay!" he calls out.

Even though they're in a rush, Lup can't help pausing for a moment to glance back, surprised by the act of kindness. She smiles softly and nods at him before being dragged back along by Barry. They rush through the corridors, down to their little-used sleeper car to gather their things. Lup is reminded of the fact that she was holding the candy when the attack happened and, well, that’s probably gone. Damn it...

"So, it'll take Grimaldis a while to get a hunter or constable to the station, especially if he wastes time throwing a tantrum like always," Barry says in a rush, slinging luggage straps over his arms and back. He considers for a moment before holding Lup's shopping bag out for her.

Lup takes the bag and looks over Barry, who's very much looking like an overloaded pack-horse now. "Here, let me just..." She maneuvers around to grab two of the bags that feel the least like iron off his arms and hooks them over her shoulders. "There. Share the load a bit."

"Thanks," he says, smiling gratefully. The train shudders around them as it slows. He leads them to lurk at the exterior door, squinting through the tiny window at the dark, pine-shingled buildings that slide past. The attendant doesn't walk in until they're fully stopped, and he barely has a chance to get the door open before Barry and Lup bolt out. Barry calls out another quick "Thanks!" and heads straight to the service counter, warily glancing over his shoulder for Grimaldis.

"Here," he says, slapping his report down on the counter, bags banging off his elbows. The woman behind it makes the face of a service employee who may not know what's going on yet but can plainly see that it's being made her problem. "There was a—an incident on the way up here. I've written a report that needs delivered to the Port HQ. For hunters. Jane, the conductor, can confirm. I put in a good word for how admirably your people handled the, the whole situation. Trust me, you'll want them to see this." That's even true. She opens her mouth and he cuts her off. "It's urgent, and thank you, and we've got to be going. Ask Jane!"

There’s another letter underneath it. This one is stamped and addressed, and needs no special instructions. Barry’s long overdue to send an update. Hopefully overdue enough that everything will be resolved before Davenport hears what he’s been doing.

With that, he bolts. He leads Lup out the main doors, alert for any sign of pursuit. They manage to grab the first coach in the line waiting for disembarking passengers. The driver takes a moment to understand that they're heading out of the north side of town—Barry avoids saying the forest—but soon enough they're speeding away from the station, with Grimaldis nowhere to be seen.

Barry slumps into the coarse, fraying fabric of the cushioned seat. "Phew. Grimaldis might have them mad as hornets by the time they get ahold of me. Or, even odds, everyone might be sick of his whining. Either way, I'm uh, pretty darn happy that they won't be able to get ahold of you. There's not much they can do to retaliate against me."

Lup takes a moment just to breathe. She didn't mind being dragged around, but she’s exhausted. Her magic pounds sluggishly in her veins. "You sure? I mean. You have dangerous magic too, right? They're not going to twist that into something against you?" She doesn't want her altercation to get Barry in trouble. No matter how justified, he did attack another hunter.

"Kinda wish I had blasted that bastard. But—I didn't. And it's actually—humans don't much care about other humans' magic. They'd have to arrest—geez, like, a third of everybody, if they were going after people with my same affinity. Even if they only wanted the ones who'd trained, that'd still be several thousand people."
The coach rattles over a stretch of cobbled road. The town's busy outside; traffic moves at a fast clip, mostly horse-drawn, but a couple of motorcars have passed them. Port Wick's rapidly expanding, a huge center for freight, shipping, and fishing. Even right on the edge of a fae forest ruled by living courts. It stands in stark contrast to Glamour Springs and Refuge. They might not be "plagued" by fae, but they're tiny and dying while Port Wick thrives.

"I'd get a trial," Barry says abruptly. "Even if I had killed him, I would be—be guaranteed a trial, and I'd be looking at—getting my license stripped, fines, prison. But probably not even the death penalty, since I could make a good case for self-defense. There are rules about what kind of sentencing is fair. At least—for some people." For humans, and for those lucky enough to be passed as human, or connected enough to their communities. Would Boyland get a fair trial? Would Davenport? Would Noelle?

"Oh..." Lup says simply. She's not sure what she expected. That's definitely not how fae are treated by humans. But not exactly how fae handle transgressions. Usually, if the court is active, the fae in question would be brought before their respective queen and judged. There aren't many rules on what is and isn't allowed. Being brought before a queen is already an indictment. The punishments they choose can vary drastically from court to court. It all depends on what that particular queen deems fair—or fun.

Usually, fae work problems out between themselves. Though humans don't have queens... and don't have enough leaders to handle how numerous they are.

Their carriage is soon bumping along a dirt road as the buildings around them grow sparse and ramshackle. They pull up alongside a waterlogged, grassy embankment. There's a decent gap between the edge of the city and the start of the forest, where the land has been given over to tall grass, late-season wildflowers, and the occasional shack. The humans living here clearly worry about imposing on fae land. Smart.

They thank the driver. Barry pays while Lup takes stock of the trees. They're tall and healthy in a way that only comes from a steady stream of fae magic. Lup can feel the thick energy radiating off the foliage. It calls to her in a way she's never experienced before: familiar, dangerous, and powerful all at once. She can't help but want to answer that call and stands transfixed by the feeling.

"So, give it to me straight," Barry says, joining Lup to survey the forest. He'd forgotten how big pines get. Seems almost silly, how ominous he found the rot-riddled forest along the southern border, when its trees would've been barely a third as tall even before they were bent under heavy, fungal shrouds. "I've maybe uh, been curious about this place my whole life, but uh—is there a path we need to stick to? Offerings we should make?"

Lup blinks back to awareness at the questions. "Hmm? Oh. Uh. Not so sure about a path. But, when we find an entrance, we should wait for someone of these courts to meet us outside. It'd be nice if we still had that candy to offer, though... If we just go barging in, we'll be treated as intruders, and you at least would be lost in there for a long time. Not sure what they'd do with me."

"Oh, damn, I forgot about the candy," Barry says, as if that's remotely close to his worst problem today.

She shakes her head out and smiles brightly. "No time like the present, right?! Let's go." She starts off ahead of Barry, pretending it isn't the forest's call that's making her so eager to get going. He trots after Lup without hesitation, mentally reviewing how many rations he has packed.

Her excitement makes him giddy. He remembers the awe he felt the first time he saw this forest.
The countryside where he grew up was mostly farmland, interspersed with the occasional squat oak tree. Flat and tame, save for the constricted slashes of wild growth clinging to the uneven slopes around the few creeks.

The contrast with Lup’s ravaged home is even starker. A thick carpet of needles muffles their footsteps, smelling fresh and clean. The pines looming around them shade the ground a deep, misty grey, but also give a comforting impression of safety and shelter. Their canopies form a vaulted ceiling, an almost-solid roof held up by the proud, straight columns of trunks. The space between them is like a cathedral decorated by twisting roots and bristled branches.

Lup shifts back into her true form as the forest darkens. She may be more welcome like this, and the enhanced night vision doesn't hurt. She quickly shucks her new shoes into the shopping bag so she can curl her toes in the needles. They’re wonderfully soft, similar to the mosses she's used to.

She can practically feel the magical heartbeat of the forest: strong, steady, and ancient. Moments later, she can feel her own magic start to pulse with the same rhythm. On one hand, it's comforting. On the other, it's a constant reminder of the hidden power of this land, of the people lurking in the trees. Soon her ears begin flicking wildly with her nerves; each bird song or rustle of nettle pulling her attention.

Despite the pervading aura of peace, Barry’s on edge too; nothing makes it more obvious that this is a place not meant for humans as the abrupt end of the road, hundreds of feet from the forest's edge. "D'you know why some humans were able to settle in your forest?" he asks, thinking of the decrepit, abandoned homesteads and roads overrun by spongy webbing. There's nothing like that here, no signs of habitation. "Cuz like, the accounts I've seen all go something like 'fae didn't stop us from logging and the money's good', or, 'our family just was always there!'. Nothing informative, per se."

"Different systems of courts feel differently about humans. I was never really around for the old courts, though. I assume they were more willing to live alongside." Lup gazes up at the thick, dark canopy in thought. "Something tells me the fae here are less tolerant." Very quickly, her wonder at the forest is replaced with worry for Barry. This might not be the safest place for him. It might not even be especially safe for her.

Barry’s mouth turns down in a contemplative frown. "How much less welcoming?" he asks.

All of his previous visits to Port Wick were spent by the harbor. The pine forest does extend that far west. Whenever their ship docked for a few days, he and Davenport would take short walks up to its border, sometimes picnicking in the shade. Now they're already deeper inside than he'd dare go on his own. "Hopefully we can find someone to ask for help soon. I've got hardtack and trail mix and stuff for a week, easy, but that only lets us get about three days in before I'd have to turn around. And I don't wanna get too far across the border. Some of the stories you get up north scare even me."

Lup hums at that. "I can't imagine it'll take that long. Eventually someone will notice our magical signatures." She doesn't say that a court this anti-human would have ways of keeping track of humans entering its boarders. She also doesn't mention how 'finding someone to ask for help' might not be the best idea.

Somewhere in the distance a wolf howls, sending a chill down Lup's spine. There are so many creatures alive in this forest, and though that's comforting in a way, it’s also unfamiliar. Foreboding. She's not sure she likes it so much anymore.

"Anything you can tell me about the fae that live here?" Barry asks, adjusting the straps of the bags
he's carrying. He slings them over his shoulders. They'll be a little harder to remove in a fight, but his hands are free now, and he's got a dagger and a wand holstered at his waist. Not the embellished elderwood one from the department store: hawthorn, for protection. "Have you ever been up here before?"

Lup laughs hollowly. "Hardly. On both accounts. Taako and I could only travel so far when we were kids. Trains were only just becoming a thing and most people weren't especially fond of children hopping on. Not to mention how much more paranoid people were about fae. Couldn't go anywhere without there being some kind of warding." Lup can't believe she's spilling the beans on her childhood to a human... But Barry isn't really just a human anymore, is he... She shakes off that thought. Off topic.

"Once we passed as adults we settled down for a while. But-" Lup stops herself from telling Barry the sob story of exactly what uprooted that life. She trusts him, but she's not quite ready to bare her heart like that. "Well we moved into the old forest after that. Not much travel on my part.

"As for what I know, it's really limited to what Luce says. Which isn't a lot. Secrecy and all that. I know it's a dual court system, smaller than the one my forest used to have. The winter queen is harsher than the summer. They really don't like humans here. Some kind of nastiness centuries ago, I guess." Chatting with Barry like this as they wander through the trees, even if it's about such tricky topics, is comforting. "What about you? Any experience with these woods?"

"Uh, we always sailed up around the coast to pass 'em," Barry says, scanning where the distant vista disappears into mist. Their line-of-sight is excellent; the trees are spaced far apart, trunks largely bare up to several feet above Barry's head. Maybe some creature could sneak up on a hapless human with mind-bending illusions, but he's confident nothing could surprise Lup. "My old partner and me spent a lot of time in Vandellia, doing consulting for their—well, not hunters, more like… clergy, kind of, that deal with conflict between humans and fae. Liase with their courts and all that. We never went into the forest from their side—my partner wasn't keen on the risk, and I'd imagine that's closer to wherever the courts are, cuz it's supposed to be pretty damn dangerous."

"The courts are everywhere, B—" She should probably use his code-name here. "Bluejeans. They're not on this plane of existence, so they can't really be somewhere. It's possible there was a higher concentration of portals there, but I promise you there are portals everywhere in here. Just a matter of finding one." Lup's attention goes to every patch of foliage clinging to the ground: waving fronds, rangy bushes, clumped leaves. Her eyes scrutinize the branches over their heads. So many places to hide...

Only training prevents Barry from stopping short. A jolt of adrenaline shoots tension through his calves and he fights to keep his pace even with Lup's. "Should… I'm, I guess it doesn't matter how confident I am in a fight, cuz if it comes to that I can't go pissing off an entire court. Should I even be in here? Is 'sorry, we come in peace' not gonna cut it, when someone finds us?"

Lup hesitates and looks back at Barry for a moment, considering that. Honestly? Probably not. This is the last place a human should be, especially a hunter carrying a lot of anti-fae things. Especially when autumn's creeping through the trees and the calmer Summer Queen’s domain is giving way to the strict thumb of the Winter Queen. And maybe it's selfish of her, but she just really doesn't want to do this alone. She doesn't want this to be goodbye. Not yet.

"I—" What can she even say? "Wait a moment, I have an idea." She reaches down and takes off her shirt. She makes sure to shift a new one underneath as she does it, for the sake of Barry's comfort. Not that she really has anything particularly intimate under there in this form. She takes off the pants too and carefully folds both to put in the shopping bag. She doesn't want them to get
ruined when she goes for a more dramatic shift.

She carefully takes off the bags and dumps them under a nearby tree. She takes a moment to carve a small, simple insignia in the bark, a basic finding charm. "If you have anything you don't want to lug with you, leave it here. This'll let me find it later."

Then she turns into a grizzly bear.

Barry is concerningly slow on the uptake when confronted with close to 400 pounds of heavily-muscled bear. The gears in his head stalled when Lup started stripping and were visibly locked up by the time she was folding her clothes.

He looks down at her muzzle, level with his stomach. She blinks back at him. "Oh," he says, intelligently. "You… you got real big." He reaches his hand out, as if to pet her. He pulls it back. He opens and closes his mouth. "Not as… big as I thought bears were?"

Lup snorts with amusement and shakes herself out, furry scruff ruffling from the movement. She hasn't been a bear for a long time. Not big, huh? She draws herself up to standing height, quickly finding herself towering over Barry, paws bigger than his head resting on her chest. "I'll stick to this form for a while. If 'we come in peace' doesn't cut it, I'm bigger than most common fae like this."

Barry’s stomach swoops. "No kidding," he says, swallowing dryly. "But—even so—let's uh, let's try real hard to not get in any fights. I'd hate to go asking that high fae about your brother after we kill some of his people."
Death's Messengers

Chapter Summary

Something finds Lup and Barry in the woods.

Little wind penetrates this far into the forest, but the chill in the air has settled into Barry’s nose and the tips of his ears. He can only assume Lup has it worse. They probably beat the first snowfall by half a month, at best. The largest of his bags—his paperwork and nicer outfits for warmer weather, all his half-completed projects, excess knives, specialty tools for hunting, pounds and pounds of iron kitsch—are left tucked protectively around Lup’s single shopping bag, because their sturdy canvas will stand up better to any damp.

What little he carries into the forest will have to do. Food, weapons, first aid, his warmest clothes, a tent. A single notebook and three pens; any journaling here will be virtually guaranteed publication, so rare are modern records of this place. Rope, full canteens, a sewing kit. Matches and lighters, even though Lup can start fires with her mind, because hoarding habits die hard. In the end it all fits in two small bags, slung together across his chest. The salve Indrid sold him rests in his pocket.

He tells himself over and over that they’re looking for people. This doesn’t seem like a place to find any. Silence stretches around them, sinking into the carpet of pine needles. The padding of his boots and Lup’s paws sound quieter than they should. Like they’re walking lightly, for fear of disturbing the peace.

They travel in silence for hours. Neither of them wants to be distracted should something appear. Lup’s ears stay alert and she takes frequent breaks to sniff the air. She really doesn’t want to be caught unawares, especially as the little light filtering through the trees darkens to nothing.

Eventually, long after they’re left with only the pale orange flame of a lantern to light their way, Barry halts them both to make camp for the night. Lup momentarily shifts to human so she can help out. She’s not especially efficient. So sue, her she’s never pitched a tent before. Before Lucretia made the first version of their tree, she and Taako mostly squatted, or strung up a tarp.

As soon as the tent looks like it won’t collapse, she turns back into a bear and sits down to keep watch. She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if something happened to Barry in the night. But he needs to sleep. She can keep going without true rest, but he’s got to be running on fumes after being woken up so early this morning.

Lup stretches herself out next to the tent after Barry crawls inside. The bed of needles is surprisingly comfortable. She might have to get Lucretia to replace the moss in her tree with pine after this.

Without the sound of their footsteps to mask the ambient noise, the forest comes alive. Crickets and cicada echo their songs through the darkness, accented by an occasional howl of a wolf or hoot of an owl. The night feels too long. Lup’s used to waiting for things to happen, letting time slip by like water, but tonight she itches to move. Taako has to be close. He has to be.

Over time she grows anxious. She keeps hearing branches shift up above and around the clearing.
bushes rustling in a way that can't be from the wind. Shapes in the dark have her pacing the makeshift campsite before long. She normally wouldn't be this on edge, but she's so worried for Barry. He's her responsibility right now and she needs to show him she can watch his back as much as he watched hers when they were traveling amongst humans.

Peeking in at him sleeping in the tent helps calm her nerves a bit. Even though he seems so fragile like that, so… soft. She still can't quite believe he'd go as far as this just to help her find Taako. The only person who's ever been there for her like that was… well… Taako.

It's somewhat of a relief when faint, gray light filters through the branches. As the light grows bird song starts up, bright and cheery. It's deceptive of the true dangers lying at the heart of the forest.

Dawn has come and gone by the time Barry stirs. The light this far beneath the canopy is diffuse and grey, but his watch says that Lup let him sleep twelve hours. He really needed it. While his body is still heavy with fatigue and his old wounds itch distractingly, he feels almost at peace with the morning, anxiety sloughed away.

Scratching at his stubble, he washes out his tacky mouth and chews a sprig of mint. He normally wouldn't bother shaving when he's camping like this. Lup's going to see him, though, so he's sorely tempted. Either way, breakfast should come first.

He drags himself and his bags out of the tent to sit with Lup while he munches on granola and crackers and reviews the map. The details are sparse, with no topography or landmarks, but he can at least roughly tell how far they are from either border. The pines occupy a swathe of no-man's land, unclaimed by either human nation. He marks their path in pencil, checking against the compass. They can't afford to get lost. Sure, Lup can turn into a bird and fly above the canopy, but that won't do them any good if all she sees is an ocean of pine needles. Lup finds herself entertained by watching his shoulder. She doesn't eat this morning; no point in wasting the rations. The ambient magic, flowing thick as molasses around them, is enough to sustain her.

"I used to do this kind of thing when I was a kid," he says. "Never overnight—my mom would've had a heart attack—but me and some of the neighbor kids would try and map the sorry excuse for a forest we had between our farms. Took maybe half an hour to walk from one end to the other, but we uh, we kept telling ourselves that fae were hiding in there."

"Well, we only need to know how to get out from where we left the stuff," she reasons. "I'll be able to find that again easy. Also, if you never found any fae, there either weren't any or they didn't particularly care about you guys. Fae know when someone's in their forest. Especially if it's just a lone fairy occupying a small area."

"Is that why we're slipping under the radar, then? Cuz these woods are huge?" Barry asks, measuring out the distance to the forest's northern border. They're tens of miles away yet. Looks like they traveled a little less than fifteen miles yesterday, between their late start and making camp early. He thinks they could cross the forest end-to-end in another three days, if all goes well. Hopefully they'll run into someone who can help them in half that time. "Anything we can do to let—Luce's friend—uh, K, know we're here?"

Lup stands up and stretches, mouth pulled wide in a yawn that shows off her large teeth. "Depends. Since K's a high fae he might already know? But male high fae are much more limited powers-wise, so it's hard to say. I'm sure someone knows we're here." She glances around at the trees above, paranoia from the night rising up again. "I'm just not sure that someone is the kind of fae we want to run into."

"When you say limited powers-wise, do you mean… political power? Or also, magic?" Barry keeps
his tone as casual as possible, for asking after information that's starkly absent in human literature. All he knows for sure is that courts are ruled by Queens.

“A bit of both, but mostly magic,” Lup says. “Only Queens can make courts like that. Doesn’t mean we should fuck with him though. Any high fae is stronger than your average fairy.”

Barry focuses on changing his bandages; his cheek is on its way to scarring, but the scab seems solid when he prods it. Some of his stitches feel tight around puffy, irritated skin. He's going to have to be very careful to keep them clean. At least his left palm's healed enough that he can use the hand normally, so he ignores the stinging as he flushes the wounds, applies salve, and bandages them back up.

He doesn't feel like he's in danger. He's confident in his abilities and trusts that Lup can keep him safe. She's a far sight scarier than most fae he's had to deal with, between her shapeshifting and fire magic. Besides, they're looking for a guy who might'vve saved Lup's brother, and who sent a telegram to Lucretia about it. They're not really intruders. Just friendly guests, trying to make themselves known.

Their idle conversation peters out quickly, leaving only their crunching steps to ring in the chilled air. Pine trees stretch on all sides like grand columns holding up a vaulted ceiling. Barry finds himself checking his watch every few minutes, surprised each time that the hour hand still hasn't hit noon. The monotony of endless pines and gloomy light makes it feel like they've been walking for so much longer. But he can't bring himself to shatter the silence; he hears his own breathing as if echoed back from the forest, threading into the soft snaps of pine needles underfoot until the sound becomes unnoticeable again.

As they walk, Lup feels her nerves rising. The forest is permeated with magic, but she's sure there's another signature close by. She just can't pinpoint it, or quite tell what it is. It's powerful, but... weirdly contained. And it's definitely tracking them.

After a few minutes of this Lup comes to a stop, letting Barry rebound off her thickly-furred flank. She doesn't move an inch as he stumbles back. A low, deep growl builds in her throat as she scans the trees and foliage. Where is it.

"Something's been following us," she whispers, not looking away from the surrounding vegetation.

Barry's drawn his dagger before he processes her words, spurred by her tone alone to brace himself and put his back to hers. "Do you… think it's friendly?"

Lup turns around, scanning the trunks. "I don't—BARRY!" she screams as a small, inky black creature explodes out of a nearby bush. She doesn't have a moment to process what it is before it's on Barry's chest, claws digging in and skull face open-jawed with aggression. It screeches a high, piercing sound, and lunges for Barry's neck.

Its jaws are met by his dagger. He forces the blade up between them and feels no resistance where the roof of its mouth should be. Metal clicks against bone and skates off with a grinding shriek. Its snout is shaped like a pincer, sharp teeth nicking his hand as he forces its bare skull away.

He hooks his fingers into its empty eye sockets and yanks up. The thing wails and struggles, claws scrabbling harmlessly across his jacket. He slides his dagger into the corner of its jaw and pulls. He's not sure if it's the iron or the force that does it, but the jaw comes loose and tilts out of the skull. The creature crumples. He shoves its limp form off and pins it down in a flurry of pine needles, dagger held at the ready and knees damp from the moss. His hand's not even bleeding.
After a moment of pause, the creature squirms and screams. Tendrils of the thick darkness making up the body twine through and around Barry's fingers before crawling across the ground to latch onto its displaced jaw. The inky blackness coalesces into a dense body, locking the jaw back in place as the creature writhes.

Then it sinks into the ground, body spreading out into a pool of black ichor studded by a macabre selection of tiny, scattered bones. It reforms outside of Barry's grip and bounds off into the trees like a rabbit.

"Shit, it heard my name!" Barry curses, already bolting after. They have precious few seconds before it vanishes into the murky gloom. He throws himself forward, jumping over roots and fallen branches.

"Fuck," Lup growls, bolting after Barry in turn. That was her fault. She let that slip. She frankly isn't sure this thing can charm but they are not taking any chances.

She overtakes Barry quickly, paws thudding heavily on the soft pine and tossing needles up behind her. Grizzlies are ridiculously fast. He falls ten, twenty, thirty paces behind Lup, her brown fur blurring as she recedes into the trees.

It’s hard to keep his balance on uneven ground buried under needles and twigs. One misstep could send him sprawling onto his own dagger. A risk he'll have to take; the thing that assaulted him is obviously a fae's familiar, an animated servant-construct of bone and magic. It may very well be able to carry his name back to its master.

So he runs. The thunder of his boots against the forest floor and his pulse rushing in his ears carry him for a small eternity before he notices that something's changed.

Lup catches up with the rabbit-skull monster. Without breaking stride, she brings her paw down on the creature's skull, shattering it with little effort. It gives a final shriek of defiance before dissipating, leaving behind only a small pile of bones. Lup makes out pieces of a spine, some toes, a few ribs. Creepy.

She lets out a breath knowing that it's over. It's not great that she said Barry's name in a fae forest, but it's fine. It's done.

Barry skids to a stop in a spray of pine needles, eyes fixed on her, and as they patter to the ground he hears it: his name.

It comes again. He strains his ears and scans the trees. He opens his mouth to call for Lup. But his name resounds, in a susurrus of indistinct voices that hook behind his eyes and yank.

Thoughts burst apart and scatter; he grips the dagger and scans blindly for his attacker. In the span of a breath, he forgets the source of the noise. The voices are all around him, whispers as pervasive as wind rushing through the forest, and for a moment he thinks that's what he hears.

His hawthorn wand heats at his belt, protective magic unharnessed. He thinks that's what hurts, after a shadow drips out of the canopy and descends on him. Its horns and claws resolve from branches, its skull clacks and jaw unhinges. It stands a head taller than Lup, thin limbs like corded shadow and mouth crowded with thick, sharp teeth.

Barry only manages to stab it once. Clawed hands close around him, slicing through his jacket as he's lifted from his feet. It closes its jaws around his side and tears. He doesn't manage to scream.

Lup's ears swivel to catch the sickening crunching sound. Instantly, she knows something is
seriously, seriously wrong. She turns on her heel and a scream is caught in her throat at the sight of Barry's limp body dangling from the jaws of a beast five times the size of the one she just killed. Its inky body turns towards her, shifting and pulsing unnaturally as it drops to all fours.

Lup doesn't hesitate a moment longer to charge, roar bellowing in her throat. She fucked up. She had one job and she failed. She can't tell if Barry's alive or not and it drives her to a pinpoint focus on the creature.

It spits a horrible, gurgling laugh before shaking its head and tossing Barry aside like a sack of potatoes. His shoulder impacts the ground hard. He catches himself in a roll, muscles seizing. Nauseating pain shoots from his burning side to his gut. A gasp forces its way out of his lungs.

Lup can only spare him a glance before she rears up to slam her weight down on the creature. It slips from under her paws with ease, just as the first creature melted from Barry’s grasp. It reforms to Lup's right, putting itself between her and Barry, and begins to pace. At each turn it seems to almost fold into itself, reshaping to face the other way.

"A changeling defending a human," it hisses, words slurring and dripping together, jaw not even moving. "How... novel."

Lup matches its stride, anxiously shifting forms at each turn. Wolf, great dane, bear again, bobcat, puma. Barry’s motionless on the ground, gaze unfocused, blood rapidly soaking through his torn jacket.

Something lodged violently in his head screams that the creature looming in front of him is the most important thing in existence, and that he needs to pay rapt attention to every word from its bleached skull. He knows it’s fighting. He can’t remember. Something’s defying it. Flickering shapes. Lup.

A fragile thought bubbles tumultuously in his mind: he needs to help. Viscous and tarry, something engulfs that impulse and submerges it before he can envision what he'd do, or even decide who he should help. The creatures burbles another laugh. Lup blocks it out of her ears as she springs again, mountain lion claws extended.

She clashes with the creature, claws digging for purchase in its semi-solid form. It in turn rears up, bringing her with it, and reaches its long, clawed fingers around and into her sides. It pries her off and she yowls her pain as it pins her into the fallen needles. For as much as it slips and shifts, it’s surprisingly heavy on top of her. She struggles to free herself. She attempts to shift and squirm away, but her magic congeals and clogs around the claws in her sides, trapping her in the mountain lion-shape.

Something is cataclysmically wrong. Barry latches onto that, sensations slipping away almost as soon as they register: his blood welling hot and thick, soaking into his clothes, the pine needles prickling against his face. His fingernails dig crescents into his empty palm, fist tightening where the dagger's hilt should be. He realizes his wand is poking into his side and almost draws it, but forgets in the next moment. Helplessly, he presses his hand against his wound, fighting for every shred of awareness.

The creature’s face leans in close to Lup’s, teeth and bone clicking next to her ear. “Do you care for the human, changeling? Has the parasite bonded with its host?” It makes that low gurgling laugh again and snaps at her, just barely avoiding contact with skin and pulling at fur.

It's playing with her. She can just barely see Barry around the beast's crouched form. Deep scarlet is starting to pool and stain the pine nettles around him.
She squirms again, claws lashing out blindly. The beast releases her and curls back, blocking the path towards Barry. She snarls in frustration, changes into a wolf, and the two resume their pacing. They size each other up.

Lup shakes her head to clear its words from her ears. She already knows she's a parasite. She doesn't need it repeating that back at her. What she needs is to get to Barry before he bleeds out with her watching. She just needs an opening. Unfortunately this antlered, wolf-skulled beast moves as quickly as she does, effortlessly matching her desperate pace.

"Come now, Barry." The creature doesn't turn to look at him as it hisses his name, laced poisonously with magic. "You tagged along to further your own agenda, to see that which you could never otherwise. Changeling, you've been fooled. You don't truly care for her, do you?"

He was asked a question. His focus narrows on that: can't he truly care for the changeling? Because he does. He's relieved by how easily that answer springs to his mind.

His lips form around the words, but his voice doesn't come to his throat. He presses harder on his bleeding stomach. It does little good; the wound circles around to his back as well. The torn skin aches under his weight. His fingers slowly uncurl as he realizes his hand is empty, dagger lost.

Lup snarls at the creature's taunting, refusing to otherwise respond. It's lying. She knows it's lying. Barry cares. She—she knows that. To shut it up she lunges again, jaws snapping as she scrabbles at its lanky neck.

Once again, her attacks seem to almost slide through the ichor making up the monster's body, until one claw catches. Her back foot hooks on a solid gash in the beast's skin before it yowls and tosses her off.

Lup rolls when she hits the ground and huffs as she gets to her feet. She eyes the dark gray gash in the thing's chest. It's small, but now that she knows it's there, easy to see. She's not sure what made that wound, but it's an opening she can use.

She takes a brief moment to pull her focus back from the creature, planning her next move. She scans Barry's limp body behind the beast and notices the hand clamped over his stomach. He's still alive. Thank the Fairy Mother. She needs to keep it that way.

She trusts the creature isn't going to attack her directly. It hasn't yet, only retaliated against her assaults, so she breaks eye contact with it to glance around the clearing. She prays whatever did that damage is still lying around somewhere.

She spots the dagger. Iron, one of Barry's. He must've managed to get a hit in. An idea starts to formulate in her head.

While she's distracted, the creature lunges with a sharp snap of its jaws. Lup barely manages to move out of the way. She snarls, batting the air with a paw as it pulls back laughing and turns to curl around Barry's prone form. A clear threat.

She eyes the dagger as she continues to pace, waiting. She doesn't want this thing to predict her move and retaliate against Barry. On her next turn she lunges, changing into something akin to her true form. She grabs the dagger and lands in a roll, brandishing it as a shield just in time to avoid a cautious swipe from the creature.

It doesn't want to touch the iron. The dagger burns in her grip. She grits her teeth against the pain.

"Oooh," the creature taunts. "Found yourself a weapon? Blackening your hands with the iron they
use to hurt us? Wouldn't it be easier to just walk away and leave him? I'd let you go, little changeling. You’re not barred from this land. I have no orders to kill you.”


Lup snarls with her ears pinned back. She runs at the creature, narrowly dodging a swipe from its claws. She shifts her grip on the dagger and brings it up hard through jaw and into skull, mirroring Barry’s earlier strike.

The beast screeches and skids away from Barry. The dagger goes with it, still embedded deep in bone. Lup pulls her burned hands close to her chest to cradle them as the beast writhes and grabs for the dagger. A sizzling sound rises as its ichor body, more magic than flesh, breaks around the iron and drips away from the skull that anchors its form. It turns to glare at Lup through empty eye sockets and dissipates.

Black ichor vaporizes and streams into the air. An empty, antlered wolf skull drops to the forest floor, dagger driven through the bottom.
The Moth Prince

Chapter Summary

Lup does what she can and yells at someone she shouldn't.

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Sorry it's been a bit of a while between updates. Our lives have been very busy lately. We're hoping to publish all of what we call "book one" before the end of summer but no promises! <3 thanks for sticking around. We absolutely adore the feedback we get from this piece

The tar clogging Barry's thoughts turns into a sucking drain. He fixates on the antlered skull, inert in a nest of pine needles.

She killed it.

She killed it—the—the most important person in the world. The thing.

Its wail still rings in Barry's ears, presses against the back of his eyes. He needs to move. He scrambles weakly in the dirt, craning his neck to watch the mist from its dissipating corpse as his side pulses with red-hot pain.

His flailing snaps Lup back to the present. She scrambles to her feet, barely processing the pine needles and dirt scraping her raw palms, and over to Barry.

"No, no, no," she soothes, gently holding his hands still. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay." Blood bubbles from his abdomen, dark and thick and red. She drops his hands to desperately put pressure on his side, trying to stifle the bleeding.

This is bad. This is really, really bad. How much blood can a human lose before they die? How much has he lost already? Lup looks around frantically, trying to think of a plan.

There's no way she'll be able to get him back to Port Wick in time. That's a nonstarter. This is her fault. This is all her fault.

"Barry?" She reaches a bloody hand up to gently turn his face towards hers. Hot tears well up in her eyes as she stares into his blank, charmed expression. She said his name in a fae forest. This is entirely on her.

"Barry I need you to tell me what you need," she pleads. "What can I do?" Please, let what she's saying get through the charm. She needs his help for this.

The recognition that flickers in his eyes quickly dims. With the creature dead, the strings between them are cut. But they're still anchored, even with no one left to manipulate them. They flail and lash out to sever the delicate links between his thoughts. She knows how this works. She can tell
Barry’s trying to focus on her words. For all the good that does.

"Barry, please," Lup begs, leaving trails of his blood as she rubs her thumb over his face. "Keep fighting it. It's Lup. What do you need?"

She can’t just break another fae's charm. Only queens have that kind of power. The creature had to be a sentinel for one of the queens of this court system. Which means that, whoever She is, she’s the ultimate master of the charm. It would be child’s play for her to take the reins and use them however she saw fit.

There’s only one thing Lup can think of that might help. Bile churns in her stomach. She hates the idea of doing anything to him without his permission.

He can't tell her, is the thing. He can barely remember to keep pressure on his side. Without the blood welling through his fingers, he would quickly forget the wound was there.

He needs—he needs the bleeding to stop. He focuses on moving his tongue to form the words, but they slip away. His breath comes shallow and hard. His fingertips and toes tingle like they’ve been stung. It's almost funny, how much more obnoxious that is than the pain.

Lup’s other hand goes to his face and she drops her forehead to his. There’s little left that she can do. It's awful and wrong, but she needs him to be able to focus on her, not whatever got left behind of that creature. She can’t erase its influence—but she can sweep it aside.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I have to, Barry."

She laces his name with magic formed as tethers, as lifelines, something for him to latch onto. She coils as much power around the creature’s charm as she can bring to bear, repeating his name like a chant to layer it on. "Please Barry. Come on, Barry. Barry, I'm so fucking sorry. Talk to me, Barry." Her words slip into whispers and mumbles. She needs this to work. She needs to be able to talk to him. Comfort him, at least.

She can't break the charm, but maybe she can overpower it.

His face contorts against hers.

He hates the grief he's feeling for the creature's death. The part of him able to think that surfaces in a blind panic, pulled by magic not his own. When did Lup abandon her bear shape? She's got hands to hold, hands on his face. He grabs for one, fumbling and tacky with blood. "S'not your fault," he says thickly, unsure of what she's sorry for.

Lup takes his hand and rubs her thumb anxiously over his knuckles. It is her fault, but she's not going to argue with someone… charmed to heed her. She's going to have to apologize so damn much after this. She prays there is an after.

"Barry, you need to keep pressure on your side.” She moves his hand there, coaxing. At least she knows that much.

"Right," he says mechanically. "Right." This time he clamps down on the bleeding with willful force. His skin feels puffy and sore. He's not—he's still missing something. Probably several somethings. His emotions feel frayed and exhausted, having run the course from fear to grief to all-consuming pain.

Lup winces at the way he presses down without a thought of his own. It’ll be efficient at least. "What can I do for you? Stitches? Uh." She racks her brain for anything that might help. "Do you
need magic for this? What can I do?"

"Stitches—the, it needs disinfected first, and—there's... Shit," he trails off. He has his first aid kit. This is well beyond first aid. "I don't think there's anything you can do."

"Okay. Okay. Okayokayokayokay. " Lup peers down at the wound. She can't really see much under his shirt, behind his hands. There’s a smell tainting the fresh blood that just can’t be good. She doesn't know what she's working with here. Maybe... maybe it's not so bad? The dark blood still welling around Barry’s fingers tells her otherwise.

"I'm gonna take your bags off, Barry," she says, already starting to move. She's doing her best not to jostle him, but it's not easy. "And then we need to get your shirt too. Will—um. Will it help if you can see the wound?"

"Yeah, that'll help," he agrees, watching her blankly. It won’t.

She reaches around in one of the bags, glad he removed most of the iron. It’s like dipping her hands into a hot sink rather than scalding them with steam. She finds an extra shirt first, that's good. She can use that. Finally, she finds one of his many knives and gets to work cutting fabric away from his wounds.

Barry impassively watches her slice his old favorite jacket open. He locks his gaze on the knife and forces himself to ignore the area behind her where the skull lies. He refuses to cry. It doesn't deserve his grief, that emotion isn’t him. What's important is that Lup's upset.

He can't manage anger, he can barely manage stubbornness, but he can latch onto Lup and follow the motion of her hands and the tone of her voice. Her words are a scaffold for his molasses-thick thoughts to congeal around.

She tosses the knife away as soon as she can, not taking a moment to think about the worsening burns on her palms. Her own wounds are the least of her concerns.

Barry recoils from the smell before he realizes it's him. From Lup’s face, he can tell she expected it to be bad. Wounds don't smell like that. Or they shouldn't. He tries to sit up and look, but pain strikes like lightning and he crumples, spine arching.

Lup bites her lip when she glimpses the deep mottled color, darker tissue than blood peeking through broken skin. "Don't move so much, Barry," she commands. She hates ordering him around like this, knowing he can't disobey, but it's for his own good. She can't even imagine what he’s thinking under two heavy charms. Without her, he might let himself bleed out.

She forces herself to examine the ragged, deep tears cut into his side by the creature’s teeth. It’s even worse than she thought. There's more than one puncture. Torn skin besides: furrows cutting through where the creature snapped its jaws. Beyond that, there's too much blood to tell how bad the injuries are. But she thinks she sees some internal tissue poking up that’s deeply worrying. Rather than forcing Barry to move, she grabs the spare shirt and presses it into the bubbling punctures.

"Hold that there, Barry," she says, nudging his hands back in place. "I'm gonna... gonna see what I can do." Barry doesn't acknowledge her order, but he follows it without hesitation.

The first aid kit has relatively fresh yarrow leaves from Indrid's dispensary, but he's not sure stopping the bleeding will make a difference. He doesn't even remember to mention them. Instead, prone, he tries to follow Lup’s gaze to the antlered skull. She can still faintly sense the bond tying
him to it, and that just shouldn't be a thing. It should be a ragged thread at this point. But the anchor she thought was cut hasn't eroded. Which means someone is on the other side right now, feeding power into it. The fae who created that creature.

Lup hesitates to move away Barry, but she has to get up and grab the skull. She snags it by an antler and rushes back. They aren't getting out of each other's sight now. She's not letting that happen.

Barry struggles and flips onto his good side. Lup huffs a breath and allows it. Her order for him to not move 'much' went a long way towards substituting for his own lack of restraint. A deep, throbbing pain is sinking into his gut. He thinks he might've thrown up, if he'd eaten more than granola for breakfast.

Lup stares at the skull in her hands. There's definitely still a faint magical signature there. Someone very strong made this thing, and with a lot of care. Maybe she can use it.

"Hey!" she yells, feeling a little silly talking to a bone. "If whoever's on the other line can hear me, get your fucking butt over here. You fucking did this and I swear to the Fairy Mother that if you don't fix it, I'm going to personally burn this forest down. How much damage do you think I can do before you stop me?" She glares into the empty sockets, taking a little of her frustration and anger and grief out on something that might not even be able to hear her.

When Lup doesn't get an immediate response, her hands heat, burning the blood coating them and adding a second awful smell to the air. The antler starts to darken around her hand. She curls the other into a fiery fist.

Barry's forced to watch the skull char in her grip. Looking away isn't an option. He's bearing witness, beset by grief layered heavily over the surety that he shouldn't be feeling this way. He's gone through this before. He's had the threads of someone else's magic stuck and rotting in his head. Given time, he would recover.

Not that it matters. Very little matters anymore. He wants to close his eyes and sleep.

"You think I'm bluffing?" Lup extends the fist at her side and snaps her hand open to set a nearby tree on fire. The healthy bark smokes and resists catching, but Lup forces heat in until it sparks and bursts, steam escaping through widening cracks. She has complete control, of course. She's an expert at burning trees in the blighted forest that is her home, carefully excising old fae portals without igniting a wildfire. But no one else needs to know that. They should fear the consequences of making her wait.

Barry's eyes water. The image of the skull blurs. He forces his gaze to the burning tree and finally remembers to breathe. He's so, so sorry that he failed to see Lup to the end. She has every right to be furious at how unfair this all is. The pyre she builds in her rage enralls him. Its warmth soaks into his face and he realizes that the ground's been sapping away the heat from his puddled blood.

Orange shines in Lup's hair and casts a radiance to her skin, highlighting the planes of her face and the sharpness of her eyes. She's just as gorgeous now as the first time he saw her. He notices her hands are red. His brow furrows as he makes sense of that. When was she injured? A dozen thready heartbeats and ragged breaths race by before he remembers the knife. She burnt herself for him and it came to nothing. She's going to be stuck out here, alone and injured.

The first sob that bubbles from his throat catches him by surprise. Dry and harsh, a second comes. The tar clogging his thoughts swirls and drains away, the edifice left behind crumbling. The third sob comes wet and he hates it, because the tears feel as cold as ice and blur his vision until he can't
see Lup any longer.

He doesn't see the spikes of butter-yellow mushrooms blooming in crescents opposite the fire. Arcs trace together, connecting in a circle as they spring out of the lichen, shoving pine needles aside. Their heads crinkle and balloon into upturned, delicate frills of spongy tissue. They're shaped like umbrellas turned inside out, or like sunflowers. Their faces turn inwards and fixate on the circle's center.

A tearing noise cuts through the fire's crackle. The mushrooms flash a viscous gold and illuminate a cut-out of a figure that sucks in the light as it coalesces. Light glints off leather shoes and faceted eyes. Texture and definition wick up his form, outlining thick, short antennae and draping cords of dark hair. Dusky wings edged in cream snap out from his back and flair the second his presence is solid enough for his shoes to settle against the forest floor.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he bites out, stomping towards Lup. The fury on his face falls to shock the second he meets her gaze.

Lup stares down this high fae who thinks he can try to kill Barry and get away with it. Every instinct screams at her as she glares, palm still outstretched to control the blaze. She bares sharp teeth and her hair flares in a clear display of aggression. So much for kindly waltzing in.

"Your monster did this," she snarls, before throwing the skull at the other fae and gesturing to Barry. "Fix. It." She's barely even seeing him, so consumed by anger and anxiety. It’s absolute madness to challenge a high fae in his forest, with a court at his back. It's taking all she has not to back down from him like every fiber of her is screaming at her to do.

He rolls his eyes at her anger. "Okay, first off, I don't know how much more obvious we could make the 'no-humans' policy. Are centuries of monster attacks not enough of a deterrent anymore? Do we need signage?" But he does lean to get a look at Barry, taking in the blood and meeting his confused expression with a grimace. He resettles his wings with a ruffle and turns back to assess Lup. "Second off: it's rich that you're demanding a favor, but I suppose I could've expected that. Third: what the fuck do you think I can do for him, anyway?"

Lup feels herself deflate at the last point. She doesn't know, but there has to be something. There has to be. She refuses to face a world where Barry dies here. It's not going to happen.

"I don't—" She backs down, giving instinct an inch and feeling it take a mile, driving her to look at the ground, submissive. Terrified, exhausted. The heat's gone from her gaze and she drags her feet over to Barry. As she kneels down to put a hand on his, still at work stifling the blood flow, she mutters, "I can't just watch him die. I'll find a way to repay the favor. Please."

The fire behind her dies, leaving a charred husk in its wake. The tree might survive, even. It was healthy and strong before she burned it.

"I suppose it would be egregious of me to take that literally," the high fae says, surveying the scorched tree. "You don't think your debt to us is great enough already? You destroyed two of the Queen's Thorns, and now you want to make your pet human my problem too? Our largesse has its limits. Rather like a brick wall, in fact, one that you're speeding towards. You should bury him and we'll call the Thorns paid. I'll even ignore the tree."

That red-hot anger bubbles up again and Lup pops to her feet. "He is not a pet," she hisses, flinching under the high fae's gaze. "He's my friend. The only reason he's even here is because he's been nice enough to help me. It wasn't his fault; only mine."
The high fae sighs hard and folds his lower set of arms, resting his elbows on top of them. "Fine. Fine! This may as well happen. I think you're going to end up disappointed by what's actually in my power to do for your friend. But I can at least offer you hospitality while we work out exactly how much trouble you're in. Can you lift him?"

Lup swallows hard. That's the best she's going to get right now. She'll take it. "Yeah. I— Probably."

She bends down and runs her hand through Barry's hair a few times. She notices he's been crying and curses herself for getting so distracted by her anger that she wasn't there for him. "This is gonna hurt, but we're gonna get you help, okay. It's gonna be fine. Hold on for me." It's not an order, more a prayer than anything.

She tucks her elbows under Barry's knees and shoulders, using her forearms to better support his weight. She tries not to jostle him and lets him adjust his arms as needed to keep the shirt pressed to the wounds. As she tucks him close to her chest she notices the blood leaking from the wounds along his lower back. Damn it.

He's obviously in a lot of pain. His breath's a rapid whistle and his face breaks into a cold sweat. "Ow," he comments, curling up. He can hold it together. Lup said he's getting help. Every part of him wants to believe her.

The high fae turns back to the burnt tree. He thrusts his hands out decisively, fanning all twenty fingers. Pale yellow stalks dance up from the forest floor with his gestures. They file across the mossy ground and to the tree, and light blooms once more; a buttery luminescence like gentle daylight instead of smoky, flickering fire. His fingers shake. Under the steady light, his complexion seems waxy. Flyaway curls poke up from his corded hair. He glares at the tree as he works, the muscles anchoring his wings twitching in exertion.

The mushrooms sink into the charred tree and burrow threads along the grooves of its bark. They grow in wavy tiers, frills blooming in complex patterns, ascending to a point just above his head. Then they swell and balloon into the outline of a seal, enclosing an oblong expanse of bark. The craggy texture shimmers and fades. A smooth plane of polished, healthy, dark wood reveals itself underneath. The high fae reaches a hand into the tree and raps sharply on its surface. He grabs a carved handle and slides the door aside; the sounds are muffled and slick, the surface of the portal rippling where his wrist breaks through. He pulls his hand back and shakes it out.

"You two first," he says, turning back to Lup. "I'll gather up your things; I imagine you'd be well-served by medical supplies. And if you didn't think to bring any for your treacherous, ill-fated romp, then you've only yourselves to blame."

Lup swallows her pride at the comment on what she and Barry were doing here. It's not the time to poke the bear that's only barely willing to help. She holds Barry close as she slips through the doorway.

Inside is a room about the size of her house. The walls are formed from tightly woven branches, leaves budding and growing at random intervals. Blue crystals embedded in the weave cast a bright glow over the space, creating a sense of the ethereal. Furniture rises from the moss-covered branches making up the floor: a desk, a moss-laden bed, a dresser, a wardrobe, a small table. Various knicknacks of both fae and human origin line the shelves. A little trickle of water flows down a far wall and into a stone pool before disappearing beneath the floor of the room. It's a perfect bedroom, pristine aside from its sole inhabitant.

Another fae stands at the dresser, fiddling with a golden comb. His ears prick up—well, one does,
the other droops with the weight of heavy bandages— and he turns smugly, arms crossed, to say, "So what was so important you... had to..."

Taako's arms drop to his sides and he stares open-mouthed at Lup.
Chapter Summary

Lup and Taako catch up and talk about how to move forward.

Chapter Notes

What? Two updates in one week? Who are we? Ha. We're getting to the end of part one of this thing so we're real excited. Everyone's reaction to the last chapter was so incredible (don't think we didn't notice people commenting who haven't in the past and we love you all). Thank you so much for reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Half of Taako’s face is tightly bandaged, some of his hair shorn away to clear space. His one uncovered eye widens as he takes in what must truly be a strange sight; Lup, covered in blood and carrying a wounded human in her arms. She'd be surprised too.

As it stands, her emotions kick even further into overdrive than they were before. She's left fighting over the two different sides of herself. On the one hand... Taako, the sole reason of this whole mess, is here, alive and more-or-less well. On the other hand, Barry is dying in her arms as she stands there. Instead of doing anything, she just starts to cry: real, thick, proper tears. She's not sure if they're happy or sad or just so, so overwhelmed, but she stands just inside the doorway and cries.

"Oh, oh shit," Taako says. He dashes to her side, hovering fretfully as he takes in Barry's hands clenched over his stomach and the steady dribble of blood pattering to the floor despite that. "Lu—Lulu, what happened? Shit, shit— C'mon, let's put him—somewhere, fuck, who even is this thug?"

Lup takes a second to stop openly sobbing, sniffling all the way. She uses the time to carefully deposit Barry on the bed. The moss at his side quickly starts sopping up the blood, turning a deep green-red. Lup figures that's probably a good thing. Maybe it'll help stifle the wounds on his back.

With Barry handled as best she can for the moment, Lup turns and pulls Taako into a tight hug. She presses her face into his neck and takes a couple hiccupsy breaths before saying, "That— hic — that's B-Barry." There's no reason for caution at this point. He's already well charmed out of his mind. And she'd trust Taako with anything.

"He—he's been—" She breaks into another sob and pulls Taako closer, not caring in the least about the blood she's getting on him. She swallows hard and continues, "He's been helping me find you. H-he got attacked by a-a—"

"One of the Queen's Thorns, her personal guard," offers the high fae, as he steps inside and closes the door behind him. The portal makes a muffled, fizzling noise as it dissipates. "And now I'm supposed to deal with this too, I suppose." He maneuvers around the two of them and deposits Barry's things by the bed, eyeing the bloody mess that's being made with a grimace.
"Shitty fuckin' guards," Taako says, winding one arm tightly around Lup's back and using the other to guide her to sob into the collar of his dressing gown. "Yeah, homeskillet, you better do something about this! You know—"

"I know," he snaps, antennae vibrating in frustration. Barry shifts against the moss and closes his eyes. He's too tired to watch their exchange, but at least this high fae is more expressive than Lucretia. It's easier to read the emotion behind his words. "I know, they wouldn't be here if I hadn't, quote, 'kidnapped you', end quote. So I'm going to let him bleed all over my bed and be appropriately apologetic about it, and you can at least please be happy that your sister's here, and, oh, that you didn't get executed by humans after they assaulted you."

"It was one guy, and he's crispy-fried," Taako says dismissively, though his eyes glint and the skin visible just around the edges of his bandage purples. "Where'd Barry get got? I'm thinking you gotta stop that bleeding, pronto."

Lup pulls away, but refuses to fully break contact; she reaches to grab one of Taako's hands. "His gut, I think. Barry, babe, I need you to move the shirt for a second, okay? We need to see the wounds."

Barry opens his eyes to stare blankly back at Lup. Pulling up his shirt is easy—his hands hurt from applying pressure for so long—so he does that right away. His abdomen is smeared with bright red blood and smells of fetid iron. The puncture wounds barely stand out: two in his front, fang marks spaced across skin torn by shorter teeth, and shallower ones in his back. Dark wet flesh gleams in the deepest wounds.

Lup grabs the bags and starts aimlessly looking through them. "Do you have anything to stop the bleeding?" Ordering him around still leaves a sour taste in her mouth, but it's the lesser evil.

The high fae sighs and picks the comb up from where Taako dropped it. "I'm Kravitz, by the way. I suppose you must be Lup."

Lup doesn't look away from Barry; she only spares Kravitz a curt nod. It takes Barry several slow seconds to turn her question over, niggling compulsion prompting him to tell her what he thinks she wants to hear. "Bandages, with pressure. And there's fresh yarrow in my kit. Long—sort of spindly? Soft branches, with lots of tiny fern-like leaves. The oil constricts blood vessels."

While it's true he has things for stopping bleeding, none of them are enough for his injuries. That's not what she asked, though, and some part of him doesn't want to break the news. He doesn't want her upset.

"Lulu dear, what the fuck," Taako says, narrowing his one visible eye and assessing Barry's glazed look. "Did you charm him? I mean, okay, sure, if that's how we're rolling now, but I was only gone for one week."

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Lup doesn't look up at Taako, just keeps searching through the bags. "It was more than a week and I fucking had to, okay? That thing. The—the Thorn charmed him first, and overriding it was the best I could do to get him to talk to me." She finds the yarrow and shoves it at Taako. "Barry, I need you to help Taako through how to use this stuff, alright?"

Barry's gaze focuses for just a split second. "Yes," he says, and then falls quiet.

With her heart thundering in her chest, Lup turns to Kravitz. "You're a high fae of this court," she says, staring him down. "Can you break the Thorn's charm?"
"Only the Queen can break her subject's charms," Kravitz says, placing the comb back on the dresser. He scrutinizes Barry’s wounds. "That doesn't look good. Probably punctured something internal there. I'm not sure you're going to accomplish much besides getting blood on everything."

Lup frowns in defiance before turning back to Barry. "Barry, tell me honestly, how bad is this," she says, not entirely convinced she wants to know the answer. "It— Look, it looks bad, but I don't know. I need you to do a bit of self-assessment here."

Barry winces. If he's being honest—and he has to be, the compulsion isn't worth fighting. It's Lup. He trusts her.

He can tell he's as safe as she could make him. He can tell it's not enough. "It—it's bad." The pain's a hot, constant lance in his side. His abdominal muscles scream if he so much as tries to twitch them. The punctures are too low to have hit his liver or spleen—and he would've bled out already, had they—but it's not like he needs the rest of his guts any less. "Perforated viscus, as far as I can tell."

Infection's probably already set in. He's lucky the wound's not sucking air. At this point, all he wants is for the pain to ebb enough to let him sleep.

Lup can see Taako step back at the ultimatum. "Lu," he says quietly. He's trying to tread lightly, but every word is like another stab to the gut. "The only way this is getting fixed is healing magic and this forest doesn't have a spring court."

He's giving up. No. No. She refuses to just... Just sit back and watch Barry die. Not after all that, not after what he's done for her. She won't.

Lup turns on Kravitz. "I want an audience with the Queen. If anyone can fix this, it's her."

Kravitz splutters for a moment before saying, "You—you can't just. You can't just ask the Queen to help heal your human friend. That's not how that works."

"Then how does it work, cause like hell am I sitting back while that man dies in front of me!" She just needs more time—time to get Barry to a healer, time to keep him from bleeding out, time to fix this—but time's in short supply right now. She's willing to pay for a miracle to change that, whatever the cost.

"You're doing everything you can," Kravitz replies, almost soothingly. "The payment for her personal intervention—well, I really am sorry, but I can't imagine you'd have anything to offer worth her while. You both aren't even supposed to be here. Taako's not supposed to be here either; she's cross with me right now, and understandably so."

Kravitz approaches his bed and leans over Barry, antenna twitching at the ruined moss. Taako rolls his eyes at him. "I'm not even sure what she could do. As Taako said, no court in our system has expertise in healing magic. We should focus on stopping the bleeding. Maybe he'll pull through."

"Then help me flip this guy over," Taako demands, elbowing Kravitz. Together they shove at Barry and make him roll over onto his good side. There are little pocked, browned patches of dead moss under the bloody indentation from his torso, where the iron lining the jacket was pressed down.

"This is the ugliest fucking jacket I've ever seen," Taako says, tearing the rips Lup sliced wider to ruck it up. "Yuck, there's iron in here too. You better throw this out, kemosabe."

"Jacket's dead," Barry listlessly agrees. His wounds have barely clotted, but the bleeding's at least
somewhat slowed. Taako winces and prods to find the outlines of broken skin.

"Here, let me," Kravitz says, sounding somewhat resigned to the mess this will leave. He darts over to the washbasin in the corner, the stone bowl inset into the wall and fed by the steady trickle of water from a source within the tree. He hefts it off the hollow-stem drain and lugs it to the bed, trickling water left to drip into the empty recess and leak onto the floor behind him. He makes to tip the basin over Barry, but Taako catches its rim with one hand and shoves it back into his chest. "Hey, c'mon, this is heavy."

"And too fucking cold, slow your roll," Taako commands. He grabs the blood-soaked spare shirt from Barry and dunks it in the basin, then sets to wiping at his stomach.

They get their first good look at the wound. Red swirls in the wash basin and leaks through Kravitz's fingers. The flesh along the rim of the deepest punctures isn't a uniform, healthy pink. It's whitish and yellow in patches, darker at the bottom, and hot to the touch. Blood oozes steadily into the holes. "That looks... very bad," Kravitz observes.

Lup's ears flatten against her head. Some of those, the canine marks especially, go way too deep. Even she can see that. Even as dark red blood oozes forth, quickly obscuring the bite. She's not sure a fae could survive a wound like that for long, much less a human. She swallows hard and fixes Kravitz with a teary stare. "I would offer anything I have. I don't care. I... I don't. I can't lose him."

"I don't know—" Kravitz starts.

Taako interrupts him. "Lu, this isn't some run-of-the-mill deal with another fae or something. This is a bargain with a fuckin' Queen."

"You think I don't get that, Taako?" She glances down at Barry and starts lightly running her fingers through his hair before looking back up. There's steel in her gaze. She's not backing down from this. Barry saved her life and she intends to return the favor, no matter what it takes. But it's not just that. Barry's one of the only humans Lup's ever met that knows what she is and still gives a damn, still treats her like a person. He's nice and generous and brave and she's not sure what she'll do if he dies here, on her watch, because she made a stupid mistake.

Taako stares her down for a moment longer before his shoulders slouch. He's always had her back. She wins. He turns to Kravitz. "Just try and get her an audience?"

"Taako, I don't—" Kravitz starts to argue.

"Please," Taako interrupts again. "I don't know what this thug did to earn her trust. Last I saw her, she didn't even like humans, but give her a chance? Please?"

Kravitz caves. "Alright. Fine. I-I'll. He sighs. "I'll try. No promises. My Queen's still irritated with me, remember." He walks towards the door and opens it to reveal, instead of the forest, a hallway of woven branches, more glowing intertwined crystals lighting the path. Kravitz gives one more glance back, rustles his wings, and says, "Try not to make a mess of the place," before disappearing out the doorway.

Taako snorts. The second Kravitz is gone, he sweeps over to the desk and plucks a delicately-embroidered robe hanging from the chair. The fabric's a rich black and hopefully won't show stains, because Taako sticks it under the flowing water and then slaps it down over Barry's stomach, ignoring his mumbled protest.
"Krav really is gonna try," Taako says, quietly. "Mama Bird's grumpy, but she seemed to appreciate the ol' Taako charm." He shoots Lup a wobbly, careful grin. Then he seizes the yarrow leaves and starts rubbing them against each other to release their oil.

Lup's ears perk up at that. "You met the Queen?" She asks. That's an interesting honor for an outsider. "You weren't on trial or anything, were you?" Anxiety spikes again and she selfishly wishes she could just have one day without worrying about the life of someone she loves. She helps by handing more yarrow over as needed and sponging excess blood away from Barry’s wounds. Everything is so red.

"Hell no! No, she just sent— Hold still," Taako barks, tugging on Barry's belt loop to stop him from rolling onto his back. Taako presses the yarrow directly onto his open wounds, wrinkling his nose. "M'dude, you are leaking out your side and the best we can do for you is like, a bunch of leaves, so here's a thought: maybe don't wriggle around?"

"Hurts, though," Barry says, eyes screwed shut.

"Yeah, sure does." Taako's nose is wrinkled with distaste and he's getting blood under his nails, but he works at the wounds without flinching. "I was not on trial. She's very clear on the fact that I, Taako, had no part in Krav's decision to drag me into the spook zone here. No, he's like, her kid or something, so she popped in as a fake-bird-thing to say hi at like fuck o'clock last night, scared the piss out of me, asked a couple Q's, and then laughed and fuckin' vanished."

Taako sluices rubbing alcohol onto a gauze pad and swipes at Barry's wounds. The skin looks even puffier and redder when he finishes, but at least the alcohol smell cuts through some of the fetid, bloody reek. While he layers bandages across Barry’s side, Lup take to wiping the blood off his face.

Fairy Mother, he's a mess. Guilt curls tight in her stomach looking at him. He's so out of it and also probably dying and that's just as much her fault as the Thorn's. She hopes Kravitz can get them the audience.

It takes her a moment to realize she's just been staring at Barry instead of having an actual conversation with her brother. "Why'd the Queen wait so long to drop in? You've been here a while now."

Taako shrugs one shoulder and hands her the stolen robe he's been using to mop blood. "Lu, you know I haven't been kicking it here, right? I've been chewing Krav's ear off to get back home. Ch'boy's not above tying the bedsheets together and going out the window. But I haven't been, you know, awake, per se—I was running the worst fever of my life, and they've got some real kickin' drugs here. For that first—week? Fuck—I would've missed Queenie visiting if she came through in a conga line. I hope she fuckin' wasn't—I'm not, I don't want to be seen, you know?" He gestures to his face, bandages running from the bridge of his nose to his left ear. The skin peeking from the edges of the bandages looks mottled.

Lup feels something seize up in her for what must be the hundredth time today. With Barry in danger, she didn't even stop to think about what might be under the bandages Taako's wearing, about what he's been through. She swallows hard. "What—uh. How—" She stutters, trying to find the right words. There is just no conceivable way to put this delicately, is there. "Are you okay? I've been worried about you."

It's not the most elegant or impactful way to ask 'how bad were you hurt', 'is it going to scar', 'what do you need from me', or any other number of questions she's been obsessing over the last few weeks, but she knows it's enough. She resists the urge to hold his face and brush the damaged skin
Taako turns away. "I'm fine," he says, in the exact same tone he uses every time he doesn't want to talk about his pain. He's skirting awfully close to the edge of a lie. Before she can call him out, he amends; "I mean I'll be fine. It's too late to roll the clock back and get a real healer, you get me? Not that we know any of those." He cocks a hollow smirk. His distrust of Merle's effectiveness is a long-running joke between them. "But, uh—I didn't mean to get us both on a first-name basis with Krav. At least he's being a gentleman about it. Kravitz is his real name, too. Tell me how you picked up Barry and got here this fast. I was like, this close to doing the bedsheets thing."

Lup narrows her eyes. He's babbling, just like he always does when he's hurt or scared or sick. He's also very blatantly changing the topic. She won't press him on it. Not now, at least. If he wants to dodge her, let him. There's too much else going on. She makes a note to not let the topic drop entirely.

"He was looking into the, uh. The Glamour Springs thing... You." She shakes her head to get back on track. "Point is, we were both looking for you, albeit for different reasons at first, so it worked out. I wouldn't be here without him. They know you didn't do it, by the way. Hunters found a money trail for Sazed buying arsenic. Course, not all hunters are as willing to forgive as Barry so... Yeah."

Of course, all that happened before Lup started to really, actually care for Barry. Before he became a friend, someone she could rely on. Another pang of guilt that his trust in her led him here.

"That shitbag gave my audience arsenic?" Taako shrills, voice breaking. "I—I knew it. I—I fuckin' knew it wasn't my cooking."

He doesn't sound like he knew it. He sounds like he's about to cry. He busies himself by wiping his bloody hands on the canvas of Barry's bag and dumping its contents out on the floor. "Well, nice one, getting a hunter in your corner—don't let him sleep, bee-tee-dubs, he might not wake up. Or is that for brain damage? Shit, this sucks." He straightens up with the first aid kit in hand and dumps it out on the bed next to Barry's head. Barry opens his eyes enough to squint. Taako snaps fingers in front of his face. "Hey, Barold, if you pull through? You're not arresting me. But thanks, for escorting my sister all the way out here."

"Y'r welcome," he mumbles. "Just so you know...your uh, the audience..."

"They what?" Taako leans in. Barry's gone pale, breathing heavily. Impatient, he turns to Lup. "They what, Lup? What—how are...?"

"Most of them seemed like they were going to live, actually. I don't remember the death toll when we left. They found water in a lot of their stomachs instead of food. Whatever you were doing to help worked." She doesn't mention how he probably could have saved all of them if Sazed hadn't interfered, but Taako's probably been through turmoil over that whole thing. For now she'll just give him the positives. If he works out the rest on his own, then fine.

Lup's more and more worried about Barry. He's looking worse by the second. "Barry, I need you to try and stay awake for me, okay. Try not to go to sleep." If Kravitz doesn't get back here soon, Barry might not make it to an audience with the Queen.

She refuses to consider that. "Barry helped me travel to find you and, well, we kind of got pretty close over that time, I guess." She wonders if lifting her charm on him might be smart now. He doesn't need to be forced to awareness at this point. But he also doesn't need to be sad about the Thorn dying, on top of everything else. "He was pretty okay even back in Glamour Springs, before
we knew what had happened. He’s the one who realized it was arsenic.”

Taako bites his lip. "I figured— I didn't know what was going on, but it doesn't take a genius to know that the vomiting was a big clue. But I am a genius, so I transmuted everyone's stomach contents, natch. So some people still died, huh. Figures. So you're— What're you gonna tell the queen?"

Lup turns to the wall, which is suddenly very interesting and much better to look at than Taako’s face or the wounds in Barry’s gut. "I'm not sure. I guess it depends on what she asks. I'll advocate for Barry, of course. I'm... I'll do what it takes to save him."

Taako puts his hands on her shoulders and leans his forehead against the back of her neck. "Lup, I love you, you know? Like, I get that you feel responsible for Barry. I respect that. But—you're my one and only sister, and the thing is, the thing is I don't want you to trade your soul away or whatever for some guy you met two weeks ago—no offense, Barold. We're not court fae. We don't get how this works! The queen obvs hates human in her woods: see, keeping monsters around to eat them like kibble. If she comes up with something she could get from you that—that's enough for this dude's life? It's probably bad fuckin' news."

"You don't know that," Lup counters, knowing he's right. “I can't watch him die, Taako. I can't. What would that make me, if I did? It's my fault he's like this. I brought him here and told him I could protect him. I failed. He saved me once and I couldn't do the same." Lup pulls away from him gently and goes to crouch next to Barry. His hand finds hers with his eyes closed. She squeezes back. "I need to fix this."

Taako knows her. He knows how she gets when she has a cause to champion. She's as stubborn as him, and she lets her heart bleed so much more. They run out the tape layering more bandages across Barry’s side, and the rest of Indrid’s salve. Taako's left anxiously shredding Barry's stock of dried pimpernel petals, just for something to do with his hands. He pulls Lup down to sit beside him on the floor, shoulder-to-shoulder and knee-to-knee. He wipes his hands dry on his—Kravitz's—dressing gown and risks an arm thrown around her.

After a while, he quietly says, "Thanks for coming to get me. You were right about Sazed being a jackass. Let the record show that you're probably right about Barry, too, deserving you caring about him and stuff. We're gonna do our best here, and that's—that's gotta be enough."

He's kept her on his right side, bandages outlining the profile of his face, thick over the bridge of his nose. The eye she can see is bloodshot and deeply shadowed. He's exhausted; this must be the longest he's spent on his feet in days. He bumps their knees together and settles with his back against the bed. Barry takes a shuddering breath and Taako exhales a whistle in sympathy.

The two of them sit there for a few minutes, both just enjoying the ability to be with each other again. Lup revels in it: her two favorite boys. She distantly wonders when Barry became that to her.

Chapter End Notes

Big ol thanks to emi_rose who acted as a consultant on all the medical stuff in this chapter and the last. She was a huge help making this feel more realistic!
Lup prepares for an audience with the Queen and carries Barry into the unknown.

A knock at the door pulls Lup out of her thoughts. She isn’t sure what the appropriate course of action is until Taako gets up to answer it. That tracks: he’s been here long enough that this room may as well be his.

Taako doesn’t have a chance to say a greeting before the person on the other side is pushing their way into the room. Startled, Lup sits up straighter, and is surprised to see another changeling. He's in his true form, tall and lanky with long white hair resting down his back. His bright smile shows off his fangs and provides a sharp contrast to the somber mood of the room.

A human toddler of about three or four sits perched on his hip, arms hooked around his neck. Lup eyes the kid nervously. For the first time, she's happy Barry's so out of it right now. She's sure he'd have some opinions about the child, things she doesn’t want to have to get into right now.

"Hello, hello I'm here to bring...er... Lup and... Barry? to their approved audience with the Queen?" He has an incredibly thick accent Lup can’t quite place. Taako rolls his eyes at the back of the man’s head and Lup can imagine this is someone he’s dealt with before.

The kid reaches up a hand and tugs on the changeling’s ear. "Wanna walk," she whines. He bends over to help her to the floor and keeps a careful eye on her as she wanders over to the trickle of water on the far side of the room and starts playing with it.

"Hey man—it was, uh, Black Spider, right?" Taako says, rushing for Kravitz's wardrobe. He looks Lup up and down and starts yanking clothing off hangers. "Give us a sec to freshen up, kemosabe."

"You may as well call me Brian, darling. I'd hate to be rude," he says, leaning over the bed to survey Barry, who cracks one eyelid open with a confused expression. "Mmm, and I think freshening up is definitely in order—dearest!" He calls across the room to the girl. "Dearest, have Taako help you find a towel, let's get everyone's faces clean."

By all appearances the girl is still human, and Lup can't help but feel a little pang at the soft tone Brian uses with her. The girl’s changeling double must be back at home with the human parents, maybe watched over from a distance by Brian's spouse. Neither of the children were abandoned by either set of parents. Someday, when they both come into their magic, they'll have a home in this court, a family. Maybe even a family with their human parents too, if they’re accepted. Lup’s heart aches at the thought.

The child gamely accepts a scarf from Taako in lieu of a towel, soaking it through and scampering over to hand it off to Lup, eyes fixed wide on the mess of bandages covering Barry’s side. She rushes back to Brian just as quickly, fisting a hand in his robe at the knee and popping a thumb in her mouth.

"None of that," he says, prodding her. "Your teeth will grow in crooked! Now, Lup, it is lovely to meet you. I have to ask—your boy, here, will he be walking to the throne room? It is a fair distance
away."

"I'm not sure how up-to-walking Barry's gonna be," Lup says as she smiles and waves at the girl. Maybe seeing a bandaged, dying man lying in a mess of his own blood isn't the best thing for a kid, but Lup's sure it's fine. Not like she didn't see some things when she was little, and she turned out alright... For the most part. "What do you think, babe? You want one of us to help carry you or...?"

Taako's ears swivel at the pet name and his eyebrows escape up into his hairline. Lup frowns at him. She has names for everyone. This is absolutely not out of the ordinary. 'Babe' is common for people she cares about. Though. Maybe that's where the shock’s coming in.

Barry opens his eyes and stares at the wall, still heeding Lup's order that he not move too much. She's right, after all. "Are we talking about going somewhere...?" Barry asks thickly. "Walking? Me? No."

"She asked if you wanted to be carried, my man," Taako says. "Dunno how, but we'll figure that out."

"Over walking? Yeah."

Taako barks a laugh.

"We got an audience with the Queen, Barry. Hopefully she's willing to fix you up. I was working mostly on adrenaline when I carried him before, but I could probably manage it?" Lup offers. "Or I could shift, maybe," she looks at her blistered hands, “and one of you can put him on my back or something?"

"Oh please, allow me," Brian says. "It is my job to fetch you of course. Move out of the way, sweetheart." He nudges the girl a few steps back and then shifts into an enormous, monstrous spider, with four glossy eyes that are each the size of her fist. His legs span the entire room, clawed feet splayed out awkwardly between furniture.

Lup’s brain stalls out. As far as she's aware, changelings can’t turn into something that doesn't already exist. Something about it being easier to internalize the form. She and Taako have never been able to learn new forms without spending at least a few minutes in close contact with their target. She was not aware there were such things as giant fuck-off spiders bigger than a person, and if Brian can turn into one... She. She does not like the implications of that. She casts a nervous glance towards Barry, who returns it so readily that, for a moment, he almost seems back to normal. At least being confronted with a giant spider made him more alert.

On the other hand, the little girl jumps up and down and calls out, "Spider dad! Spider dad!" before clambering up the nearest leg, taking big fistfuls of wiry hair, and placing herself at the junction between Brian's head and thorax.

Brian chuckles and takes a couple tiny steps forward—and that's an awful, awful sound, with all those chitinous claws clicking on the wood. He crouches down next to the bed. "If you can get him up on mine back, I should be able to carry him without trouble."

Lup decides there are worse solutions—though also definitely much better ones—and helps Taako maneuver Barry. He cooperates with their pulling and prodding, leaning heavily on his good side, until he's straddling the spider's thorax a foot behind the girl. Then he collapses into a reclining position and stares up at the ceiling. "Stretchers," he says gravely.

"Yeah, buddy, you and me both wish they had a real fuckin' hospital here," Taako says, wiping his
hands off distastefully. He throws another of Kravitz’s embroidered robes at Lup, entreating her to make at least a token effort.

Changelings don’t necessarily need to wear clothing. Many fae don’t, but fake, shifted clothes are just not as good, practically or texturally, and Barry always seems uncomfortable when he realizes she’s not dressed. Besides, the robe is incredibly soft, so she accepts the silent prompting. She likes the slide of the fabric on her skin; she was right, it’s good-quality stuff. Taako drops another on Barry, who feebly tries to tuck it between his bare shoulders and Brian’s hairy abdomen without sitting up.

"Quit fussing up there, darling," Brian says, voice emerging from a fanged, articulated maw. His daughter claps her hands in delight. "We can’t keep Her Majesty waiting, but there will be a little time to finish preparations, yah? Now," and he rears forward, one jointed leg coming up to slide Kravitz’s door open, "let’s be going!"

Lup does her best to keep close to Barry and make absolutely sure he won’t slip off, but it’s impossible to not be underfoot when Brian has eight of them. His jointed legs take up nearly the span of the hallway and he towers above her. If Barry sat up, he could reach the smooth, flowing wood overhead.

The pathway is long and winds through the wood like a vein. There are no sharp corners or flat planes. The lichen and mosses that coat the thickly-woven branches of the floor are soft against Lup's feet. Flowers and vines spiral through the ceiling, creating a soft ambiance that makes Barry’s injuries seem even more jarring. This place was not created for him, or for her.

She wonders whether this is what the dead courts were like. She can’t imagine herself and Taako feeling at home in a place like this. Still—still—she feels comfortable, on a deeply physical level. While foreign, and maybe inhospitable, the flow of magic feels natural to her in a way she’s never experienced. It feels like peace.

The interior is cast in soothing blue light that emanates from amorphous crystals, and the occasional floating, glowing sphere of loose magic. She’d known that magic can coalesce, and has seen will-o’-wisps and little bursts like fireflies, but these spheres are as big and bright as the moon looks in the sky. When they flash by, they illuminate other pathways that branch off the main one they seem to be following, with other doorways. Dozens of fae must have made a home here.

And Barry’s barely taking any of it in. He hasn’t turned his head in minutes. She ducks under a spider leg and skirts around to see that his eyes are unfocused again. Her throat constricts in fear. After far too long, they descend down into a massive tree branch, carved hollow but still thriving and alive, and out onto a platform overlooking the inside of a gargantuan tree trunk. It’s like a small city within the tree. Countless other hollowed branches around the walls lead to what Lup can only assume are other branch-woven hallways. The air is chilly and somehow smells more crisply of pine than the outside forest did. Fae of all kinds mingle on the ground below and on the spiraling platform around the sides. Pixies fly by in small swarms, flitting from place to place with little comprehensible direction.

Most of the other fae give Barry looks ranging from curious to disgusted. They pass a trio of redcaps that bare red-stained teeth in his direction. Lup holds her head high and keeps moving. It's unnerving, in a way. She's never seen so many fae in one place. They stare after her and Taako too, and she realizes that, despite their changeling features, they look… comparatively mundane.

Only dim light filters in from overhead, leaving everyone overcast in greys and blues from the softly-glowing crystals. But the gloom doesn’t obscure how human the proportions of her face and
She pulls Kravitz's robe tighter around her and realizes that she and Taako move like... like their skin doesn’t quite fit. The pitch of the floor makes them graceless. She keeps having to glance down at her footing. And Taako is the only person with bandages. No one else even has a visible scar. So many of the fae are beautiful, ethereal in a way that makes her want to touch her face. She balls her hands into fists and finds that her palms feel rough.

Fae that aren't outright aggressive are uncomfortably interested, watching them with a knowing look that Lup doesn’t want to think about. They pass a winter fairy so gorgeous that she could have stepped out of a painting, with hair that twines and drips like icicles and wings of white lace. She sits perched on an overgrown toadstool, delicately braiding a human woman’s hair. The woman has a blank-eyed smile on her face and grins with empty adoration when the fairy pats her head. Lup looks away.

"Zis is the north tree," Brian says, continuing to lead the way, unfazed. Other fae make an effort to get out of his path and Lup is somewhat relieved to know at least she isn't the only one unnerved by his choice of form. "We are headed towards ground level and the central Queen's Bower. Would you like to stop by a spring on ze way to freshen up some more?"

Lup glances down at her bloody hands and arms and, just... everything, and says, "Yeah that'd probably be good."

There's not much they can do to improve Barry. His bandages need to stay dry, and there's absolutely no way he's taking his stained jeans off with the eyes of every passing, curious fae—be they multifaceted or hollow or ebon-black—fixed on him. But. If Lup thought it was a good idea, he supposes he would. That's at least a comfort; he can let himself fragment and throb with pain, be overwhelmed and consumed, and know that she’ll take care of him.

He wishes he'd had a chance to discover whether he'd trust her this much if he had a choice. In the end, he’s glad he got to see this place. It's wondrous, in its own unnatural way. The jarring incongruences where magic manifests as material are softened by the layers of fog behind his eyes.

He finds that he can't sit up to dismount by himself, and then finds Brian gracefully condensing into a humanoid form to wrap arms around his chest and help him lean at the edge of a public fountain. His daughter dips a finger, shrieks, and dances away with a giggle. The pool is cupped by a basin of textured stone that’s sunken into a lump of luminous crystal. A freezing spring pours from the gaps, illuminated a deep blue by the glow.

Taako dumps water on Barry’s head and finger-combs his hair into place. Then he twists his own hair into a simple updo, sweeping bangs over his bandaged eye. Barry manages to shrug Kravitz's robe on by himself. It’s charcoal-grey silk, hand-painted with skeletal, white flowers he doesn't recognize. It's handsome, sumptuous fabric, and he's glad to have it between his skin and the chilled air and prying eyes. Tying it absorbs all of his concentration for a minute—except for the part of his mind honed to track Lup, constantly and obsessively.

He loses track of the spring until Lup dips her hands into its waters. Taako's at her side, mirroring her posture, with the same pointed ears and curled hair and sharp shoulders, but he and everything else in sight may as well be a backdrop for her beauty. She's ethereal, cheekbones and chin painted soft cool hues by luminescent water and bobbing puffs of magic. Her hair's wild frizz is limned with an aura of light like a prism.

Her image fades with his vision as standing for so long takes its toll. Staticky black swells in from the periphery. Brian must have noticed him sway, because Barry finds himself tucked into his side, held up by an arm across his back. The little girl watches curiously. He closes his eyes against her
Lup shakes her hands dry. She managed to get most of the blood off her skin. Her palms started to sting like nothing else once the adrenaline wore off. They’re shiny with broken skin, blisters cracked and weeping. She tests her fingers a few times and hums unhappily over how stiff and uncomfortable the movement is. Thankfully, the initial heat of the burn lessened while she was distracted by Barry. It's still gonna be awful to deal with. She’s grabbed iron before by accident. Frequently, when she was a child. The healing process is slow and frustrating.

Lup's at a point where she feels like she's just moving through a haze. Being given time to calm down and talk has made her acutely aware of how tired she is, how drained. She’s used too much magic today without giving it time to replenish. It shows in her haggard appearance. Her true reflection in the water is a harsh contrast to the grace Barry’s charmed-addled mind supplies, eyes rimmed with red from crying. Her hair is tangled and bloody, but she can't find it in her to care enough to do more than wet it; a pitiful effort to clean it out, considering.

"Nope. C’mere," Taako intervenes and starts running his fingers through her hair until she gets fed up and takes over. She doesn't need to be babied. Her hair's dripping wet by the end, but at least it's some semblance of clean.

Lup moves to take some of Barry’s weight from Brian. She slings his arm over her shoulder and her arm over his back to lean into. "You okay there, Bear? Think you can walk to the hearing?"

She's barely touched him since—since he was charmed. That revelation is slippery in his grasp, skittering on his conscious like water on oilcloth. He is charmed, and there should be an 'and' to that thought. There should be a web of ramifications, considerations, spirals of worry, effects following cause.

It's funny, in a way, how little all his vigilance came to. It's funny that he's so content to just to be in her company. It’s funny that he kind of gapes like a fish in her embrace, as if he was overcome with nerves from a pretty girl.

"I'm fine," he says, and it's only a lie objectively. He thinks she might be able to hear the mad, painful rush that is his heartbeat. He thinks that, if he has to walk by himself he'll collide with something, because all he can see are motes of cool light punctuating dark blurs. He closes his eyes and nothing changes. "I'll walk. Just don't let go. Please."

Lup worries that he only wants to hang on to her because of the charm, but adjusts her grip around Barry regardless, pulling him closer. She doesn’t want to take advantage of him, but doesn’t want to upset him either. She thanks Kravitz's wardrobe for the soft fabric on her hands. She wants to be absolutely sure that, if he goes down, she'll be there to catch him.

"Are we all ready zen?" Brian scoops his daughter up, giving in to her grabby-handed demands. "I will not be present for ze proceedings. It's zis little one's nap time." She yawns wide and rubs her eyes.

"Yeah, I think we're good," Lup confirms. "Well. As much as we can be. Taako?"

"Cha'boy's ready... I guess."

Lup very consciously chooses not to unpack the way he said that. She will not feel guilty putting herself on the line to save Barry. He’s done the same for her.

Brian gestures them back off down the mossy path. It's slow going, with how shaky Barry is on his
feet, but they make their way along. There are a few heart stopping moments where Barry goes absolutely limp in Lup's arms, but he manages to pull himself back together. Lup can't help but fear each time he goes out that he won't come back at all. Taako moves to Barry’s other side and takes half his weight. Together, they manage to help him stumble to the entrance tunnel into the Queen's Bower.

It's a natural tunnel of woven saplings, draped with frosted, purple wisteria blooms that catch the light of passing pixies and will'o'wisp. Despite the chill, the floor of the tunnel is an even carpet of fallen petals, all fresh, soft, and untouched by ice. It's beautiful and winding and disappears into distant mist. It doesn't look like it's going to be fun to traverse in this state.

"Well, zis is where Taako and I leave you two," Brian says, as if it's the most logical thing in the world."

"Wait, what?" Taako immediately protests. "I'm not leaving Lup. Taako's good right here."

"You may watch from the branches if you wish." Brian waves him off. "But only those two are permitted entrance to the clearing."

"No, I—"

Lup interrupts him. "Taako, just go. I'll see you after this." There's no need for an 'I promise'; there never is, among fae. She will see him after and Barry will be healthy again. It's all going to work out. It's all going to be fine. She wouldn't be able to say it if she didn’t believe it. "Go find somewhere to watch. I'll be okay."

Taako hesitates for a moment, just staring at Lup, before he slips his arm out from under Barry's shoulder. He lays a hand over Lup's and says, "I'll see you after, then."

Lup turns away, but she can feel Taako's gaze linger before he trails after Brian. She swallows hard and shifts Barry's weight to accommodate for the loss of Taako's help.

"Alright, Barry," she says to no one but the pixies. "Let's get you fixed up."

Lup starts their steady stumble down the tunnel.

She doesn't know how long the walk takes. With only the whisper and clink of the frozen wisteria overhead, time seems to dribble like molasses. Barry’s fumbling steps are almost more of a hindrance than helpful. She knows he doesn’t have it in him to make conversation without asking. She has to carry them both. Left alone with her thoughts, she fluctuates between anxious and empty and back. Barry's weight against her the only steady presence she has.

There’s no light at the end of the tunnel, no sign at all until they’re spilling out of the mist in a flurry of bruised petals. One moment Lup's spacing out through their careful stagger, the next she's at the edge of a clearing surrounded by the largest trees she's ever seen. They stretch unfathomably high above their head, the mist trapped below their branches forming a vaulted ceiling.

The branches of the trees are woven thickly together to form what must be the pathways they'd traveled through before. Additional swells and swoops of wood jut out to form what can almost be called a platform, circling the clearing. Fae of all kinds rest on the natural balconies, some sitting, some standing, some just hovering. There are so many, just here to watch Lup fight for Barry's life. She can't even make out Taako among the crowd.

At the center of the clearing grows a truly massive throne, bigger than any humanoid Lup's ever met could need to sit. Vines of ice and flowers curl their way up the sides, cushioned by emerald
mosses and sprigs of grass. The tree forming the throne itself is a sight to behold, each knot and grain of the wood perfectly designed into something elegant and powerful.

And then Lup feels a presence. It reminds her of Lucretia and Kravitz's auras, but amplified to unbelievable levels. She struggles not to drop Barry as she compulsively bows low so as not to dare insult the creature such an energy could belong to. To look before being granted permission, to raise her head, would be to claim she's anywhere near the status of this being; a lie of the utmost severity.

Her grip on Barry is starting to slip when a voice that fills the clearing, fills the world, says, "Rise."

Lup does so immediately, haste rendering her graceless. But to make the presence wait would risk insult.

The Queen perches on her throne, solid red gaze fixed pointedly on Lup and Barry. She's at least ten feet tall sitting, one pair of hands clasped firmly in her lap, the other poised on the armrests. Massive white wings patched with mosaic black drape over the seat like a gown. Her true wings rest fanned out and prominently displayed, red and black, and cream and grandiose past anything Lup could have imagined. A halo of magic encircles her head, pulsing with power and casting a crystal-blue light across the mist and leaves. It's the same magic that pervades the rest of the court, the Queen's power condensed so densely even Barry can track its flow with the naked eye.

The Queen leans forward to rest her chin on her upper pair of hands and commands, "Let us begin."
A Union of Crystal and Blood

Chapter Summary

Lup and Barry make a deal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bower is like something out of a storybook. Barry’s seen thousands of renditions of Fairy Queens on their thrones: stage plays with chintzy gauze bordering plywood thrones, poetry in yellowed paperbacks, woodcut prints in the newspaper, painted candy tins, printed matchboxes. There’s little art or literature that doesn’t evoke a romanticized image of the enthroned Queens, surrounded by the splendor and magic of their courts.

Somehow nobody got it right, or even came close.

For the first time, Barry's sharply limited awareness gets to him. He wants to take in more than the gut-punch of the Queen's presence and the silent attention of her subjects on the balconies. Their seats are elevated above the Queen's, but instead of looking down on her, the impression is one of inescapable gravity drawing all eyes like water swirls around a drain. She is the center of the court's tiny universe. It was born from her magic untold ages ago, and yet continues, sustained by her will alone. She is the impulsion behind everything from the cast of the sky to the currents of the air. Everyone that lives here does so by her mercy.

No human has ever seen this sight and told the tale. There's one account buried at the edge of Barry's awareness. A man, from his own country, who, before the catastrophe, set out to meet the long-dead queens of the rotting forest. His quest—and his life—came to nothing but a footnote.

And here Barry is, bowing at the foot of this Queen's throne. His glasses are streaked with smudges, he's got dried blood chafing between his belly and the tattered waistband of his jeans, and his torso is bare except for the ill-fitting robe that Taako stole from Kravitz. The pressure bubbling at the base of his skull is the lingering influence of the monster she sent to kill him, as if directing that creature was a thought to her at all. And yet here he is, pretending there's any way he or Lup could hope to challenge her authority, or change her mind.

"You are known to me," she says, and her gaze bores through Barry's eyes and into the tar clogging his mind, racing along the paths scored by her creature's magic.

A kernel of power hits the surface of the tar, a nucleus around which crystal clarity blooms into fractals like snowflakes. The pain falls away. The sense of confusion falls away. Fear and anxiety don't rise in their place. He is frozen, suspended in a landscape as blank as a fallow field coated in snow. He clings to the flickering candle flame of Lup's presence by the thin, anchored warmth of her charm, thrown into stark contrast by the might of the Queen's will.

"As are you," the Queen says, turning to Lup in full force. There is no exchanging of names in this court. Her audience isn't entitled to even a record of the proceedings; no such thing exists, except in her long memory. "You, in your ignorance, sought hospitality from my people hand-in-hand with their enemy. Your intentions are inconsequential. We know what we have of yours: your brother,
gladly returned to you. That's a branch cleanly shorn.

"And yet, you wish for more. Tell me the shape of your desires, Motherless Daughter. Bare your heart, and I will judge whether its meat is enough to fertilize soil."

Motherless Daughter. Yeah. That's—yeah. Lup wilts under the Queen's gaze. It's literally impossible to meet her eyes, but she knows their power resting on her. Her mouth's gone dry. What could she have possibly thought she was doing, putting herself at the mercy of such a powerful being?

"I-I have—" Lup swallows hard and adjusts her supportive hold on Barry.

"Speak your mind," The Queen says, commands, which honestly does very little to ease Lup's nerves.

"For what hospitality you have shown my brother, I will forever be grateful, and I regret to have to ask for more. I have traveled with this—this hunter in search of my brother. Without him I would never have found my way to your esteemed court." She keeps her eyes locked on the ground below her, not daring to glance up and catch an edge of wing or segmented hand. The formal speech comes to her unbidden, a natural respect to be paid. "We grew closer than I would have believed. He saved my life. I said I would protect him in your forests and I failed. I-I wish to right such a wrong. I implore you state your price. I will pay any cost for his continued life." Better to keep most of her own emotions out of it. Keep her words pure fact, not letting her heart bleed through. Her bond with Barry is her business. Perhaps the Queen would understand, perhaps not. She doesn't want to take the risk.

The audience is silent, aside from the faint buzz of wings or shifting of fur, each individual listening raptly to Lup's plea, hanging on the Queen's every word. Lup can't quite picture what expression would rest on Taako’s marred face.

"And you, human," the Queen’s gaze shifts to Barry, lifting part of the weight off Lup's shoulders. "What have you to say for these claims? What right have you to step onto ground not meant for your kind and ask relief from the consequences? Speak freely. Mind your place."

"I don't have the right," Barry replies with the easy assurance of a simple truth. He does not avert his gaze. His eyes are blank and unfocused, dark where they should reflect the light haloing the Queen's brow. "I wasn't afraid of the consequences. I didn't really understand."

The corners of the Queen's eyes crinkle ever so slightly, the sound of her wings shifting echoes through the silence of the clearing. "Then why?" she prompts. She doesn't have to elaborate. The weight of her intention is the only lens through which Barry can view his own mind.

"I promised to help find her brother. I did have my own reasons, at first, but I haven't been thinking of those. I like her. I liked traveling with her. I wanted to help, and I didn't want to leave her alone. I thought we'd be safe together… and I didn't have anywhere else to be."

Lup's ears flick forward impulsively at the monotony of Barry's tone. She risks a glance up from the ground and finds his eyes glazed over in a new way, lifeless and empty. She delicately probes the wires she has locked around his mind, careful not to disturb the delicate balance of his thoughts. When she strikes power her own can not hope to match, she draws back. The Queen’s taken control of the monster’s charm, pushed her own magic through in full force through what was once only a minute thread. Her breath catches on the next inhale. They're treading ever dangerous waters, and Barry can’t even know.
"You've lived and worked past your years," the Queen says. She sits up to her full height again, top arms returning to rest on the throne. "What led your fate to intertwine with that of a lost fae, to trust your safety in her hands?"

"He was—" Lup starts.

"I asked him," the Queen decisively cuts her off. Lup shuts her mouth and returns her gaze to her feet, toes curled with nerves in the soft moss. The Queen wants a straight answer, one pulled from a compliance of her own making. Lup's stuck where she is.

"I met her because the other hunters thought her brother might be hiding from their justice in the forest where the courts died," he says, after a careful moment of sifting through his memories for what little she may care about. "They sent for me because I'm an expert."

That would sound arrogant if it wasn't unvarnished truth. Barry is perhaps the foremost living expert on the so-called "Hunger". Among humans, at least, he's spent more time there than anyone. Not that his careful surveys, or painstakingly-collected data on air and water quality and the slow, steady expansion of the fungus, mean much to anyone outside of the few who read his papers. Critically, he can't tell anyone how to kill it for good. Not with its threads tied so deep in the tombs of the rotting courts. Controlled burns only buy time, while the Hunger’s spores disperse again and again.

The Queen doesn't move, but her power flares for a moment; Lup and the other fae of the court are forced back before being given a second to recover. Something Barry said sparked her interest. The Queen doesn't speak, just watches for a horribly uncomfortable minute. It's not a normal pause in conversation, but for a being as ancient as the Winter Queen, Lup imagines it counts little more than a heartbeat.

"Lift your charm," she commands."The unshrouding will be easier if the new is torn away first."

Lup hesitates. As much as she despises holding Barry charmed, she's the only mote of protection between him and the full weight of the Queen's grasp. She gives him a lifeline and in turn, that connection acts as one for her. But she cannot disobey.

She gently brushes her power aside and leans to whisper in Barry's ear. "Come back to me, babe." It's unnecessary and cheesy, but she's scared. She doesn't want to lose him. For all she knows the Queen could be removing Lup's influence to kill Barry, to hurt him.

She can't tell her last, powerless order gave him comfort because it's fleeting, swept away by all-encompassing power. "I wish to converse with you," the Queen says, her voice resonating soundlessly.

Ice thaws. The numbing blankness in Barry’s head melts to muck, churning around the image of the skull that whispered his name, now charred and abandoned. He'll never forget he remembered it in this moment, but it vanishes. The last dregs of its power drain away into sucking, searing pain. Only Lup's supporting arm stops him from doubling over.

"Rise," the Queen says, and after a moment, he does; compelled by his own will and the gravity of the situation, but nothing else. "Look at me."

He leans into Lup deliberately. There's too much to take in at once. The Queen's eyes shine such a bright red that everything around her grows dim in contrast. Or maybe it’s blood loss making his vision blurry. He feels the bandages slowly soaking through and knows he doesn't have much longer on his feet. He doesn't have much longer left for anything. The thought is so much shaper
But this can't be how it ends. He can't die in front of Lup, not after everything they went through to find her brother safe and alive. There's only a few weeks left until he's supposed to go to Candlenights at his mom's. Dav will be furious if he doesn't come back after that last letter. He's not satisfied with everything he's seen and learned—it means nothing if he can't do anything with the knowledge.

Lup doesn't deserve to lose the people she cares about. He’s starkly aware he’s one of those people now.

He squeezes her hand. "We—we really can't go anywhere together, huh," he says, thinking of Grimaldis. They've both almost died in barely two days for the crime of being unwelcome.

The Queen allows the digression to pass. "You will speak to me whole," she says, and he can't imagine why she'd allow him the presence of mind for panic. Red spreads from her eyes at the edges, the glare wicking across his vision. "I would gladly offer you your life, if you tell me of my sisters' graves. Tell me that you can divine the means of expunging the monster that squats in their empty houses, Hunter, and I will consider you owed not just your health, but the wealth and luxury of an empire."

A long moment of silence passes. The court holds its breath, the rustle of bodies on the balconies a soft whisper. Barry wishes he could spot Taako or Kravitz, but the murk blurs everything above the Queen's head into indistinct silhouettes.

He's being offered the best deal he could hope for and he can't deliver. He's fallen short of the mark in so many different ways lately that he could never have guessed the consequences. Who knew a fairy queen would be disappointed by the same research that frustrated his grant committee?

"I'm sorry. I wish I could, really—I've, I've done everything I could in there, I've gone over the fungus and how it rots things, how it grows, and, and what the water and air are like but—I'm sorry. I only recently found out that it's infiltrated the old courts as well as the forest. It—if I could help, I would."

The Queen doesn't react, just watches Lup’s face as she frets over Barry. He's back, and Lup's grateful for that, but he's in so much more pain without the charm to dull his senses. That tired, anxious look in his eyes gives her a sick feeling in her stomach. She doesn't dare say anything in this moment, but leans back into him, holds him a little bit closer. She hopes he understands her silent attempts at comfort.

"Many means exist by which to heal you," the Queen says. Her voice seems void of emotion. She speaks slowly, giving time for each word to process. "A stasis of mind and body would stitch your wounds in natural time." Lup wants to protest. She can't just freeze Barry for however long it takes for him to heal. That can't just be the only option. "You have a choice, child. The court's power may cleanse, but all rivers change the course of their beds."

The Queen lifts a hand and flicks her fingers out to produce a small shard of blue crystal. It doesn't glow with the same light as the others, instead emitting its own power like a pulse. "You came to bargain," the Queen says, rolling the shard between her fingers. It's not an absent-minded movement. Nothing she does is. It's very deliberate, teasing, seducing. "Forces trouble my court this era. Weapons of new destruction, an unknown Queen-killing plague. And you come to me: Motherless Daughter of Summer, Hunter of Rot. Yes, you have something to offer. Your services would benefit my court."
Lup can't help the stutter in her breath. Oh.

She intends to use him, both of them. He's already had her sink into his mind; the totality of her power is overwhelming. Barry shivers. "What—what do you mean?"

Her smile isn't cruel. It's artificial, though, her lips curving stiffly to bare sharp white teeth. "This is my offer: I will recognize the value of your life, but only in my service. Your help is inadequate, by your own admission. But if you had claimed impossible mastery I would have had my Thorns take you in your next breath. Instead, I will sustain your life through my art.

"Daughter, your companion will live past the end he should meet here. You may choose to keep him at your side. But neither of you will equal my subjects, nor will you be permitted residence in my realm. You will return to your land. You will execute my will. You will oppose my enemies and give succor to my allies. And, should you dare act counter to my interests, your lives will be forfeit by that betrayal."

Treason. That's what she wants from Barry. She's an enemy of his state. She embodies a foreign power in every sense. And she's demanding his loyalty. This is exactly the kind of catastrophe he was supposed to beware. Through him, the entirety of his organization is vulnerable; he knows the leadership, the chain of command, each headquarters. More than a few true names. Their practices and protocol. He can put a face to almost every senior hunter in the country, and through him she could exterminate them all.

Every story about humans trespassing in fae courts ends in death or thrall. Barry and Lup both knew this. By the rules of his profession, by the laws of this Queen, their fidelity was foolishness.

They're holding hands. They don't let go.

Lup gives Barry's hand a gentle squeeze. They can work this out. It could be worse. The Queen could have asked a life for a life. She could have refused them outright. She could have rejected the audience entirely.

But Lup and Taako had never been tied to a court. They never answered to anyone but themselves. The thought of being so fully under the will of another fae, regardless of what her instincts insist about the Queen’s authority, terrifies her.

Her magic is swirling like a storm under her skin, making her wounded palms burn. It wants to be tied to something. It wants a proper conduit, but it can't know what she does. Being banned from ever entering the court she's tied to could weaken her power instead of boosting it. Interactions with Lucretia might change on an instinctual level. Hell, the pull of a winter court may extinguish her summer fire magic. She doesn't know the rules. She's a fae that knows almost nothing about how courts work. It hadn't mattered, until now.

She needs time to think. Maybe they can strike a better deal. A glance at Barry's pale, sunken face, ragged from the sheer effort of staying on his feet, tells her she doesn't have that time. She needs to make a decision.

Lup swallows her pride. It's her freedom or Barry's life, and she knows what her answer is. She doesn't know Barry's, but... She looks up at the Queen for the first time during the audience, still physically unable to meet her gaze. "Deal." Then the finality of the moment is ruined because, right, this isn't just her decision. "I—I mean for me. That's— I'm willing to uphold my end of that. I — Barry?" She's very glad she can't see Taako right now. He's going to kill her.

"I—" Barry closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath, more to feel the air in his lungs than because he
hopes it will calm him. Even now, he's most afraid of hurting Lup. "It's, it's one thing to bargain my own life. But I can't choose to jeopardize everyone else's. That's—that's too much, for what I'm worth. I mean, I can't help you hurt the other hunters, or the people they—we—protect, just cuz I wanted to live."

The Queen leans forward, eyes radiating crimson, and stretches her wings in a heart-stopping arc. They quiver with tension, shedding scales as glinting motes, as she judges Barry's intention.

"Perfectly reasonable," she says, as she relaxes back onto her throne. Barry nearly faints. "I will not enumerate my enemies. All who would visit harm upon my court, myself, or my sisters are counted among them. But still, I do not seek war.

"I will not allow you to hold your laws inviolate, but neither will I spend you injudiciously. You have shown yourself to value honor and compassion. Accordingly, I will allow that your hands should not strike your friends. I will allow you to remain honest. Never will I compel you to betray those who kept you in confidence, except should they impel my enmity.

"You will understand: I know of human fear and the intolerance it begets. I remain uncaring. Your most dire blows are barely puffs of air. Your zealots, your scholars, your leaders and champions; they rise from dirt and fall to dust in the span of a single night.

"My realm is sacrosanct. And yet, there remains one force whose touch cannot be brushed aside. One faceless enemy, still festering in the abattoir it made of worlds like this one. Feeding on the corpses of my sisters, who I respected as equal to myself, and those of their children and lovers and subjects.

"I want you for the purpose of opposing this enemy above all others. As a tool, not a slave. I ask nothing more, and will permit nothing less."

Barry’s heart is in his throat. His pulse grows ever-weaker, thready, tingling in the tips of his fingers. He closes his eyes to turn the Queen’s words over in his mind.

The Hunger is the greatest existential threat faced by his country, as far as he’s concerned. He dedicated as much of his career as he was allowed to its mysteries and came up virtually empty-handed. As did all those who came before him. A little more than a hundred years of expeditions and surveys and research, of rescues and burnings. Of clouds of spores settling on precious fields of wheat, in sluggish streams, in fragile lungs.

A hundred years of dwindling support from those who should be their leaders in this. All the while corpses pile up just out of sight, victims of the enigmatic, ever-present monsters lurking within the woods. Year by year, the rot advances. Year by year, the fields shrink, the farmers retreat, and the small border towns empty out. They give ground to be chewed and swallowed—a few inches here, a foot there. Time staggers on, and his careful surveys are met with increasingly incautious, ignorant disinterest.

Few men fear the slow unfolding of a disaster across the span of human lives. All the while, the rot remains insatiate.

"Deal." The word drops from his lips. Uttered in an instant, vanishing without an echo. No regret emerges in the silence.

The Queen rises from her throne. Her fingers, splayed and steady, bloom icy crystals at their tips. Shards of her power. They are alien to his being, far more potent than his magic. He doesn’t know what their touch will do to him.
"This will hurt," she says. "Come here."

Haltingly, he pulls away from Lup. Her hand lingers on his arm until he’s out of reach. He advances, and the Queen leans down to meet him.

This will save him. He'll be alright, but he's going to be changed. Lup knows that. To have a Queen's power harbored in a human body for as long as it will take to heal? That kind of mark doesn't fade. But he’ll still be him. She has to believe that.

The Queen dwarfs Barry. He barely reaches her hip when she stands to her full height. She slides a delicate, massive claw across his stomach, effortlessly cutting away the bandages. She carefully pulls them away where blood has pasted them to his side and allows them to pool to the ground around his feet, leaving the angry, red bite mark exposed. Even at this distance the dark scores across his skin convey the depth of the wound, outlined by bruises and weeping fluid.

No further warning is given before the Queen digs her crystal-tipped fingers into the punctures. In the piercing silence of the court, the awful sound of flesh being further torn is audible even at a distance. Lup sees Barry stumble in a wordless shout of pain before collapsing limply against the Queen's palm. It's by sheer will alone she doesn't sprint to him. It's fine. It's going to be fine. She has to convince herself that's true.

Lup watches as the crystal rises up from each point of contact to ice over the shallower marks, creating a clear, stony seal over the wounds. When the Queen breaks away, allowing Barry's unconscious form to slump to the ground, the crystal refracts the dim blue ambience of the clearing, blanketing his side in a pale blue glimmer.

The Queen straightens up and motions for Lup to approach. Lup doesn't hesitate to run the short distance. She drops to her knees at Barry's side, feather-light hands ghosting over the crystal. His breathing's already improved, steady and deep, unlike the ragged and labored breaths he managed before. His skin is already starting to cool from fever, so immediate is the effect of the Queen's power seeping through his body.

Lup could cry with relief. He's going to live. He'll live. "Thank you," she says, quiet enough the audience wouldn’t hear.

“Our proceedings have not yet concluded, Daughter.” The Queen crouches to lightly rest two fingers on Lup’s shoulder. “Speak your vow: You will follow my will.”

Lup hesitates, a luxury the Queen allows for a moment. She has to obey. The deal is already struck. She wishes she could apologize to Taako beforehand. She wishes she didn’t have to tie herself down like this, without even the benefits such a binding would normally provide. "I will follow your will," she says, already feeling the power in the magic winding through her mind.

"You will answer my call."

"I will answer your call." The cords of power slip through her very being. It's more than a promise, it's an oath, one she can never break by her own will.

"You will grant sanctuary to my allies and sanction to my foes."

"I will grant sanctuary to your allies and sanction to your foes." Lup still doesn't look at the Queen, shaking under the weight of her own words.

"I am your Queen."
"Y-you are my Queen." Lup softly gasps as the connection forms; the tiniest, sturdiest thread of her magic, now tied to the Queen and this court. It's not enough for Lup to draw from: just a reminder, a promise.

There are murmurs from the branches above, deafening in the renewed weight of the Queen's presence. The Queen is no longer just a powerful force, driving obedience through her existence. She's the center of Lup's existence, her purpose. It makes her sick to her stomach.

"You may remain in my court until he is healed." The Queen stands and turns to leave. Her steps don't make a sound. "You will learn our customs, our history. When fit to leave, you will not return without my endorsement." It's more than an order: it's law. Lup has to accept it.

The Queen passes by her throne and is gone, vanishing into the space between blue light and deep shadow. The rest of the court begins to disperse, flying or walking away from their vantage points to continue with their days. Lup stays shaking over Barry’s unconscious body, probing her bond to the Queen.

A hand on her shoulder draws her out of her thoughts. She lifts her head to see Taako, Kravitz standing politely off to the side. Taako looks worried. He hasn't been crying, but he's upset. Lup meets his gaze blankly, exhaustion evident on her face. Her eyelids droop, her lips parted ever so slightly against the effort of keeping them closed. She leans into his touch and Taako drops to the ground to pull her into a tight embrace. She shakes like a leaf in his arms.

They'd lived. Against all odds they'd lived. They may be broken and battered, but they weren't down yet. This isn't their end.

Chapter End Notes

SD: And that's it for what we've been lovingly calling 'book one' of this fic! Tansy and I are gonna both be taking a short hiatus to deal with some personal stuff (moving back to college and adjusting to a new semester for me), but if you know Welcome to Night Vale it's gonna be that kind of not-really-a-hiatus where we're still posting something. We plan to both solo write a bit of an intermission each before we move on to 'book two' of ofaf, but aren't sure when those are going to be out. Thank you so so much for all your continued support. The comments and kudos really keep us going and we truly love and appreciate all of you!
Intermission 1: Lucretia

Chapter by SparkleDragons

Chapter Summary

Lucretia meets two new faces and learns of a new threat the Hunger poses.

This storyline takes place a few decades before the main one.

Chapter Notes

WE'RE BACK!!! Sorta. Still technically on hiatus but it's been way too long and we're posting! Tansy’s intermission chapter is enroute, but it'll be a bit longer. Busy busy times. Once the second intermission is up we'll be back to a more normal posting schedule (have a nice long backlog of chapters to edit and publish for you all).

Anywho thanks for sticking around and we can't wait to get back into posting again! < 3

Lucretia sighs and places one of her upper hands on the tree. It was a foolish venture, attempting to leave anything to grow here. The oak that just last week was gorgeous and flourishing, vibrant green leaves and rich brown bark, is now cracked through with black, oily fungus. Its branches hang heavy, laden down with strands of the Hunger’s rot. She pulls a piece of ashen bark from the trunk and watches it crumble between her claws. Foolish.

Nothing not constantly upheld by natural magic can grow here and there aren’t enough fae left to maintain more than a stray tree pocket or two. It’s impossible to regrow this forest. She should have known.

Lucretia looks up towards the sky, hazy from the cloud of Hunger spores that float lazily through the upper branches, dusting the foliage as they slowly fall. She remembers when she could see the sky here, blue and beautiful. She remembers how the sun used to filter through verdant leaves, casting the forest floor in soft green light.

In autumn, when her Queen, her Matron dominated, the forest faded to a rich amber. There was nothing like it, the autumn leaves filling the forest first with colorful warmth. Then the trees were accompanied by the delicate crunch of animals scuttling through dying brush as they prepared for winter.

There was a deer herd that came through each autumn. Lucretia had liked watching them, sketching out their numbers from year to year, noting the way the males’ prongs expanded and branched over time. They would approach her, accepting pieces of fruit and a pat to their velvet noses before continuing on their way.

There are no seasons in this forest anymore, no deer, no life, and she longs for better times. Some
fae still linger, sure. Merle stays from time to time, Ren comes in from the human village when she can. Lydia and Edward make for fine company when Lucretia’s feeling lonely, but Lydia never liked her to begin with. They only socialize now for lack of anyone else available. Deep in her heart she knows things will never be the same again, but she wishes they could.

A sound catches Lucretia’s ear, the squelch of feet stepping through the fungus-carpeted floor. She turns, melting into her human form as easy as breathing. She knows her regular excuse for when humans stumble in; a young girl just looking explore and sketch the forest, naive to the dangers it poses. It works long enough for her to get a name and charm them away, using her autumn-court boons to make them forget they ever saw her. If it’s a corrupted fae, she can deal with that fine in this form too.

At first she thinks her immediate assumption was correct, as two humans push through the brush. They look incredibly similar—siblings, perhaps even twins. Golden hair and deep amber skin, eyes that sparkle like crystal with perfectly-spaced freckles across their cheeks. Gorgeous people, she thinks, before catching the magic rolling off them in waves.

Fae, then.

“Oh, fuck uh,” the one with his hair done up in a loose braid says. “Hey. Sorry. Not-uh. Not trying to cause any trouble. We were just—”

“We’re just trying to find something,” the other cuts in, her hair done in a ponytail. Their hair and apparent gender presentation are the only distinctions between them at first glance. Lucretia has to wonder why two fae would choose such similar human appearances. It can only draw unnecessary attention.

“What are you doing in these woods?” Lucretia asks, cutting to the chase. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you two here before.”

“Nah, we’re new around here,” the man says.

“Just rode in,” the woman adds on.

“Few fae unfamiliar with these trees are brave enough to wander in,” Lucretia says, not letting her guard down. “I ask again, what are you doing here, and if we could avoid the silver tongues?”

“What are you doing here, then?” the woman asks, again dodging the question. “You reek of magic.”

“Watch your tone,” Lucretia says with little bite behind it. “You speak with your better.”

The woman’s about to say something else indignant when the man grabs her hand, shaking his head. At least he’s caught on to Lucretia’s high fae aura, weak as it’s grown over the years without a court tie. Or maybe the woman just doesn't care.

The woman squints and looks Lucretia up and down. “Who are you, then?”

“I could ask you the same,” Lucretia sighs. “I don’t expect true names, but where do you hail from?”

“Uh, Tewsovina? I guess?” the man says. “But, like, fuck that place.”
“You know full well that’s not what I meant,” Lucretia says, quickly growing impatient. “Where is your court? Which Queen sent you here?”

“Oh!” The woman hits her fist into her palm and flicks a quick point towards Lucretia. “We don’t have one of those.”

That gives Lucretia pause. Don’t—? All fae have a court, even if they choose to leave it, every fae hails from somewhere, especially such high-magic fae as the two before her seem to be. What—

“What kind of fae are you that you don’t have a court?”

“I don’t know?” the man says. “Just? Fae I guess? We’re changelings if that’s what you want to know?”

“Ch—” Lucretia’s brain feels like it’s stalling. She hasn’t seen a living changeling in decades. Their reproductive tendencies made them a quick target for hunters. Beyond that, though, she’d never met a changeling not still tied to their court. She was under the impression that changelings couldn’t exist without a court to rear children in. Nothing about these two makes any sense. “Who are you two?”

“Well… I’m Taako. And, uh. That’s Lup.”

Those names carry power. It’s another shock, that they’d so willingly give their names away like that. Especially to a strange autumn fae, of all the courts. Fae can only do so much to each other, but it’s still a dangerous game to play. “It’s… Nice to meet you,” she says. “Forgive me for not giving my true name, but you may call me Luce, for now.”

“So Luce,” Lup says, looking up at the trees around her, stalling on the crumbling visage of the oak Lucretia had been working on. “Can we go?” she pitches up her tone as she stretches out the ‘o’. “Or are you, like, the guardian we gotta answer three questions from first or something.”

“No I’m not, I— What?” The longer she talks to these two, the more baffled she becomes. They talk with a sort of irreverence she’s only really experienced from Merle, and Merle was, well, Merle. “I’m a high fae. Forgive me for wanting to protect my forest should a couple of strange fae with some very strange claims wander in.”

“Look, we never really got what you would call a ‘formal education,’” Taako says, putting air quotes around the last words. “We’re really just looking for the next place to settle in.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Lucretia says, “why don’t you have a court? I was under the impression that changeling didn’t often leave their forests.”

“I mean. We never had one,” Lup says.

“Yeah,” Taako adds. “Not really interested in the whole ‘bowing the head to some Queen’ thing. We can take care of ourselves.”

“That’s… That’s not possible,” Lucretia says, knowing it must be true, at least in their minds. “And you’re both changelings? With full magic?”

Lup shrugs and turns into a sparrow in an instant, letting her clothes drop to the forest floor. She
flutters for a moment before perching on Taako’s shoulder. “Unless there’s some secret fae power I don’t know about, I think so?” Taako further demonstrates by turning into a fox, much to Lup’s displeasure as she’s displaced from his shoulder. She tugs on his ear with her beak in retrobution before perching on his back.

Lucretia’s befuddlement doesn’t change. How could a pair of changeling children exist outside a court and still end up fully-fledged fae? It didn’t make sense. One should be human, and the other’s magic should have collapsed long ago, shouldn’t exist at all. The human child had to live among a court for their development to change into that of a fae. They had to be in constant contact with fae magic for the change to take hold properly.

More rustling catches her ear and she can’t help the undignified groan. “Balls. Who is it now.” She turns, expecting to see perhaps Merle or maybe an actual human this time.

Neither are what comes stumbling out of the sick brambles. The waves of magic hit her before she sees them, distinctly wrong, lining up closer to the energy the Hunger gives off rather than that of a fae. A young-looking summer fairy stumbles her way out. Her sunflower-grown clothes are tattered and oil-slick. Her dragonfly wings drag behind her, torn and shot through with rotten black veins. Her dark brown skin has faded into a mottled, blackish gray, peppered with specks of bright, unnatural color. Hunger sludge dribbles from her mouth and she looks at the three of them like she isn’t actually seeing.

“What the fuck is that,” Lup says, jumping off of Taako as they both slip into their true forms, sharp ears and voided eyes.

“I-I don’t…” Lucretia says, staring. “I’m not sure. I’ve never—”

The sickly fairy’s head cranes unnaturally to look over at Lucretia. Her delicate, thin antenna twitch once before she releases an animalistic snarl and lunges. Lucretia’s response is just fast enough to send the other fae flying with a quick, but powerful, gust of magical wind. The summer fairy doesn’t make a sound as she hits the ground and rolls before coming to a stop.

As she slowly picks herself up, movements stuttered and unsure, Lucretia says, “What. The hell. Is wrong with you? You can’t just—”

“Watch out!” Taako cuts her off with the warning as the fae sends a surge of fire in Lucretia’s direction. She only has enough time to cover her face with her hands, expecting a painful blast of concentrated, magical flame.

It doesn’t come, only the heat, and she opens her eyes to similar outpourings of flame from both Lup and Taako diverting the one that had been coming right at her. So they’re also summer fae, then.

The… corrupted? fae lowers her arms to douse her fire and turns to snarl at Lup and Taako. They both bare their teeth right back and take on more combat-appropriate forms: Lup a brown bear and Taako a large mastiff. The other fae screams and charges them, flaming hands extended. It’s a quick fight.

Lup slams into the side of the sick summer fairy with a paw, easily knocking her to the ground, and Taako finishes her off with a quick snap of jaws around her throat. He holds tight against the burning hands presses into his sides as she struggles, and she soon goes limp.

Both Lup and Taako are panting as they turn back into their true forms; the burns along Taako’s side are already starting to heal over. Before Lucretia can snap at them for just killing a sick fairy,
said fairy’s body starts to collapse in on itself, skull and chest caving in, before melting completely into the Hunger-covered forest floor.

“What the hell was that?” Taako demands, holding onto his side.

A thousand possibilities shoot through Lucretia’s mind, but she ends up settling on, “I think the Hunger is corrupting the fae it’s absorbed…”

“That was a lot of words I didn’t understand, considering we just saved your ass,” Lup says.

None of this makes any sense. Not the corrupted fairy, and not Lup and Taako, and Lucretia is trying very hard not to freak out right now. She can’t act fearful; she has to put on an air of control, especially in front of two new fae. Lucretia sighs and let her wings and antenna unfurl, taking on her partial fairy form. “If you’d follow me, I’d like to have a longer conversation with you.”

“Yeah, not so sure I’m cool with that,” Lup says. “Following some woman we just met into the forest of fae that try to kill us?”

“I,” Lucretia starts to argue, but no, that’s fair. The forest could actually use a pair of fae like these two, now that she thinks about it. Someone to burn away the Hunger’s advances, not afraid to defend themselves. “I may have a place to offer you in this forest. If you’ll accept.”

“Really?” Lup says, still looking skeptical, but with an underlying hint of hope this time. “That’s… that’s great. I mean. We won’t want to impose but…”

“I mean we’ll stay here if we want. It’s a whole forest,” Taako says. “Besides, as uh, let’s say wild, as this place is, something about it just feels right. Like we’re supposed to be here.”

Lucretia’s not sure what to make of that. Could they have had origins from the old courts? Were their parents part of a court here, years past? Were they just warping the meaning of what they were saying with clever words? “Well, I can offer actual homes, if you’d like. If things work out,” she says, trying to hide her confusion and fear.

Taako and Lup share a look, one she can’t quite read, before they both turn back towards her and Lup says, “Alright. Lead the way I guess.”

She doesn’t voice any of her concerns, simply nods and turns to make her way through the forest, antenna and ears perked to make sure they’re following. There’s certainly a moment of pause, but eventually the crunch of dry fungal growth under their feet joins her own.

She leads them to her pocket home. If this goes sour they wouldn’t be able to re-enter without her consent, and she can always move to a different location in the forest. The portal into her home manifests as a circular patch of vibrant, green grass, stark against the rotting, fungal forest. Little, delicate, white mushrooms pop up sporadically in a ring around the patch. Fairy fungus isn’t like the Hunger’s fungus. It’s just as much a piece of nature and life as anything else in the forest. It has a purpose. Real fungus, natural fungus, cleans. It clears the forest of the dead. The Hunger? The Hunger clears life. It doesn’t feel natural. It’s not delicate or soft. It’s destructive, voracious, indiscriminate. Today has only further cemented that idea in her mind.

But this? Her little portal to home? Her magic keeps it resilient. Her own little spot of life in her forest of death.

She sighs and slips into a crouch to run a hand through the soft grass. She grips the blades between her flingers, careful not to tug and pull them from their carefully-rooted positions. As she does, she
presses some of her magic into the portal. The grass blades perk up, the mushroom cap-umbrellas open wider, and the patch of grass advances a fraction of an inch over the rot around it.

“Hachi-machi that’s some fancy work.” Taako’s voice startles Lucretia out of her thoughts.

“I— Sorry.” Lucretia stands up and brushes herself off. “Just needed to recharge the old portal.”

“Yup. No clue what the means at all!” Lup says cheerfully. Lucretia looks the two of them over. They’re hard to read, especially with their eyes starry and blank.

“Just,” Lucretia sighs. How much does she have to explain to these two. Did no one teach them anything? “I need to add more magic to the portal periodically—and surreptitiously—to keep it going. With the Hunger encroaching, it’s a delicate process.”

They both nod, but Lucretia gets the feeling they don’t fully understand. Well. They’ll figure it out if they end up living here.

“Come on. Let’s go,” she says, stepping into the circle. She stands there and waits, scrutinizing their faces as they warily shuffle forward. Definitely changelings. Knife-like ears and starry voids where their eyes should be. They give each other a look Lucretia can’t begin to parse before stepping into the circle with her.

“Little cramped isn’t it,” Taako snarks. And he isn’t wrong, but a soft tap of Lucretia’s foot activates the portal and in a blink they’re standing not in the corrupted forest, but in a small hutch seemingly woven from towering blades of brown grasses. The ground under their feet grows with a soft green grass set in earth just loose enough to curl your toes into. Little amber crystals are woven through the grass walls of the space, casting an autumn glow over her home.

Her furniture is sparse. A chair of woven branches overlaid with colorful autumn leaves, a little log table large enough for only herself, a large bare-wood bookshelf stuffed full of books she’s gathered over the years and what little she had with her to save when the courts collapsed. So many good, old books lost. There’s no bed. She has no need for it, so it would only serve to take up space.

Taako hums contemplatively as he looks around the space. It’s not as tight as the fairy ring had been, but it was certainly not designed with two guests and herself in mind. “Homey,” he says as he leans against the table.

“Taako, be nice,” Lup scolds, and shifts into a red squirrel. Taako grumbles as she skuttles up his pant leg, up his arm, and onto his shoulder: something about watching where she digs her claws in. Lucretia can’t say she’s not grateful for Lup making more space as she herself settles into the chair.

“So,” Lucretia starts. “As far as I understand it, you are two changelings with no court, very little knowledge of fae workings, no idea what this forest is, and yet you feel you belong here? Is that right?”

“That’s about the way of it,” Lup says. “Still haven’t told us who you are. What your whole deal is.”

Lucretia takes a breath. “I am Lucretia. I am a high fae and spawn of the former Queen of the Autumn Court.” She holds herself highly as the title deserves.

Lup snorts a laugh, making Lucretia falter in her prideful posture a little. “So what,” Lup asks. “You’re some kind of princess or something?”
“That’s,” Lucretia says, confused. “That’s a very, uh, human way of looking at it, I suppose.”

“I mean…” Taako shrugs and Lup chitters her complaint as she is nearly dislodged from his shoulder. “We were raised by humans. So, like, doing our best— Lup, stop it, just be a person.”

Lup sticks her tongue out as she resettles on his shoulder and says, “Being a person is for humans.”

Meanwhile, though, Lucretia’s brain is stalling for what feels like the hundredth time today. Raised by humans. That explains so much, but leaves so many questions. Of course they wouldn’t understand things any fae should. But how are they both changeling at all? How did they both end up raised by the human parents? Why weren’t they taken back to their court afterwards?

“You were… both raised by humans?” Lucretia picks as her first question.

“Yup,” Taako says, popping the ‘p’.

“I mean, they were shitty humans,” Lup adds, “but yeah.”

“Oh, real shitty for sure,” Taako says. “But I when have humans not been—”

“Why were neither of you raised by fae?” Lucretia interrupts.

“I d’know.” Taako shrugs again and Lup nips his ear. “Okay, enough of that,” he says, and picks her up off his shoulder and puts her down on the table. They’re so casual about the whole thing, as if they aren’t talking about breaking the rules of fae kind as she’s aware of them.

“Dingus,” Lup calls him, resigning herself to being on the table instead.

“Goofus,” Taako retorts. “What were we talking about?”

“Why neither of you were raised by fae,” Lucretia says. “That’s not how things work.”

“I mean,” Taako adjusts his position uncomfortably. “We could’ve gone back. If we wanted.”

“What?” Lucretia asks.

“A few decades or so back,” Lup says. “There was this other changeling who found us. Probably heard about all the shit that went down in town. Offered to take us back to the courts with him.”

“We told him to go fuck himself,” Taako says.

“The courts didn’t care about us when we were little,” Lup says.

“And we don’t trust them to care about us now,” Taako finishes.

Lucretia takes a breath she doesn’t need, a bad habit she picked up in her years acting as an ambassador to the human government. “If you have no interest in the courts, why are you here?”

“We’re sick of running from place to place,” Taako says bluntly. “Figured we’d settle down in some sort of forest.”

“And no way you can convince us this place has a court,” Lup says. “It’s… rotten.”

“It used to,” Lucreta says, trying not to let her own sorrow tinge her tone. She knows she’s failing.

“What… “ Lup starts to say, “if you don’t mind me asking… What happened here?”
Lucretia looks up to see Lup has taken the form of a small snake, coiled up on herself on the table. She sighs, another bad habit, and says, “Have either of you heard of the Hunger?”
Intermission 2: Magnus

Chapter Summary

In the very recent past, Magnus fell in love.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sum of a man’s worth can be calculated from the people he protects.

This is something Magnus has believed since he was ten and gutter trash, tiny and split-knuckled from brawling more often than eating. His foster home was packed with older boys, bigger boys, and everyone was worn-out and sick of hearing each other breathe.

Probably they fought for the same reasons: misery and stress, the frustration of knowing their lives were worth nothing to anyone, and that only labor laws kept them out of the fields or the Miller factories and in a shitty run-down schoolhouse for shitty run-down kids.

But Magnus also believed he wasn’t like the other boys. He had them figured out. They were always seeking to wound because that was the only way they knew how to leave a mark on the world. They’d shred newspapers and shatter windows and dent plaster. They’d piss on flowerbeds and throw rocks at cats, puffed up for their friends. All “look at me”. All very proud in the act of breaking.

The worst was when they went after dogs. Birds and cats were too hard for them to catch, but dogs would trot right up with wagging tails for an offered piece of biscuit. Magnus got a lot of black eyes for those dogs.

He got beaten bloody but he won every time, because they’d let the dogs go as soon as they had him. Maybe that was their game. Maybe. Magnus didn’t care. He’d keep chasing them down because it was the right thing to do. Even when he was left with his ears ringing and an ache at the back of his skull, one that wouldn’t go away after sitting in the school for hours, zoned out and quiet. He’d let the teacher’s words wash over him, rubbing chalk over his slate until the whole face was solid, bright white.

It was fine. He was never gonna be good at school. He was a dumb orphan, so he was never gonna be good.

But he could do good. Recklessly, wholeheartedly, and all by his damn self. So maybe things would work out. If not for him, then for everyone else. For all the stray dogs.

He was a stray dog when he showed up at the Hammer & Tongs in the pouring rain, seventeen and strapped with hard-won muscle. School hadn’t worked out. The foster home hadn’t worked out, but he didn’t give a shit about that. He’d found a job he liked, sitting shotgun on the mail wagons that ran through all the small towns from Goldcliff to Rockport.

Word was, any time you passed through countryside where running water was sparse, you had to watch for fae as much as bandits. He never saw either, but it made the drivers feel safer to have
him by their side, and he could take the reins on long shifts so they could get some shut-eye.

But then that didn’t work out either. The post switched to Rockport’s shiny new railroad. He hadn’t owned the horses or the wagons, so he couldn’t go on with them to cart passengers around cities. He couldn’t work on the trains, because he had a record from fighting all through school. No one had ever cared about his record before.

He was only in Raven’s Roost because he thought he’d head east and see about farm work, or go south to the rotting forest, because everyone knew those little border towns on its edges were emptying out. Someone had to need a hand, and he wasn’t scared of any monsters. So he hitched a ride.

And then he was on foot, because he was near out of money for travel. And then the sky came down like doomsday. And then, while he was fighting through dirt roads as they collapsed into rusty mud, everyone safe inside put on gas lamps. And then, in one of those butter-yellow windows, he saw the Help Wanted sign.

He says all this in a rush to the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen. She looks at him with two dark, crinkled eyes above a perfect round nose, her face framed by flyaway frizz like a lion’s mane, and she says, “So, okay, that sounds like it sucked. Now are you gonna stand out there all night, or how about instead you come in and get dry?”

Hammer & Tongs is a blacksmithy, he finds. The lumpy stucco walls of the attached living area have been sanded and scrubbed, but he can still see smudges from ash on the inside, especially on the one stone wall around the far door. The world’s most beautiful girl makes him shuck his boots and gives him a wooden thing to scrape mud off from the knee down. “I’d almost like to get those pants off you too,” she says.

“Hah,” Magnus says, very intelligently.

“Wait right there.” He freezes and does his best to look meek and harmless as she goes to a cluttered table up near a wall. She grabs a chair to drag over to him, yanking off quilts and a hung dress and kitchen towels. “You can sit on this without getting mud everywhere. Maybe my dad has some pants that’ll fit you. He’s Steven, by the way. And I’m Julia, Julia Waxmen.”

“Ah,” Magnus says.

“And your name is?”

“Nagmas Burns—I mean, Magnus. Magnus Burnsides. Ma’am.”

Julia laughs at him so hard she doubles over. When she looks up, tears streaming from her eyes, he’s grinning back.

Julia and Steven live in the little room with the table, and in the loft above. The blacksmithy is attached, and sometimes the smoke gets in, but the wooden shutters to plug the windows up are sturdier than in most houses, and they keep out the worst of it. The Waxmens’s place is nice. There aren’t many two-story homes this far out of Goldcliff. Steven is apparently a pillar of the community, as far as Raven’s Roost has one.

The town used to be thriving, Steven tells him the next morning, after he asks about the Help
Wanted sign. Magnus balls up the quilt he slept on, lifts the leather-strip cot frame back up against the wall, then hurries to pull bacon out of the oven. Julia’s shucking peanuts, her chair pulled under the window so the breeze can tease the sweat-damp curls off her forehead.

“Couple years back, we got a new governor,” Steven says. “He’s a real piece of work. This place used to be independent, and it was safe as anything, but he put his goons to patrolling the streets anyway. They get in a few fights, and suddenly there’s a curfew for ‘public safety’. Then he started asking for taxes. People were always happy to contribute to public works, raise a few roofs, that sort of thing. And we already pay taxes to the state, so what’s he taking local taxes for? I wish I knew, because he’s not saying, and none of that money’s come to any good use. A lot of folks just left.”

“That sounds terrible,” Magnus says, hoping he doesn’t sound too earnest. He’s mad, really he is, but he doesn’t want to use his mad voice. Steven and Julia are such nice people. He wants them to think well of him.

“It is.” Steven nods firmly. “Everyone’s had it with him, except for the people on his payroll. We can’t figure out where he gets the money. Boys down at the pub are thinking he must be somebody’s son. Gotta be family money, because a little community like this can’t support that big governor’s mansion he’s having put in. Not even at his absurd tax rates.”

“I thought—excuse me if I’m talking out of my ass, I don’t want to seem like I think I’m any kind of authority because I know I’m not—but I thought the artisan scene was pretty strong here? Like, by reputation.” Open-air markets in Goldcliff frequently featured goods made in the Roost: elaborately woven rugs, silver jewelry, hand-glazed pottery. Sometimes shop windows had papers up advertising those wares. Even Magnus, who reckons he’ll never make enough money to afford so much as a single silver spoon, knows them.

“That’s why Kalen moved in,” Julia says. Her fingers methodically rip shell after shell, each whispering down in fragments to the apron stretched across her knees. Talking doesn’t slow her down one bit. “The crafts district makes us pretty wealthy for a small town. But, because we’re so small, we didn’t have much structure. No institutions, no one to give him hell when he took charge.”

“We’re not incorporated,” Steven puts in. “There’s no utilities—or voting. When the state appointed Kalen, that was it. We didn’t get any say. I don’t think anyone in town had even met the guy.”

Conspiratorially, he leans in and shoots Julia a meaningful look. She twists in her chair and closes the shutters tight.

“Don’t go repeating this,” Steven says to Magnus, who jerks a nod like his head is on a pole. “But I know someone—a friend of a friend—who’s looking into how Kalen got made governor. Who recommended him, who approved the appointment. Maybe—and you didn’t hear this from me—whose palms he greased.”

Magnus lets out a low whistle. “That sounds pretty serious.”

“Glad you understand, son,” Steven says. “I think you’re gonna get along here just fine.”

After that, Steven acts like he’s only now remembering Magnus’s question about the Help Wanted sign. Turns out it’s the off season for the smithy. Most of their work comes after the harvest, when farmers have time to round up their broken ploughs and spades, and then later in the spring, when yearlings and new lintels alike need protective iron horseshoes.
When it’s quiet, Steven whittles. He also, as it turns out, made all the furniture in the house, from the kitchen table and chairs to the bedframes. “I don’t tan my own leather, though,” he laughs. “I’ll show you the tannery on some day there’s a stiff wind. Makes the smell more tolerable.”

That’s how Magnus realizes he gets to stay.

As soon as the mud’s dry enough to venture out, Steven puts Magnus to work. There are potholes in the gravel path running from the road to the smithy’s door that need filled, garden beds to turn over for the coming winter, and a few cracked tiles on the roof. Magnus sweeps the furnace’s chimney out for the first time in maybe years. Julia laughs when she sees the soot gathered in his eyebrows. She gives him a handkerchief to wrap over his mouth before he heads back up.

He washes her handkerchief real careful in the stream at the edge of town. Julia showed him the little path down the cliffside. It’s not that steep, but from the bottom, the only thing tall enough to peek over the lip of the arroyo is the scaffolding around Kalen’s new mansion.

“You keep it,” she says, when he offers her the dingy square of fabric. “I’ve got a million of ‘em.” The smile she gives him is brighter than the afternoon sun.

He nods dumbly. He feels like he’s been on his back foot ever since arriving in town. He doesn’t understand it, with how well things are going. Steven doesn’t pay much, but Magnus still has plenty of pocket money because room and board are free. And he’s kind. Everyone in town is kind. The work is hard, but the days are short, and when the sun sets he gets to go help Julia finish supper in the kitchen. Magnus is no chef, but they’ve made egg casserole and yeast rolls and they’re working on a three-bean soup tonight. Steven is watching the pot simmer in the kitchen for them. Julia said she was glad to get out of the house and do laundry for an hour, because steam makes her hair poof into an unmanageable cloud.

Everything has been kind of perfect. Magnus supposes he’s still waiting for that first sign of it all going wrong.

“I’m about done here,” Julia says. In the time it took Magnus to scrub her handkerchief, she expertly dragged a wicker hamper through the fastest part of the stream. He helps her haul it back to the shore by a rope. The clothes inside are sodden and freezing. “Yup, looking good.”

“No, you,” Magnus says with his heart in his throat. Instead of being taken aback, she laughs at his terrible joke. It’s the first time they flirt.

Magnus meets the farrier, the silversmith, a couple of plasterers, and several farmers at the pub. At first he thinks Julia and Steven are taking him around to be friendly. He loves it. The music is coarse, raucous, and the hand-carved furniture is comfortable and charmingly rough.

Steven fetches a round of beers as they settle at a table in the corner, next to a smoldering fireplace. The silversmith leans over and Julia passes her logs to stoke it higher. Steven sets the beers on the table just as a merry blaze roars to life.

Magnus takes a sip. The beer’s thin and hoppy, but seasoned with something unusual that he loves
instantly. It’s tangy in a way that coats the inside of his mouth. Julia waggles her tongue at him until he notices that she’s copied the face he’s making, and they share a laugh.

When Steven calls a toast, instead of saying congratulations or cheers, he speaks in a low voice below the clink of their mugs and the crackling fire. “So, here’s what we’ve found.”

It’s not long before Kalen sends men to Hammer & Tongs. Julia answers the door, but they brush her aside. She has time to call out the window before they circle around the smithy to the back yard, where Magnus is acting as pit-man for Steven. He shoves as Steven pulls the whipsaw upwards, the wind carrying sawdust away from the timber they’re splitting, delivered that morning from the logging camps out east. Julia’s handkerchief is tied securely over his mouth.

When Steven has the saw set down safe on the timber, Magnus tries to climb out of the pit before Kalen’s goons reach them. He doesn’t make it. One of them stalks towards Steven and, before Magnus can shout, shoves him into the pit.

Things could’ve been bad if the saw hadn’t been safely away. Magnus catches Steven around the shoulders and helps him find his footing in the loose sawdust and sticky clay coating the bottom of the pit.

“And that’s your warning,” the goon is saying. “Dissident behavior ain’t gonna be tolerated. The boss doesn’t appreciate you digging into his private life. Have some fucking decency and mind his privacy, before we make you mind it.”

Magnus drops Steven’s shoulders. “Excuse me, I’m sorry?” He digs his fingers into the side of the pit and vaults out in one powerful motion. It feels good. He feels big, drawing up to his full height. The goons’ eyes go to his knuckles when he cracks them. “Because it seems to me that you came onto this private citizen’s property to what, threaten him? That’s some two-bit thug bullshit, so, counteroffer: You guys leave. Now.”

One of the men spits at him. Miraculously, Steven seizes Magnus’s arm in mid-swing, before the punch can connect. Clay coats his hands and knees from his scramble out of the pit. “I think everybody would be interested, if word of this got around,” he says, low and even. “You gentlemen had best be going.”

The goons shoot each other meaningful looks. One of them steps forward. “Hey!” someone calls.

Julia’s coming around the edge of the smithy with a gaggle of neighborhood women Magnus has barely met. They surge forward in a pack. Their hands are empty, but their strides are so purposeful that it’s almost like they’re looking for a fight. “There you boys are,” she says cheerfully, and turns to the goons. “I’m Julia Waxmen, and I don’t think we’re acquainted?”

They shuffle, flat-footed. She’s thrown off their script. “Now, you look here,” one says. “We’re having an important discussion ‘bout some of the governor’s concerns on respect—”

“If this was a conversation about respect, then that rat’s-ass Kalen wouldn’t have sent thugs to rough up an old widower at his home.” Julia’s tone is bright and cheery in the same way as a bonfire. When the goons lunge for her, Magnus can’t get between them fast enough. Her gut-punch lands with a thud and she hooks an ankle behind the goon’s knee to trip him before he knows what’s happening.
The other one rushes forward and one of Julia’s friends shrieks. Two others take up the chorus, and a third rushes forward and slaps him in the back of the head.

The ensuing chaos sees half the town pour out onto the streets. In retelling, the story becomes that the well-respected Waxmens were assaulted in their own yard. No one cares to repeat Kalen’s accusation of dissidence. It’s beneath mentioning; it’s thick in the air. Everyone breathes it.

A lot of the suspicion falls on Magnus. He welcomes it; as a young man living with the Waxmens, new in town without any kind of family, it was inevitable. He would describe himself as strapping, so it’s no surprise that he can’t even go to the vegetable market without a tail. He has fun making them watch as he gossips with the farmers and puts arduous effort into discriminating between cabbages.

Across town, Julia’s conducting a meeting with her sewing circle. They’re working on quilts for the winter that nips at their heels, stealing daylight bit by bit. They exchange intel while they sew. Two of the women are maids in the finished parts of Kalen’s mansion, and between them they’ve seen every sponsor and head-of-state he’s met with this month. They’ve worked out a list of names of legislators who oppose Raven’s Roost ratifying its own charter. One of the other women has an uncle married to a big-city lawyer, and she’s struck up a correspondence about the state of the Roost.

Magnus loves being the face of the rebellion. He gets to make noise at the pub. He thumps his chest and gives vague, optimistic speeches in his big, booming voice. He swaggers down the street, always staying on paths as public as possible, so he can wave to his friends while Kalen’s militiamen grind their teeth.

He's proud of what a fantastic distraction he is. That’s what the face does. Keeps the brain hidden behind it, safe. Half the town knows Julia’s the one to go to with whispered news and plans, and Kalen’s men must know she’s the one who punched out a guy, but no one ever dogs her footsteps.

Kalen hires someone to ward his mansion, the bastard. They only know it wasn’t a licensed hunter because there’s no record of the warding. Nothing for them to use.

One of their maids is eliminated right away; she’s fae enough, from somewhere back in her family tree, that the act of crossing the threshold takes her legs out from under her.

While she sobs to her husband about losing her job, on the bench behind the smithy, leaves shower down from the trees like the coming snow. Julia brings them both mugs of coffee that Steven made and slips back into the smithy with Magnus to give them privacy. He’s trying to pretend he can’t hear what they’re saying. They have the forge pumping, so the shutters have to be left open for fresh air to circulate. He hopes all the iron doesn’t bother Julia’s friend.

“I think she was targeted,” Julia says.

Magnus answers in his best approximation of a whisper. “You think they figured out she’s a spy?” The woman’s stifled sobs increase. He winces.
“I couldn’t say.” Julia grabs up tongs and furiously shoves a bar into the forge. Magnus doesn’t ask what she’s making. Whether or not there’s an order he’s forgetting about, the metal is hers to use. “But what I do know is, things are getting dangerous. If they notice that we’re wrong-footed now, they’ll figure she was our in.”

“What should we do?” Magnus asks. The voices from the bench have grown very quiet.

Julia shakes her head. “I’ll think of something.”

Less than a week later, Steven starts a petition for incorporating Raven’s Roost. Julia’s friend’s uncle wrote back. They’re not sure they can get enough signatures, even with the support of everyone in town—there’s never been any kind of census, and the population might just be too low—but it’s a fantastic distraction. By all accounts, Kalen is livid. His mansion isn’t furnished yet and already the greedy peasants are trying to run him out! He rages about Steven’s recalcitrance and idiocy for an hour. They don’t even need a spy to discover this; he left the window to his study open.

Julia’s friend’s uncle writes back again, weeks later. Turns out, it doesn’t matter that they don’t have the full thousand signatures. More than eight in ten adults signed. They can win by percentage. Magnus escorts Steven to Goldcliff while Julia holds down the fort and runs her spy ring, and then it’s time for elections.

There’s never any question about who they’ll put forward as a candidate. Julia takes Magnus aside in the arroyo, far, far downstream from Kalen’s mansion, and kisses him. “I want to start a family,” she says. “I don’t want to have to look over my shoulder all the time. I really don’t want to deal with all the paperwork and schmoozing you need to do to run a town. Is that selfish?”

Magnus scoops her into his arms and presses his bushy beard against her face in a kiss. “No. Hey, he said he wanted to do this. And also, like, you’ve been really good at the spy thing. I don’t think we could get your name out there in time if we tried. But, if you do wanna try—”

Julia laughs. “No, that’s okay. Are you seriously not going to say anything about me wanting to start a family?”

“Well, I didn’t want to make assumptions—”

“You ass. Of course I meant with you.”

Falling in love with Julia was the easiest thing Magnus has ever done. He thought, once, that it
should be more like in stories. But there was a total absence of revelation or turmoil. Not even a little scandal. It was like waking up one morning to the smell of fresh bread. It was like a warm summer rain that comes through in minutes and leaves everything fresh and sparkling. He turned his head, her eyes met his, and there it was.

That was what he was doing this for. While he cared deeply about fairness, about keeping safe what was yours, other ideals were more the Waxmens’s purview. Magnus only loved this town because it was theirs. But this was what he believed now: that love made the world a better place. It deserved to be fed. Nourished. Protected.

“I agree,” Julia said, sitting across from him. They’d pushed their mattresses together on the floor of the loft two nights ago, so they could pile their quilts and huddle together for warmth. Steven got the cot near the fireplace, because a few embers smoldering overnight helped keep his joints from aching. He didn’t seem to care they were sharing a bed. “My thinking is, people need something to invest themselves in. It can be beauty, or craft, or learning things to go in books. But everyone wants to put something into the world. And people are your safest bet, the way to do the most good. Because they’re what we have in the end—when dirt’s shoveled into your grave, all you’ve got left are the lives you touched.”

She slowly untucked her legs from her nightgown and lay herself down on the bed. Like this, her hair was a stormcloud, dark and wild. Magnus rolled onto his side to face her. “That’s Kalen’s problem,” she continued. “I never met a man as grasping and desperate as him. He cares so damn much about his stupid mansion and his wealth and his legacy. He’s never had a thought about investing in other people worth a bent penny. Everything he thinks will save him is gonna wind up dust.”

“So, what, he thinks if he has enough money it’ll make him not a total waste of oxygen? Like anyone cares how much fancy shit he has more than how much of a raging dick he is?” Magnus can see it. None of Julia’s people ever fingered any family or confidants. The only people in Kalen’s life were the ones he’d bought.

Julia took his wrist, turning his palm over in hers. “From that statue he commissioned, I’d sure guess so.”

Magnus barked a laugh and squeezed her hand. “Fuck, who would even take the job? He’s pissed off uh, everyone who could?”

“From around here,” Julia agreed, dancing fingertips up his arm. “But Mark and Gil took the job. Half up front, rest due on completion. Gil’s ordering granite from Rockport.”

“No!” Magnus gasped.

Julia’s smile stretched wicked. “Yes. And the granite’s gonna be waylaid before the train’s even halfway here. Accidentally shipped to someone else, you see. Mistake with the invoice. And then, if I can help it, that’ll happen again. And again. Mark and Gil will get to keep Kalen’s money for not one ounce of sweat.”

She went easily when he hauled her against his chest. “Ho-ly shit,” he giggled. “You’re brilliant, right? You know that?”

She tipped her chin up to meet his gaze, her eyes crinkled with mirth. “Mm, I reckon so. But tell me more.”
They’ll get married a couple months after the election. Magnus doesn’t even think to propose; he thoughtlessly broaches the subject one day, Julia agrees wholeheartedly, and Steven reminds them they’ll need to give plenty of advance warning as to the date. Half the town will want to attend.

Later, she makes them rings. “These are for the engagement. I commissioned Farha to do us some silver ones too, and she was pretty panicked until she realized I meant for like, next month at the soonest.”

“Oh yeah, fuck, Kalen’s stupid embargo tax thingy. Tariff? It’s not importing anything if we’re in the same fucking country, does he still get to call it a tariff? Anyway, you think we should send a guy to do some good old-fashioned smuggling? Does she need the hand?”

Julia shakes her head. “It’s not as urgent as making sure everyone’s fed. She and I just had a laugh over how likely it is for Kalen to throw our marriage certificate on the fire if we try to file while he’s in office.”

“Ooh, yeah, that guy hates me an awful lot. Can’t imagine why,” Magnus says with a grin. He’s got a black eye from his latest tussle with the militia. The other guys have six broken fingers between them. They can’t arrest him if he wrecks their shit first. There’s no law on their side, just muscle, and he has more.

Julia slides the ring onto his finger. When she gets it past his knuckle hair and to the joint, it fits perfectly. Thick, cool iron, smooth and solid. A humble ring for humble folk. He closes his fist and cups the spot she engraved their initials on in his palm. “It’s perfect,” he says, voice wavering.

“I’m glad.” She gives him the smuggest look. She’s gorgeous. “You know, Mr. Burnsides, you’re supposed to get down on one knee to propose. Not bring it up over hashbrowns, in front of my father.”

“Oh.” He grins. It makes his swollen eye ache a little, but she looks him up and down like he’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen. “My apologies, future Mrs. Burnsides. I guess I owe you one. If it helps, I could get on my knees right now?”

She shrieks a laugh and slaps his shoulder. Then she takes him up on it.

There’s no plan for Kalen’s mansion after Steven wins the election. It’s got so much empty space. More than a dozen rooms with half-finished, intricate details: picture rails and tin-molded ceilings and lincrusta friezes, all shipped from Rockport or Goldcliff at great expense.

Most of the rooms are sitting bare when Steven does his walkthrough of the mansion. He calls them monuments to vanity and tells everyone assembled that they’ll board the mansion up for now and run the town from the smithy.

The location is central enough. They have more neighbors lately. No one wants to spread too far from the arroyo and its stream until wells are dug, so the building teams have been infilling between existing structures. Steven and Julia talked eagerly about turning the smithy’s living space into an outbuilding and putting a new house on their lot. Maybe adding an office, or something like a town hall, though the mansion has more space for that sort of thing.
Magnus is crossing his fingers for them to designate the old living space as a woodshop. He thinks that, if he dedicated a full year to building stock, he could bring in plenty of clients. He’s gotten really good; Julia said the last couple rocking chairs he finished were gorgeous.

They hadn’t planned to run Kalen out of the mansion. Julia glowered while speculating how many months he’d squat in there like some fat toad. Instead, he and a few of his goons disappeared on their own in the middle of the night. Apparently he saddled up his horses, loaded his carriages, and drove out of town in the dark.

Escaping justice before his corruption could be investigated, everyone assumes. Cutting his losses. Running off somewhere to hide his cash and ledgers. Raven’s Roost is full of strong bodies and minds; they’ll have no problem rebuilding without all his hoarded wealth. He won’t be missed.

Magnus takes Julia’s favorite rocking chair to a showcase in Neverwinter. Black oak with lavender polish.

When he makes it back, the empty mansion is matchsticks. The first streets that he could picture himself calling home for years to come are buried under rubble. He finds the smithy by the four lonely stone walls left, lined with all the picks and shovels and spades they were repairing, and the hammers and tongs they used to do the work. The way the walls sag makes all that iron bow inwards like the bars on a cage.

The forge is twisted where the chimney collapsed. The anvil, when he runs his hands across it, shocks him. There’s an oily cling of static across its surface that makes his hair stand up. He stumbles over the threshold and kicks impotently at the rubble. He digs, flinging away bricks, chunks of blackened plaster, and shattered wood for the sake of something to do. Looking for what was lost days ago, with him none the wiser.

After his fingers are scraped bloody and it’s too dark to see, he sits with his back to the smithy wall and weeps.

Hours later, when he’s all cried out, he sees a glimmer. Faint, bobbing lights. Like will o’ wisps, maybe, or the burning marsh gas he was told could be taken for them, except that Raven’s Roost is arid. He trained to deal with situations like this: drive straight ahead, never follow the lights, don’t let the horses spook. Head for running water.

They don’t really look like wisps. They look like little fires, somehow still burning. The afterimage of violence. He can’t figure out what the hell happened to Raven’s Roost. This is impossible. They’d won. Kalen was gone, Steven was mayor, and Julia was planning their wedding. They were supposed to have their lives ahead of them. Nothing makes sense. What the hell could flatten so many homes? Why didn’t he see it coming?

He doesn’t follow the lights or head for water. There’s nowhere left for him to go, though he thinks of how the arroyo looked, with its slope collapsing steeply under the weight of the mansion’s rubble. He can think of one very fast way to reach the bottom.

The lights fade in the morning, but he knows they’re still there. The roots of his teeth ache too
He sees smoke rising in the distance. He squints, stands. Scrubs tear-tracks from his face, leaving dried blood and ash and dirt behind.

Far from the smithy, houses still stand. He pauses. He sways in place, staring sightlessly. The loft where he and Julia slept collapsed into the kitchen. It’s all shattered tiles and planks. Nothing salvageable.

Eventually, he staggers away.

Chapter End Notes

My schedule is still crammed. The patience is appreciated. --Tansy
Gravel crunches underfoot, damp with melting frost. It’s unseasonably cold; the clouds hanging overhead, thick and grey like sodden wool, are hours away from bursting into freezing rain. The breeze has warmed steadily day after day. But here, dozens of miles from that warmth offered by ocean currents, there are no mountains to arrest the winds speeding through, or forests offering shelter. The vast expanse of farmland is spread flat like an ironed quilt. The last town they passed through sits miles back, somewhere among rows of plowed earth. Little copses of trees stud the fields here and there: windbreaks planted around the scattered houses, or small groves on the uneven banks of streams.

There’s no one else out braving the weather, but Barry still wanted to walk. Lup doesn’t mind indulging him, not after so long without the choice. They make for two dark specters, ambling as strangers along this familiar road.

Same few houses, same bounded fields, same crops planted, by and large. One year or a hundred could have slipped past. The farms out here are timeless, in a sense. This kind of idyllic landscape sells paintings. He used to agree that he was blessed to be raised out in nature like this: bucolic and idealized. Sterile in its fertility. Rattling empty to his senses.

In his childhood, he spent days looking for fae in the abbreviated forests and never found any. There aren’t even enough trees for deer.

There must be mice in the fields, squirrels and opossums hidden away in the thin slivers of forest. Birds should soon be returning for the spring. But, for now, only the wind moves around them. He feels the chill more acutely than he used to. Like being submerged in cold water, it blankets his skin beneath his coat. He doesn’t shiver.

His side aches and pulls with every step and his calves throb dully. He doesn’t move like himself. He might not look like himself, either. He can’t say: everything looked strange, under the pall of the—his?—Queen’s power. Light was diffusive, shadows were inky. Even the most universal rhythms were tenuous. The sun and the moon seemed to rise and fall at her behest.

He watches the lone pecan tree sway during their long approach. It’s set back from the road, left to mark a ditch where rainwater puddles and seeps into the earth. From a distance, its boughs are
indistinctly grey and skeletal. His gut can tell that only half its branches are speckled with the furled buds of new leaves before his eyes can. Several limbs are good only for firewood, creaking at splintered junctions. Their shapes, dry and heavy, feel as solid in his head as they would under his hands.

They take a left, off the gravel road and onto a dirt one, leading into a copse of trees like any other. There are no other landmarks, just spindly hickories stretching to hold the sky up. He wonders if they’ve grown taller, or if he has.

The farmhouse tucked away behind the hickories gapes through the center, under its rusting tin roof. Blue gingham curtains are drawn over the dark windows of the rooms on either side of the open hallway. The summer breeze will be funneled between the rooms, perfect for sitting and playing checkers or reading a book. Today, the only creature enjoying the breezeway is the ticked tabby cat occupying a rocking chair, curled into itself for want of a blanket. It gives him a baleful glare when he stops before the porch to scrape mud from his boots. They don’t recognize each other.

The first step creaks. The second groans. He used to jump the railing when he wanted to sneak out. Rolled his ankle doing that, one spring. His footfalls hit the porch to the sound of a door swinging open.

His mother peeks out from the living room. Relief jolts through him. He’d chosen to trust when told she’d still be waiting, but hadn’t been sure. She looks nearly the same as he last saw her, hair just a shade greyer, wrinkles deepening at the corners of her mouth. She has a broom in her hand; she could’ve been sweeping or preparing to beat an intruder. Her eyes, the same shape and color as his, reflect confusion back at him. Her gaze flickers between him and Lup, taking in their plain black traveling coats. Recognition takes far too long to spark.

But it does. She throws down her broom and rushes forward, yanking him into a hug.

Lup averts her eyes, hanging back at the bottom of the steps. His mother is shaking and crying and it feels far too intimate for her to intrude. It's hard to tell how long she and Barry were in the court, especially for Lup; time is always a tricky concept when you’re functionally immortal. It was a long time for a human, though probably not as long as Barry feared. Still long enough for the seasons to change, long enough for him to start going stir-crazy by the end of it. He should have this time with his mom in peace.

The rolling fields of grass are just starting to turn green. She takes a moment to revel in the feeling of actual wind on her face. It's nice to smell something other than pine again, to feel the sun on her face. She didn't realize how much she'd missed this. The physical world is so much brighter and colorful than the dusky, cool glow of the winter court.

A soft thud from the porch catches her attention and she turns to see the cat judging her from between the supports in the railing. Animals have a way of knowing things. It knows she's not human, probably knows Barry isn't anymore either, not fully at least. Lup risks a glance at the reunion and wonders whether he's realized. His magic is different now. Colder, less abrasive. Even then, she can't quite tell how much the... her Queen's interference changed him. It's not her place to know. She hates that.

After several minutes of shaky, teary hugging, Barry's mother whispers, "They told me you died."

Lup can tell she wasn't meant to hear that. To distract herself, she doubles down on petting the cat. She gets little more than a sniff before being swatted and hissed at.
"I'm okay," Barry says. He puts his hand under his mother's shawl and rubs circles on her back, over her cotton dress. "I just got—caught up for a while. Everything's okay."

"You missed Candlenights," she says, leaning back with narrowed eyes. This is the woman who raised him. He should know better than to lie to her. The look she gives him is scathing. "Davenport's been visiting, with some of his people. He was sure you were dead. It's been months, Barry. What did you do?"

Barry 'Bluejeans,' for all his plotting, has never gotten away with anything in his life. He stops trying to rub her back, but leaves his arms hovering at her shoulders as she turns to look Lup up and down. "It's—it's a long story. Uh, and this is— Can I introduce you to Lup? Lup, this is Marlena, my mom."

Lup can't help the tiny wince at the exchange of real names. She trusts Barry with her life, of course she does, but that doesn't make her any less keenly aware of the iron nails driven into the doorframe of the rickety old house. She's not exactly welcome here, whether Marlena is aware of that yet or not.

"It's nice to meet you," Lup says, instead of voicing any of this. She takes the introduction as permission to climb the steps. The iron in the roof makes it feel ponderously heavy over her head.

Marlena takes Lup's offered hand warmly and she wonders how much Marlena’s guessed. Lup can tell she's a smart woman by the way she eyes Barry. She recognizes that he’s changed the topic.

"Where did you two meet then?" Marlena asks, her tone judgemental and sarcastic in a way Lup’s nature makes her hard-pressed to pick up on. "Are you another hunter, Lup?"

Lup stalls. She’s very sure she shouldn't be the one to break the news that, no, she's the changeling Barry was traveling with.

Barry sighs. There is no way in hell that Marlena actually believes Lup is another hunter. She's had months to piece together a picture of what she thought were Barry's last couple weeks. By his own admission, in the reports and letters he left, he followed a changeling into the northern woods ruled by foreign courts. And then vanished.

And, improbably, came back mere months later. Changed, enthralled, but returned home safer than anyone hoped. He crosses over the threshold into his childhood home and his nerves jangle against the warding nails affixed to the doorframe. Davenport must've put some juice into them on his last visit; Barry can feel them like he hadn’t been able to before.

There's the living room, with the padded bench piled high with the scratchy blankets he hates, facing a sooty fireplace. There's the poker he almost put the neighbor girl's eye out with, playing at dueling when they were seven. There are the strings of onions and garlic hung up in the kitchen, bundles of sage and rosemary drying in the open window and the potbelly iron stove in the corner. The table where he read his first book and learned to write. Where he ate dinner every Candlenights of his life—except this past one.

He scrubs tears from his face. He thinks he's crying harder than Marlena, though his skin still feels cold to his fingers. Marlena's sniffing hard, cheeks colored red, but his breathing remains slow and even. She turns back to the breezeway to address Lup through the open door. "I hope you and my son have your stories straight. He's a terrible liar, you know."

"Mom!" Barry protests. "C'mon, we can just—Lup, come on in—I'm not planning to lie to you, honest."
With the invitation, the wards on the house lessen enough for Lup to pass through, but she still feels her magic bristle in protest as she ducks under the nails, careful not to even come close to brushing them. She may have grown accustomed to the presence of iron when traveling with Barry, but the months in the court had restored her more-reasonable fear and discomfort.

"Trust me," Lup says, trying to add a little humor to ease her nerves. This is Barry's mother. She won't hurt her. "I'm sure I'm a worse liar than he is." The screen door clacks shut and Lup can feel the cat's glare following her until she makes it around a corner.

It's a nice place, quaint compared to the grandiosity of the court. Lup had almost forgotten how square human design is, how unnatural. It smells nice, vastly more interesting than the ever-present pine musk.

"Now then." Marlena's gaze hardens as she sits at the table; her glare is undercut by red eyes and tear-stained cheeks. "Where have you been, Barry? They... Davenport stopped by after Candlenights, and... He said you were traveling with a changeling when you... disappeared." She sends a glance in Lup's direction. It's not aggressive, but Lup certainly feels like she's being at accused. That's fair. It was Lup's fault this happened.

"Well, she didn't kill me," Barry says, rubbing the back of his neck. "She uh, didn't do anything to me—except saved my life, actually." Untangling all the heresy is going to be such a mess. He has no idea where to start.

He drafted a few letters, once he could stay awake and sit up. Fingers numb and shaking around a quill pen, blunting the nib as he fumbled through explanations. All that effort came to nothing; the papers ended up crumpled and burnt in a candle flame. The Queen, in no uncertain terms, banned Kravitz from so much as thinking about opening even the teeniest of portals to shove a letter through. All his magic was apportioned for punitive duties, and nevermind any collateral damage to Barry's life. And no other high fae of her court would be sympathetic. He was supposed to leave his old loyalties behind.

"She didn't do anything to you," Marlena parrots, tone dubious. "What mess did you get yourself into? I've been collecting your death benefits. Everyone was—was very sure—"

Her voice breaks around a sob. She crumples forward like she's been punched in the gut, hiding her face against the scratched and burned varnish of the tabletop. Barry pulls a chair to sit with her and drapes across her shoulders, nose buried in her shawl. "Lup—yeah, she's, she's the changeling I met on—my last big case. Her brother was—well, he'd gone missing. So, we searched. But I'm back. And I'm—I'm okay. I'm so sorry for scaring you."

Lup collapses in on herself. "I'm sorry... Fuck I'm sorry. It's my fault he was gone so long. I—I thought I could protect him, and I failed..."

That's the truth, isn't it? Barry wouldn't have followed her into the forest if she hadn't said she could fight off any danger, that she could talk her way out of a confrontation with other fae. Hell, he wouldn't have even been in their forest if he hadn't been kind enough to help her find Taako.

She'd turned this over in her head again and again for the last few months, but she hadn't thought about how Barry’s absence would affect the other people in his life. She barely even stopped to think that he’d likely be assumed dead. Of course they'd think she did something, and honestly, they weren't entirely wrong.

"Failed to protect him from what?" Marlena looks up and meets Barry's eyes. "Other fae? Barry, what happened? Why aren't you telling me?" She reaches up a hand to hold his cheek, rubbing
small circles with her thumb. "I need to know you're okay."

He winces. The tension in his shoulders coils down his back to pull at his sore side. "Lup, it's *not your fault*. You didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do." He knew what he was getting into when he followed her. The decision was his to trespass, out of concern for her and her brother, but also arrogance. He was a hunter. He'd been in plenty of fights. He thought he could take care of himself.

He scoots his chair closer to Marlena and reaches for her. She bats his hands away to grab a cloth and blow her nose before letting him pull her into a hug. "Don't you make any excuses to me. You better be planning to tell that 'long story.' Every time you dodge the question I get more worried."

Her hand finds his face again. She strokes along his cheeks and brushes his bangs back, as if reassuring herself he's real and whole. Her palm caresses him and a dull pain blooms in his cheekbone, swelling across his jaw and settling in his teeth. He endures for a few stubborn seconds before flinching back. "Uh," he says, scrambling to find his train of thought. "I, uh—I guess Dav probably told you I went up into the forest. I just got—uh, held up. They're not the biggest fans of humans."

"Barry Hallwinter," Marlena snaps. She folds her hands in her lap and pins him with a glare. Barry's eyes catch on the iron wedding ring on her left hand. "Did you get abducted by the gentry? How much trouble are you in?"

Lup curls into her chair. All he wanted was to help her, and look what he got for it. "We..." Lup sighs. "Barry got attacked by the Queen's personal guard. He—" She can still see the thick red pooling around her fingers, Barry's breathing weakening, the vacant look in his eyes. "It was bad. We made a deal... with th—my Queen." The word 'my' is drawn out of her like an order. She nervously licks her lips, knowing how that must sound without context. "His life for—for service..."

It's the first time she's had to explain it out loud. The words feel like lead on her tongue.

Barry winces. That was a lot more bluntly put than he was prepared to deal with. Marlena's wide-eyed and pale, crushing her knuckles in her lap. Her eyes flicker frantically over him, and he knows she's looking for new scars.

"What queen?" she demands. "What—they were going to kill you? What 'service'?"

He knows what she wants to see. "Don't freak out," he says. He starts unbuttoning his jacket—black and plain, thick wool with two rows of buttons. Damp and cold from the misty day. Taako helped design it—something plain and simple, not obviously fae-made. "She's—the winter queen to the north—I uh, obviously don't know her name—in the forest between us and Vandellia."

"The one Davenport has told you to stay out of a hundred times, Barry," his mom admonishes, her eyes narrowing and following the movement of his hands as he shucks the coat. The shirt underneath is black, silk, and embroidered, because he got it secondhand from Kravitz, whose wardrobe is committed to a theme. He's never owned anything that nice before, even when he could afford it.

"Yeah, yeah, that one's on me," Barry says. "See, uh, Lup's brother was there, and we were just—picking him up. I uh, didn't count on their animosity towards humans? But, to be fair, the thing that attacked me—" his fingers pause at the waistband, hovering with his shirt half-untucked. "It was—more like a construct. Not a person, no autonomy. When we actually got into the court, Lup advocated for me...and things were. Fine."
He’s sure none of this comes as a surprise to Marlena. Barry spent half his childhood sneaking out to take long walks in the dusk, crashing around in wheat fields and strips of forested creeks looking for fae. She grabs his wrist and forces him to yank his shirt up. "Oh my god," she breathes.

The bite from the guard—the Queen's Thorn—scarred deeply. Mottled, shiny red rakes over his right side from the bottom of his ribs to his hip. There are two pitted, puckered swirls of scar tissue in a neat row, from the fangs that punctured his skin and dug into his insides. A third one sits at his back, barely any smaller. A crystalline shard of magic made manifest sits like a splinter, glinting at the center of the largest mark. The last fragment of the power the Queen embedded in him. Marlena presses at the corners of the scar. From experience, Barry knows she’ll find it cool to the touch in a way that sends pins and needles fizzing through her fingertips.

"So I got healed up," he says, letting her lean him into better light for scrutiny. "Or, it's more like—she froze the wound, the, the infection, and kept me alive with magic like that while it healed itself. So, uh hey, I didn't break the rule about eating fairy food." But boy, did he ever try. Taako made him just about every tea, soup, gelatin, pudding, broth, and drink that existed, and several that formerly didn't, over the months. Barry figures it doesn't count if he was hungry afterwards. He might've wrecked himself eating something he shouldn’t if he'd ever had freedom to make that mistake.

"This is—do you need to take it out?" Marlena asks, tentatively wriggling the shard like a loose tooth. It feels like the skin underneath might be whole. "Have you not been eating?"

"Uh...yeah, I'd kill for a steak, and I don't know. Lup, do you think...?"

Lup doesn't like seeing the scars. They still look so raw, but she can feel the concentrated pinpoint of her Queen's power that makes up the remaining shard. She could feel the way the power slowly seeped through Barry's body as he healed, branching through his magic and slowly changing it. The training She demanded of Lup involved heightening her sense of her Queen's presence. By now she can clearly feel the way that power has inundated Barry, right down to the barest threads still connecting him to the shard.

As the other shards slowly shrank and fell out like scabs, she felt their weave with the rest of Barry snap off. This bit is on its last legs. Barry could easily sever the last bit himself and be fine.

"Well, the shard should be alright. It might sting a little on, like, a magical level." Lup chews her lip, hoping she isn't giving a wrong answer. "You're welcome to give eating a try? It's probably okay by now."

"You haven't eaten in over three months?" Marlena says incredulously, still lightly thumbing the shard. "I'm making you pork with potato and barley dumplings," She decides, standing suddenly. "You can—you're going to tell me more while we cook, but I'm not letting my son go hungry if I have any say in it."

Lup perks up slightly at the mention of food. She's been so sick of fruit and honey cakes, and while what Marlena's making doesn't sound especially appetizing, it's different, and frankly that's all she wants right now.

Barry thinks of defending himself to Marlena—you can't eat with holes in your guts! It was days before he could even have water, and he never would've healed at all if not for magic—then decides that everyone will be happier if he doesn't go into specifics. It's enough that he's here with his mother now, relatively safe and whole, and she's making his favorite meal.

He gets up to hang his coat on the rack by the door, taking Lup's as well. She
looks...uncomfortable. He wants to make her feel welcome here. They practically lived together at
the court, but seeing her in his childhood home makes him feel...something. Something
approaching contentment.

The queen was very clear that her court would never be their home. It felt more like a prison,
especially with him confined to their room and Lup only allowed out with an escort. He's glad to
have Lup with him on the other side of that. Even if he's not sure where they're going from here.

Marlena rolls up her sleeves and takes off her wedding ring, leaving it in a little tin dish on the edge
of the table next to the pantry. "I'll be back in a second," she says. Barry sneaks up to the pantry
door to hover behind her while she picks out potatoes.

The wedding ring's dark iron, pitted and aged. He knows she's got a dark line around her finger
from wearing it. Gregor Hallwinter's been dead for almost forty years, but she only takes it off to
protect it from hard work. He hesitates with his fingertips on the little tin dish, watching his mother
gather root vegetables into her folded apron. "Need any help?"

"I need you to back up so I can get out of here," she says, flopping the mouths of the burlap sacks
shut. "And be ready to peel all this. I know you're a guest, Lup, but I wouldn't mind a hand from
you either. I'd like to feed you both as soon as I can."

Barry makes up his mind and snatches the ring. Marlena allows it and follows him to the table. She
plunks the potatoes down and returns quickly with two peeling knives. By then Barry can barely
stand to hold the ring. It tingles against his skin like a live current, like licking copper coated in
lemon juice. He can't tell if his fingers feel hot or cold, just that they're about to go numb. It's
sensation on the edge of pain, a discomfort that demands all of his attention. If Lup feels anything
close to this when she handles iron then he can see how she burns so easily. He can see why
Taako's face scarred.

He takes a moment to examine the flat design stamped into the ring. Two concentric circles with a
zig-zag between them, a little wavy and softened in the metal, with Gregor and Marlena's initials in
the middle. They never had a chance at any jewels or precious metal. They were poor, and even
poorer after Gregor passed. Marlena's had very few chances at nice things. The department store in
Rockport probably doesn't sell any iron jewelry.

He puts down the ring and takes up the knife. The steel's fine, and set into a wooden handle
besides. After a moment he thinks to check his fingertips and finds the skin smooth and unbroken.
It's not his own magic that screams at iron's touch.

"Stop messing with iron," Lup scolds a little half-heartedly. "You're gonna hurt yourself." She sighs
and leans back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before getting up and going to
help. It’s been a long time since she was a housewife, but damn if she doesn’t still know her way
around a kitchen.

There's a small mountain of carrots and rutabaga to peel. He slides the carrots over to Lup, thinking
they'll be easier, and gets to work. Marlena drags the stockpot out through the back door and to the
pump outside. "So," Barry says, as soon as the door clatters shut behind her. "We've got...maybe
five minutes before she's back in here and ready to grill us about the whole 'service' bit. And, uh,
what do we say about Kravitz?"

"I'm sorry this is such a mess," Lup sighs, expertly peeling one carrot after another.

What do they say about everything? She doubts there's an answer that would please Barry's mom
and not qualify as a blatant lie. "I think we should shoot straight with the 'service' aspect. There's
really not many ways to sugar coat 'we're now both at the whim of my Queen for the rest of our lives.' That's still weird to say...

Kravitz and Taako are planning to catch up via portal later. They wanted to give Barry time to settle in a bit and break the news before introducing Marlena to two other fae strangers on top of Lup. There had been discussion of Lup staying behind too, given the likelihood of her being blamed for Barry's disappearance by his hunter organization. They both shot that idea down fast. Like hell was Lup sending Barry off on his own while he was still recovering.

"We should definitely let your mother know the boys are coming. They're gonna need to be invited anyways, especially Kravitz." That gives Lup a thought. "Hey, can you lie? I bet you can still bend the truth, but, can you straight-up lie?"

"Oh come on, ouch," he says, grinning and rolling his eyes. "Of course I can lie—I mean, I think? Okay. I'm, uh, purple. So there." First his mother doubts him, now Lup, who shrugs at his playful indignation. It was worth asking and she's relieved, even if the way he can just blatantly say something untrue nags at her nerves a little. He's not purple.

Barry sighs. Maybe he'd have better luck lying to someone who doesn't know him so well. "I guess we should feed Kravitz and Taako dinner too. I don't know if he's figured out what to do with us, yet, and your brother doesn't technically have to hang around... Geez, I'm sure they'd be welcome to stay overnight, but we don't really have enough room for everyone to be comfortable. I sort of can't even picture Kravitz in an old farmhouse like this."

"Kravitz needs to sleep even less than Taako and I do," Lup says. Based on Barry's reaction, he doesn't realize how much his magical signature has changed. He feels like a fae these days. Or at least a strong descendent. She supposes no one really told him. Nobody would have thought to; it's like he's blind to the nose on his face. "Anyway, I don't think they plan on staying the night. Taako wants to get home and suss out the 'new' place." She puts air quotes around new. It's still pretty similar to what they had before. He's going to be so disappointed to see all their stuff gone.

"I get that Kravitz doesn't need to sleep, so... yeah. I'm kinda glad that he's not sticking around for long, cuz I just pictured him sort of lurking in the dark all night and that's not great ," Barry says. He heaves himself out of his chair and heads to the pantry to grab more vegetables. Squatting down to dig through the potato sack makes pain jab into his side like a needle. Walking helped stretch the scar a little, but he can only hope that staying active improves him more over time. While manageable, the pain still sucks.

He's just returned to the table and taken up peeling again when Marlena kicks at the back door. He leaps back up to let her in; her arms are occupied by a huge bundle of firewood. She bustles past him and sets to lighting the fireplace. She left the stockpot under the pump.

Barry grits his teeth. "I'll bring the pot in," he says, and lets the door shut behind him. The pump's iron. But Taako managed to run a cooking show without anyone suspecting a thing. He'll just...wrap his shirt around his hands and make do. He misses having the right tool for every job, but he's learned to go without.

Maybe it doesn't matter in the end, that he lost all the stuff he'd carted around for years, save for the contents of his pockets and a single bag. He doesn't even have his old hunter's license, not that it would be valid anyway—like the clothes he was wearing when he was mauled, it was soaked through with blood. Totally illegible, even dried. He let Taako send the lot away to be composted.

"Uhm, Marlena?" Lup says, as Marlena searches for the matches. "Oh, here let me." She snaps her fingers and sends a little spark of fire to ignite the wood. It catches instantly and she manipulates
the flames into a steady blaze.

"Well that's handy," Marlena says, picking herself up and dusting off her hands.

"Yeah. Uh. Do you mind if my brother and another fae drop in? Taako, my brother, and... er." If Kravitz wants to share his name, that's on him. She really, really shouldn't go around telling people the name of a high fae from the court she’s indebted to. "K, I guess you can call him. They wanted to make sure Barry and I got here okay on their way back to my forest."

"That's... fine," Marlena says. "Is K part of your court?"

"I'm not actually in a court," Lup says, fidgeting with a strand of her hair. "He's a high fae of my Queen though. If that makes sense?"

"No it doesn't," Marlena puts a hand on her hip. "But trust me, you two will explain yourselves before the end of the day. Taako and K are welcome to stay for dinner if they get here in time."

Lup pulls into her shoulders. She can tell that Marlena, though happy her son's alive, is deeply concerned for him. Lup's not sure how much Marlena trusts her either. "I'm sure Taako at least would appreciate that, though I don't know how much K eats. I can help you in the kitchen, if you want?" Taako might be the professional chef but Lup knows her way around a stove.

"I'd appreciate that." Marlena offers her a slight smile and Lup takes that as a win. She can't blame Marlena for feeling a little tense around her, given the circumstances.

The groaning porch announces Taako and Kravitz's appearance. Barry misses the sound of the portal ripping open while he works the pump. It digs into his skin like the surface is jagged rust instead of smooth, cold iron, but in the end he couldn't bring himself to use his nice silk shirt as a wrap for his hands. The pump and stairs squeak in unison, water sloshes into the stockpot, and Marlena's cat bolts past Barry and off into the field. A moment later, Taako pokes his head out from the breezeway.

"Barold, is that you?" he calls, clattering down the back steps. "What's up, my man?"

"Nothing much," Barry says. He puts his back into pumping with a grunt. The stockpot's full moments later, and his palms are raw and stinging, wet from tiny burst blisters. He turns over his hands, examining, and traces the old scar from Avi's slapdash stitch job.

Taako's gait switches to a bold sashay when Kravitz appears in the back entrance to the breezeway. They're ridiculously overdressed; all Barry knows about Taako's old style was that he passed for human, but he really took to the sumptuous robes and slippers Kravitz uses for loungewear. Kravitz himself is back in his suit, sharply cut and incongruously modern. He looks like he just stepped out of a city department store. Anybody passing could tell at a glance that they don't belong, even before noticing their inhuman features.

Taako crunches across the grass and rolls his eyes when he realizes what Barry's up to. "I see you wasted no time getting injured again. You ever think about going a week of your life without bleeding? How would that be, huh?"

"I'm not bleeding," Barry says. He wipes his hands roughly on his pants and scoops the iron pot in his arms. "You guys are early—my mom's, uh, making dinner for everybody."

"That's very generous of her. She doesn't have to," Kravitz says. He turns in place on the porch steps, frowning at the metal roof overhead. Watching his awkwardness makes Barry realize how comfortable Taako seems by contrast.
Barry would give Kravitz a shrug, but his arms are full. "It's no problem, really. I'm sure she'd love to meet you guys."

"My sister in there?" Taako asks. He darts up the stairs and to the back door before Barry finishes nodding. "Hey Lulu! Lemme in, I've got your boy and he's fucking around with iron."

Barry trudges after him resignedly, taking care to not slosh water. The pot bites into his arms. He's not going to get used to this any time soon; all these months and he didn't even realize, because there's no iron anywhere in the Queen's court.

Lup groans. "I'm sorry, Mar." Lup goes for the nickname for Marlena’s comfort, in case she’s worried about Kravitz. "I need to go make sure your son isn't poisoning himself," she says politely before turning and shouting out the door. "Barry, put that thing down, I swear! What did I just tell you! Hey Taako. K should probably put on human a human face for now. No need to stress Barry's mom out more." Lup glances up at the iron nails and chews her lip. "Mar, would you mind telling Taako and K they can come in?" She gestures vaguely with her hand. "Wards and all."

Marlena glances over, a little flustered at the commotion that is Taako. "Right. Of course. You're welcome inside, if you wish. I need to get started in the kitchen."

Taako doesn't bother shifting to look human. His iron burns permanently messed with his magic, making any kind of shifting somewhat painful. The scar tissue won’t warp cleanly. He's been avoiding any attempt. Kravitz, on the other hand, dutifully slips into his human form as he ducks under the doorway. Human features makes his discomfort more obvious. Lup realizes she's never actually seen Kravitz in this guise. Yeah, he's definitely Taako’s type. She wonders if Taako's seen his face like this before.

"Thank you for the invitation," Kravitz says, politely holding out a hand. "You may call me K for now."

"I'm Taako," Taako says, not bothering to shake hands. He's instead looking around the room with interest. "But you probably guessed that. I can help out in the kitchen if you want? You probably know this, but I'm an expert chef." Lup purposely doesn't note the way his posture falters ever so slightly as he says that.

Barry notices the moment Taako takes in the pile of potatoes and carrots and rutabaga that still need peeled, because his ears turn down. He lets Marlena wrestle the pot out of his arms and haul it to the fireplace—she's flustered that she lit it empty and then left off stoking. He's just wishing he could help her more when Taako steals the knife he'd been using, and before Barry can blink he's expertly spinning a potato against it, a great long ribbon of unbroken skin curling to the table.

"Uh, sorry I didn't get a chance to say they were dropping in," he says, pulling up a chair next to Taako. They spent months rubbing elbows at the court. Seeing Taako in his mother's kitchen—or in any context outside the room he was confined to, come to think—is weird as hell. Even weirder than those first few days without his company. "Thanks for dinner, mom."

"You're very welcome, dear," Marlena says, using an iron poker to rearrange the firewood. She straightens up and scoots past where Kravitz is lurking near the door, side-eyeing the iron nails above. The kitchen barely fits the five of them.

Marlena pries open an earthenware jar of dried and salted pork. "We doing stew?" Taako asks. "You know, there's this trick to getting extra flavor—the best way I've found, you take the meat and some grease and you just fry. Just fry it for a sec, get that nice brown coating before you start the boil. Cuz, listen, that stuff is pure culinary gold."
"If you're volunteering yourself for the work—" Marlena looks Taako up and down and laughs. "I've got a spare apron I can lend you."

"Hell yeah," Taako says, handing the knife off to Barry. "Let's do this thing."

Chapter End Notes

Tansy: Leave comments to help fuel us editing the 94k unposted words of this. <3
The Pauper's Dulled Knife

Chapter Summary

Barry and Lup part ways. Things immediately go to hell.

Dinner prep goes well, even if Taako and Marlena butt heads a few times. Lup keeps her mouth shut, because she can't imagine the family recipe for this rather plain dish is going to line up with Taako's cooking expertise. Or snobbishness. While she learned to be happy with whatever food she could get, he grew keen to indulge in the finer things in life.

There's very little space around the stove anyways, so Lup spends her time prepping with Barry at the table instead of cramming in and making it harder for everyone to do anything. Kravitz sits politely to the side, his offer to help shot down by Taako with the claim that Kravitz has less cooking skill than Merle, and that's saying something.

Dinner is still rather bland compared to what Lup and Taako usually indulge in, but Barry seems thrilled, so neither of them comment. It's nice to have a break from court food, at least.

Kravitz seems enraptured by the boiled, gluey dumplings and salted pork. Lup supposes he hasn't expanded his culinary boundaries much past what's offered by the court. The only reason changelings eat as often as they do is having been—or raised by—humans for the first leg of their lives. In all the time she worked with Kravitz, he never ate anything in front of her, even on days when they left before dawn and weren't back until after dark.

After everything's done, Lup regrets not making the meal last longer. Though, as much as she wants to stay with Barry, she also wants to go home. She never thought she'd miss the familiarity of the rotting forest. She misses the little tree Lucretia enchanted for her and Taako. She wants to start rebuilding their collection of things. She's finally out from under the court's thumb and ready to spend some time free, as herself, outside of human society and away from any expectations.

She knows she won't have long before Kravitz reeels her back in.

"Thank you dearly for the meal, Mar," Kravitz says, dipping his head as he puts his fork down. "I do believe it's about time for us to be on our way." He's getting right to the point, isn't he. Lup wishes he would wait just a little longer.

"I am so ready to go home," Taako says, languidly stretching his arms over his head. "Lu, when was I at the tree last? It's been at least half a year by now."

"Way more than that. You left early last summer," Lup mumbles, not sharing quite the same enthusiasm.

Barry's reassured by her seeming unwillingness to leave. They'll be back for him. Probably. He fixes his smile in place. They got to enjoy a great meal together. Kravitz actually liked the potato-barley dumplings, when Marlena herself barely tolerates them; in her words, they're "bland, dense like rocks, and chewy like glue". For his part, he only managed half a dumpling and a few bites of boiled pork, and even that little feels like lead in his guts. But he has leftovers for later and no regrets.
This might be the rest of his life. Maybe Kravitz doesn’t want him, no matter what his queen says. That seems likely, after how many days he took Lup out of their cramped, shared room for lessons that Barry was excluded from. It could be that he’s free to stay with Marlena and help her mind the house and farm. That's something. He’ll have a purpose, even if he never sees the twins or Kravitz again, or if they forget about him until he's too old to be useful.

He should be grateful that the terms of service the Queen demanded are so nebulous that Kravitz seems at a loss for what to assign him. Realistically, he can expect Lup and Taako will drop by at some point, after they get settled in at home. They seem to have a better grasp of mortal timeframes than most fae. Eventually, he could go back to running around the forest and futilely taking data on the Hunger's progress. Or—

His savings transferred to Marlena after he was presumed dead. It’s more money than what she made due with his whole childhood, so they'll be comfortable despite his career’s abrupt end. If Kravitz doesn’t come up with a task for him, then he should consider himself lucky. The Queen doesn't seem to care that he's the only human to survive her court. By his count, he was confined for about five months, and she never once sent a message.

Lup got all the attention. On most days, Kravitz himself would escort her out—and he’s a big deal in the court, as far as Barry can tell—and they would be off somewhere for hours of ‘lessons’. It's completely possible that retaining Lup’s skills was what the Queen really wanted, and saving Barry’s life was just an indulgence.

Maybe he should write a book. He could sit on the manuscript until it's too late for him to get punished, if publishing gives away any secrets. He should be grateful he survived everything he got to see. He should be grateful he knew Lup at all. He hates how much he's going to miss her.

"Let me—let me know what's going on," he says, scooping the leftover dumplings and pork into jars for storage while Marlena braces the iron stockpot. "I'll...be right here. Guess I should uh, figure out what being legally dead means."

Lup sighs. It's not like she won't visit soon, it's just weird. She's spent all her free time with Barry for the last few months, and that's not even counting him being a constant presence while they traveled. Still, she's looking forward to spending some quality twin time with Taako.

"Thank you so much for having us, Mar," Lup says, dragging herself up and out of her chair. "I know it's probably a little weird to have so many fae in your home."

"It's a nice place though," Taako puts in. "Reminds me of our shitty parent's house, right, Lu? It's been a while since I've used a little wood stove like that."

Marlena laughs. "Oh, I've had that stove for longer than Barry. His father and I used to talk about replacing it...one day, maybe. I didn't know faeries had those things—I thought iron was something of a problem for you all?"

Taako managed to hit the nail on the head for why Lup enjoys this place. It’s nostalgic. This humble country home is far more familiar than the bustle of the cities Barry introduced her to. In their own way, rural areas are a place out of time. So much of Marlena’s home looks like the one Lup kept almost a hundred years ago. "I like it. It's very homely."

Kravitz is watching the twins keenly. Barry doesn’t find it any easier to read expressions on his—improbably handsome—human face than on his true one, but he thinks they're sharing a moment of mutual surprise. "You guys were both—raised by humans? Together?" That's not normally how changelings work. He'd been assuming otherwise.
"Yeah, funnily enough, neither of our sets of parents were very good at the whole parenting thing," Taako says, waving a hand to dismiss the thought. "Lu was more of a cuckoo bird situation than a switch."

Lup never likes how casually Taako talks about this. Even though he insists he's happy with how things went, even though he's always saying it wasn't her fault, that he's happy to have her; she still feels guilty. If she hadn't been dropped off like that, maybe Taako's parents would have given a shit about him. They only hated them so much because they couldn't tell which one was the fae, the one not supposed to be there. He could have had a normal life.

Kravitz starts addressing Lup, a formal "Let me express my condolence that your court abandoned — ", and Marlena sweeps past him to scoop both twins into a hug.

"You poor dears," she says. "That's completely unacceptable on their part. As parents, they should've cherished—cherished!—the children they had. I'm so sorry. You're always welcome in my home." She eyes Kravitz over Lup's shoulder like she's working out how to fit her arms around him too. Barry grins and pats her back. There's no escaping Marlena's maternal hugs, not even for fae decades older than her.

Lup and Taako look like deer in headlights. Lup has to stop herself from shifting into something small in her surprise. She wasn't prepared for such an open display of affection, even after tensions seemed to ease as dinner preparations carried on. She puts her hands lightly on Marlena's back, next to Barry’s, unsure of exactly what to do.

"It's really alright," Lup says. Taako still seems to be processing. "We, uh, we had an adopted aunt with some fae ancestry that looked out for us."

Taako laughs nervously, lightly patting Marlena's shoulder and says, "Yeah, that was well over a century ago. Not like we can do anything about it now."

'Over a century ago’ means that their aunt and human family are long gone. The twins’ hometown must've been very close to the old fae woods, Barry figures. Nothing he’s ever read hinted that it’s possible for a changeling to convert an infant outside their courts’ influence, but Taako's clearly as fae as Lup. The iron-burnt scars cutting from the bridge of his nose, across his eye and to his temple, attest to that.

Marlena pulls back, leaving one hand each of the twins’ shoulders, and says, "That doesn't make it alright! Or fair. Every child deserves a loving parent."

“Yeah, well, sometimes them’s the breaks,” Taako says.

“Surely your court had something to say about the abandonment?” Kravitz asks. “Children are precious, and changeling children even moreso.”

Barry finds it odd that he and Taako obviously never talked about this before. They spent a lot of time alone together. Sometimes, after returning Lup, Kravitz would invite Taako out to tour the queen’s lands. He guesses that Taako avoided the subject.

“They weren’t our court,” Lup says sharply. “They can’t claim us when we were never invited to set foot there. And it’s all gone now, anyways.” If not for Lucretia, Lup wouldn’t know anything about her origins. It seems obvious that fire falls within summer’s domain, but how were they to know? Everyone in their mudhole village was totally ignorant of the courts, except as some nebulous, fantastical evil. The twins included.
Barry wonders if their hometown was destroyed by the Hunger, and if they ever miss it. He has a thousand burning questions about changelings, thinking of the one he met in the Queen's court and his stolen daughter. "Yeah, that—that sucks. I'm sorry, I had no idea. You guys will—I'd be uh, happy for you visit again. I guess I'll...be seeing you?"

"Oh for sure. I'm not just gonna leave you forever," Lup says, brushing off the weird mix of discomfort and soft, happy warmth at Marlena's kindness. "Krav might have portals, but I can fly over when I want. Birds have traveling down. Who knows when my Queen'll summon us next. Could be tomorrow." She figures that's probably inaccurate, but still, who knows. Lup certainly wasn't given any indication as to when the two of them would be needed. But her Queen was patient enough to let Barry heal within her court, so there's probably no rush.

That doesn't mean Lup isn't very much stalling. She didn't realize how badly she's going to miss Barry's company until the future of him not always being around loomed over her head.

"Yeah, that's—that's good, that you can fly," Barry says. He steps around Marlena to stand face-to-face with Lup, separated by only a few tenuous inches in the cramped space. "I can—I'll keep busy here and uh, you can drop in whenever. You're always welcome."

"You're very welcome too," Taako says, rolling his eyes. He slaps a hand between Lup's shoulder blades and gives her a light shove forward. "Do your goodbye hugs, ch'boy's eager to get home."

Lup stumbles and shoots a glare back at Taako. He's right, they should get going, but he doesn't need to push. She turns back to Barry and extends her arms for an awkward hug neither of them really want to have for this reason. She holds him tightly though, and now the next challenge is actually letting go.

Eventually, Taako grabs her shirt collar and pulls her back. "Come on. Taako wants to sleep in his own bed again."

Barry and Marlena trail the fae out to the breezeway. The sun set an hour ago. It's a cloudy night; the countryside is pitch-black beyond the dim firelight filtering through the open door. "You guys have a safe trip," Barry says. His arms still feel warm from Lup's embrace. He shoves his hands in his pockets, for want of something to do with them, while Marlena offers Lup her coat.

"Oh!" Lup says, holding up her hands. "Please keep it. Thank you so much, but cold isn't really something that worries me. Especially with it getting warmer."

Kravitz wanders to where a small ring of little white mushrooms has taken over a patch of grass just off the back porch, near a quaint vegetable garden. "I should be able to reuse this ring to reach your forest," he says, running a hand over one of the larger mushroom caps. He looks up at Marlena and Barry as he steps into the ring. "I'm sure I don't need to say this, but try not to enter the ring until at least one of the mushrooms has died. Nothing should happen, but magic likes to linger."

He gestures for Lup and Taako to join him in the ring. Taako darts over to hook his arm around Kravitz's.

Lup is a little more reluctant. "I'll see you around, Barry. Once Taako and I settle in again, I'll make sure to come back up and see how you're getting on."

"Keep your arms in," Kravitz says. With a shimmer, he slips into his fully fae form. Having two sets of hands makes channeling magic easier—or so he claimed to Lup. He stretches his arms and wings out, dislodging Taako, who complies with a small complaint. The little mushrooms seem to
pulse with energy and curl towards Kravitz's magic eagerly.

As his power swirls through the ring, amplifying on each turn of the circle, the simple white fungi start to change. Their caps turn black and twist from delicate domes to ridged cones with inky drips lining their rims. They stretch up and forward, fed by the powerful magic rolling off Kravitz in waves, power beyond what Lucretia could hope for without the backing of a court.

Another pulse, and Kravitz, Lup, and Taako vanish from the little farmhouse and reappear dozens of miles to the south, in a mulch-choked copse of the old fae forest. Lup takes a deep breath of the air, spores and all. It really is awful here, but it's familiar, and until Luce can find a way to fix it, she wouldn't trade it away for anywhere else.

A glance around tells her Kravitz was surprisingly accurate in getting them near the tree. "Fuck, it's good to be home," Taako says, stretching to pop his back. "Come on, Lup." Taako grabs her hand and drags her forward. Kravitz follows at his own, more leisurely pace.

Taako stops when they reach the little clearing and Lup evaluates their tree with thinly-veiled sadness. Without anyone to bolster the magic on the portal, their absence let the Hunger encroach. Strings of gray rot dangle from the branches, the fresh growth Lup remembers from rebuilding the tree long rotted away.

"Oh, that's a shame," Kravitz says as he comes up behind them. "Here, let me help you." He moves ahead and sets his hands on the trunk, pulsing magic through the ruined bark. The Hunger starts to drip and boil away, and when Lup and Taako join with their own magic, it sloughs off in chunks, leaving behind a damaged, but ultimately healthy tree.

Kravitz groans and pulls his hands away. "That's a lot of magic for one day. I hope you don't mind me sticking around until I've recovered a bit?"

Lup's eyes narrow. He's trying to come up with an excuse to spend more time with Taako. She knows full well that Kravitz can expend absurd amounts of magic, drawing from his court as needed. This shouldn't have even winded him.

"Please! Stay as long as you need. I'd love to have you, bones," Taako says. Lup raises an eyebrow at the obvious implications in his tone. Oh, so that's happening.

"Fine. Thanks for the help." Lup slips through the space in the trunk. She has no interest in commenting on Taako's love life. Frankly? It's been too long since he had anything more than a fling while on the road. She's happy for him, but even more happy to finally be home.

Well past midnight, when rain finally comes down on the roof in staccato bursts, Barry is still awake. The fire died hours earlier, stranding him in the unbroken darkness of the loft over the breezeway.

His room is just as he left it more than a year ago: quilts and pillows piled on the straw-tick mattress, yellowed from use; baskets for the stuff that doesn’t fit in the dresser he built for himself, including years’ of outgrown clothing he and Marlena hoarded, because they could seldom afford to throw things away; railings on either side of the loft, spaced far enough apart for him to peek into Marlena’s room on one side or the kitchen on the other.
He would always creep to the railing and lay down flat to spy, back when she and his father still had friends to entertain and he was a precocious, lonely kid, enthralled by their conversations.

He could hear Marlena’s snores before the rain started. Now they’re drowned out by the metal roof rattling cacophonously over his head. It’s not the noise that keeps him from sleeping, but the awareness of the patches of tin wearing away from the iron core. He’s been counting on repairing the holes, so it figures that they’d get rain before he had a chance. He imagines he can feel the moisture seeping into the gaps. Any more rust and they might need to replace the whole thing.

In the morning, Marlena doesn’t let him up there to check. She just got him back, she says, so like hell is she letting him clamber around on the roof while it’s still wet and break his neck.

Instead, he sweeps, dusts, and shells barley while she rides out to the fields with the hired hands. She’s got two men, but she’ll probably let the part-timer go now that Barry’s back.

Not that she should count on keeping him for long. Whatever Kravitz may assign him will take precedence over the farm. Even so, without a hunter’s salary, she’s looking for ways to cut corners.

Two days in and he’s reread one of his childhood novels, trimmed the hickories, sanded the rust off the roof, and made himself stop fiddling with the wards before he breaks them. They’re so far from fae territory that he’s pretty sure Lup is the first person to ever be repelled, but they help Marlena sleep at night.

Three days in and he starts meeting the neighbors again; he and Marlena go next door and trade his services in repairing a tractor for use of their rotating saw. They come away with five patches of sheet metal cut to size and Barry nails two of them in place before the sunset chases him inside. His fingers stay reddened and stinging through dinner.

The next morning, Barry takes the elderwood wand he bought at the Rockport department store down to the living room with him, while Marlena’s still dressing. He can’t get the fireplace to light. Not even a spark. Magic doesn’t fizz under his skin anymore; its flow is as sluggish as a broad, shallow river, choked with ice.

He barely practiced magic while he was convalescing. Taako had little better to do than hover, and collectively they had nothing to do but wait long hours for Lup or Kravitz to be available to entertain them. Barry couldn’t even think about lighting a candle with his wand before Taako took care of it with a snap of his fingers. Their days were a lot of talk and no action; they ran the gamut from theory to navel-gazing to reminiscing and back. Taako could tell the same story five times, each with a different spin, before Barry realized. His talents for prevarication and imprecision helped him say a lot without saying anything.

Barry can’t believe he’s bored enough to miss Taako’s deliberately inane rambling. And never mind how much he misses Lup.

He crosses the breezeway back into Marlena’s room, stopping to help her tie the back of her overdress shut before squeezing up the narrow staircase to the loft. Gregor’s wedding ring has lived in a box in Barry’s room for twenty years. Marlena said she’d give him its match when he wants to marry. He treasures it too much to store with his traveling gear. Good thing, too, since he lost all that stuff. Checking on the ring is something of a Candlenights tradition, another thing he’d missed this year.

The ring box is pristine, right where he left it when he last dusted. He opens the box. He doesn’t take out the ring, just presses his thumb flat against the initials engraved on its face until the pain traveling up his arm makes his teeth ache.
He puts the box away. Then he grabs a sock and crosses the loft over the breezeway to the kitchen. The last little shard of the Queen’s power disappeared in his sleep, so his side barely twinges when he lays on his belly to shove his hand through the railing. With the sock protecting his hand, he pries a nail out of the doorframe.

Ignoring the sting, he clenches it and bluntly shoves power into the iron. It heats in a flash. He throws it clear across the room and into the fireplace. Marlena asks him what on earth he thinks he’s up to and follows him into the kitchen. She looks on in bemusement while he fishes the nail out of yesterday’s ashes.

When he finds it, he can feel the dense core of stored magic, damaged but intact. He shouldn’t be able to feel something like that, with how his magic has always worked. Used to work.

He lights the fireplace with a match and asks Marlena very nicely if there’s any glass she wouldn’t mind him totally destroying. Well-used to his antics, she laughs and says she has a lidless jar she supposes he can experiment with—outside.

Barry promises that all he’ll be doing is seeing if he can anchor something simple, like a silencing charm, and then wipe it clean again. As far as he knows, it shouldn’t be possible for him to explode anything like that. But he’s beginning to realize that he might not have any idea what’s possible for him.

When the knock comes at the door, Marlena’s crouched in the pantry, going through the crate of odds-and-ends tucked behind the potatoes to find his jar. So Barry gets up, wondering why he missed the porch steps creaking.

That thought flies out of his head when he looks down to see Davenport’s bushy mustache and rapidly reddening face. The next second, a burly stranger shoves his way into the room and grabs Barry in a headlock.

“Got ‘em!” the man shouts. Barry grabs his wrist and tries to twist loose.

Marlena stalks out of the pantry with her broom at the ready. Davenport raises both hands placatingly. “Good morning, ma’am, I’m sorry to cause you any trouble, but it’s extremely important that you cooperate with us. This man may not be who he says he is.”

“Don’t you ‘ma’am’ me, Andrew!” she snaps.

“Hey, ix-nay on the names,” the man grappling Barry shouts directly into his ear.

“Dav, what the hell, did you get an apprentice?” Barry asks, in between stomping ineffectively on the man’s boots. He sinks an elbow into the man’s gut and is rewarded with a quiet oof, and then arms lock around his chest and lift him bodily off the floor in a bear hug.

“Ma’am—“

“Marlena,” she snaps.

Barry stops kicking before he knocks something over. “Hail and well met,” says his captor. “They call me the Hammer.”

“Glad you’re proud of your pseudonym, buddy, but can we have this conversation after you put me down?” Barry says. He’s not a small man, but this hunter’s a giant. He could probably stretch up and grab the loft railing.
“No!” Davenport snaps. “Marlena, please. We can’t be certain of your safety! I understand that you’re happy to have your son back, but now we know for sure that a court got him almost half a year ago. And then, last week, he wanders into Port Wick and writes a check for a coach back here? You must understand why we’d have a lot of questions.”

“Then ask,” Barry says. “C’mon, Dav, let’s skip all the strong-arming. When have I ever lied to you—and gotten away with it?”

“You’ve been a guest in my home a dozen times, Andy,” Marlena says, exasperated. “Can’t we talk this out civilly?”

Davenport bristles. “I’m afraid not, ma’am. This is hunter business. This man may or may not be your son, and either way he’s under arrest.”
Chapter Summary

Lup left Barry alone for like, a week, and he got himself arrested. She's not letting that stand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time spent alone is strange after so long living right next to Barry. Well, mostly alone. Taako and Kravitz are in and out of the tree. Kravitz, as it turns out, doesn’t actually sleep, more goes into a partial meditative state any time his magic gets too depleted, which is a rarity. With how touchy-feely the two of them have been over the last month or so, Lup frankly doesn’t want to know what they get up to when they head off together for hours. She tries to keep it out of her mind.

Barry was a cornerstone of Lup’s life for so long that she sometimes finds herself turning to say something to him, before remembering he’s miles away, happily with his mother. Instead of letting it weigh on her too much she takes to her usual schedule of locating portals to burn and putting down the occasional corrupted pixie or will o’wisp.

The forest quickly starts to feel exceptionally dead, compared to the lush, pulsing life of the winter court. The squelch of rot between her toes has become less familiar and more repulsive. She keeps to bird forms as often as possible.

Taako slowly builds up their collection of things again, complaining all the way that good fabric is harder to come by now. Against all odds, Lup manages to find the warped comb that was damaged when the tree first collapsed. The metal is past tarnished and it takes some work to clean all the gray gunk off, but it’s there.

She spends a full day just looking over the mutilated curves of metal, the places where it’s become far less than perfect. It’s a reminder of the first time she and Barry really tried to see eye-to-eye, of when they started out together to find Taako and fix their tree.

Taako comes in through the portal with Kravitz some time towards dusk and finds her lying in bed, turning the comb over in her hands. She doesn’t look up as he declares, “You’re moping.”

“I am not moping.” Lup sets the comb on the dresser over her head.

“Yeah you are. You miss Barold, don’t you.”

“Of course I do, Taako. We spent half a year together. Forgive me for missing him a little.”

“Mmm,” Taako hums, not really giving up any of his opinions on the matter. Lup could read him like a book if she really wanted to, but at the moment she doesn’t feel like putting in the effort.

A short lull of conversation passes before Kravitz says, “While the past week spent with you two has been delightful, we should really get going…”

Lup restrains herself from commenting that his week was spent with Taako, specifically.
“What?” Taako perks up immediately. “Where do you have to be? Who’s ‘we’?”

“I should really meet up with Lucretia. I’m sure she’s been eager to have our meeting since it was unexpectedly postponed.”

“Oh shit, at the Miller labs, right?” Lup says.

“Yes,” Kravitz replies. “You and Barry are coming with me. The meeting is in regards to the Hunger and measures to keep it at bay.”

Lup’s first instinct is to groan at the concept of work, but that’s immediately overridden by the prospect of seeing Barry again. Sure it’s only been a week, a blink of an eye in the face of eternity. So sue her for missing him.

“Oh hell, yeah,” she says, hopping out of bed. “Let’s go! You gonna be good here, Taaks?”

A look of betrayal cross his face. Only for a split second, but she saw it. Once it’s gone, he’s right back to the uncaring, flat expression that’s his go-to. He flops on his bed and waves a hand. “Yeah. Taako needs some chill time anyways. You two have fun.”

Lup hums, unconvinced and guilty. She knows he’s safe, but she’s almost more worried about him now. He can’t shift as well these days with the scars in his magic. Deep, nasty patches across his face where his magic stutters and pops before flowing properly again. Just the simple act of changing his facial features hurts.

As far as Lup’s aware, he hasn’t attempted anything more difficult than appearing human since the incident. She’s worried about him. He still has fire magic, but a changeling’s true defense is shapeshifting, and Taako can’t do that anymore. Not to mention he has every right to be mad at her for leaving him behind...

“Alright,” Lup concedes. “Don’t get into trouble. I’ll be back.”

“Don’t worry.” Taako throws an arm over his eyes. “No more hunts across the world for ol’ Taako. I’ll be right here, in this tree, on this fuckin’ bed.”

“If everything’s in order,” Kravitz says, “I’ve already had Taako clear a space for us to teleport from, Lup.”

“Lead the way, boss man.”

The two of them appear in a flutter of grass in front of Barry’s house. It shouldn’t feel comforting to see the rusted, iron roof; Lup’s only been here once. But it is. She breathes in the uncorrupted air like she’d die without it.

“I hope they’re home to let us in,” Lup muses, walking as far as she can to the front door before being stopped by the wards. “Barry!? Mar!?” She calls into the little house. “It’s Lup and K! May we come in?”
Shuffling footsteps come from the kitchen. The door clatters open, and she’s faced with Marlena, wearing a mask of swirling grief and anger. Something’s wrong, Lup knows that much immediately, and her ears pin back to her head on reflex.

“What happened?” She doesn’t care about being let in anymore, she needs to know Barry’s okay. Oh, Fairy Mother, what if he died? What if her Queen’s magic killed him? What if Lup was wrong and he shouldn’t have eaten before? What if he was careless and cut himself on iron? A thousand possibilities run through her mind before she manages to get out, “Where’s Barry?”

“Dav came by and fucking arrested him,” Marlena practically spits. “They think he’s charmed or an imposter, I don’t know.”

“Who’s Dav?” Lup’s magic pulses with anxiety. For fae, being arrested is practically a death sentence. She doesn’t know what it means for humans. And she really doesn’t know what it means for Barry, whose magic doesn’t read as entirely human anymore. Kravitz’s hand comes up to her shoulder to steady her. She takes a deep breath. “Who arrested Barry?”

“His hunter organization,” Marlena says, still standing firm. “I’ve only managed to get in to visit once. They came by two days after you left, after he got home.”

Lup bristles, but Kravitz is faster to speak. “Imprisoning Barry is a direct insult against my Queen. However lightly tied to us he is, he is an asset of the Winter Court. May I ask where he’s being kept? This is a matter I must see to.”

Right. That’s right. Barry can’t be touched. He’s important to a powerful court now. Lup feels a bit of the fear that was swirling in her gut dissipate. Kravitz can work this out.

“Here I—I can give you an address,” Marlena says. “You two may come in, by the way.” She turns to move ahead of them into the kitchen to grab something to write with.

Lup and Kravitz don’t spend long with Marlena. They’re up and out before she can do much to comment, making sure she knows they’ll get Barry back. Well, Lup reassures her at least, Kravitz less so. He curtly apologises to Marlena for refreshing the fairy circle he was using before and teleports the two of them to the nearest town. It’s small, sustained by all the farming families who travel to shop there. Lup and Barry’s chartered carriage passed through on the way to Marlena’s, so quickly that she didn’t even look out the window.

They pop up in a park, causing more than a little commotion. They’re both a tad too single-minded to care. Once they shift into human disguises, it’ll be nearly impossible to track them down.

They slip away from the people who saw them appear and quickly find a passerby to give them directions. Kravitz knows enough to make sense of the streets. Meanwhile Lup finds herself a bit lost, letting him do most of the talking and planning.

The hunter’s headquarters is as plain as the rest of the surrounding offices, shiplap siding with peeling paint and only two stories. But it seems to loom ominously over the street. Lup’s stomach churns as she follows Kravitz down the gravel road. A whole building full of hunters that could be as understanding as Barry, as aggressive as Grimaldis, or anything in between.

Both Lup and Kravitz stiffen as they walk up to the door. The warding is far more powerful than the little iron nails at Marlena’s house. The magic is heavily enforced, woven into something strong over decades of build-up. The texture feels impenetrable; dismantling these wards would be difficult for anyone.
They’re left staring with no way to get in. There’s no posted guard, fences or iron bars, but for them it might as well be the best protected prison in the world. Lup doesn’t even want to knock on the door; she will if she has to, but the wards feel like they’d skin her knuckles.

“Well,” Kravitz says. “If we want attention, there’s an easy way to get it.” Without giving Lup any more warning, he lets the illusion of humanity drop. His image wavers and shifts. Wings unfurl from his back, antennae spring from his head. His eyes facet into solid black and more than a few people on the street scream and run in the other direction.

Scaring people just by existing was funny in the park, but less so standing right in front of a hunter’s HQ. “Uh, K? Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Give it a moment,” Kravitz says, antennae twitching.

Within the next minute a full squadron of hunters cascades out of the door, weapons drawn. At the head is a short, red-haired man Lup instantly recognizes recent fae ancestry in. He moves with too much…not grace, exactly, still too human for that, but he moves like an especially awkward fae and his magic is too overt for fully human blood.

The other hunters spread out to flank him. He trains his wand on the ground in front of Kravitz’s feet. “I expect an immediate explanation as to why a high fae such as yourself decided to cause a panic on a public street.” he says, his tone demanding respect.

“I am the spawn of the great Winter Queen of the northern pine forest,” Kravitz announces, all pomp and circumstance. “I have reason to believe you have committed an offense against Her Eternal Majesty in the capture of one of Her assets. We will discuss this further, away from prying eyes.”

The man considers Kravitz for what feels like forever. Eventually, he lets out a forceful sigh that ruffles his mustache. “Fine. What’s she got to do with this?”

Lup glances around and swallows hard before saying, “I’m a friend. I’m—” Damn it, she likes this human form, but it’s a worthless disguise if hunters know her face. “I’m a changeling with ties to his court, and the man you arrested.” She could cut the tension in the air with a knife.

The man’s eyes narrow. “You are both permitted entry into this building, only for today, on the condition that no harm or magic comes over any of the possessions, structures, furnishings, workers, or visitors therein, and that neither of you visit harm upon anyone in this town. Harm is defined by my terms. Understood?”

Lup’s magic bristles. This is a person who’s worked with fae for a long time. He knows exactly how to craft a deal so that the wording can’t be used to evade his intent. Maybe she could work out a loophole with time, but that’s a lot harder without a written contract to pick apart line by line.

“Deal, permitting only a definition of harm that would be considered fair by most,” Kravitz says, far too readily for Lup’s comfort.

He lightly nudges her. “Deal,” she says. She’ll have to follow his lead.

The man nods and turns to re-enter the building. The other hunters fall in line, and two, a rather imposing man and an equally if not more imposing woman, circle around to cover Lup and Kravitz from behind. They lead them in and, hopefully, closer to Barry.

Inside is cramped for the amount of people pushing in at once, especially with gas lamps burning on all the walls. The poor secretary is trapped behind her desk by the crowd. Besides her
workspace, there’s no other furniture. Lup guesses that hunters don’t normally host visitors.

"Everyone, get back to work," the man commands. "Hammer, Tongs, I want you guarding these two at all times. We’re taking him to Bluejeans, see what he says." Lup immediately perks up. That’s Barry's hunter name.

"Yes, Captain," the huge man says, giving a little salute that still almost knocks his elbow into one of the gas lamps. Lup can't quite tell if ‘captain' is a rank or the leader’s codename. Maybe both.

She and Kravitz are led down a small hallway with a worn, faded carpet, through a locked door the Captain opens up, and there's Barry, sitting alone in an iron cell.

Lup could sing. She would run to him, if not for the man sitting guard on a stool next to the bars, looking bored and surly. It’s the hunter who attacked her on the train last year.

She bares her true, sharp teeth, snarling defensively, ears pinned back. Her fists catch fire and her shoulders hunch, ready for a fight if he wants to give her one. For a split second, he looks like he can't believe she came back for him. The disbelief freezing his features vanishes with Lup's human face.

She knows she can't do anything. She can't lift a finger against him, but he's between her and Barry and like hell is she going to let him sit there and smirk. He should be scared of her.

She advances on Grimaldis, flames crackling off her knuckles.

"What the hell is this?" Grimaldis shrieks, fumbling to draw a knife from his belt. He backs up, completely panicked, and collides with the wall. Barry almost grins to see it, but he's terrified; however Lup managed to get in here, she won't be walking out if she tries to fight half a dozen hunters by herself. He feels more trapped than ever.

Davenport moves to block Lup's view, but his burly, bearded apprentice beats him to it. "Hey, back off!" he says, grabbing Lup by her shirt collar.

She gags as she’s pulled back. She wants to fight, to struggle, but the contract keeps her deathly still. After the initial panic of seeing a hunter she knows can't be trusted—as if many of them can—she forces herself to calm down. She can't get into a fight here. If the hunters decide to attack her, she won't even be able to defend herself.

It's at that point Lup realizes what a precarious position she and Kravitz put themselves in. She pushes her nerves down and eyes the other hunter, still not willing to put her fires out, even if it's ultimately pointless.

"We had a deal, changeling," the Captain practically hisses, stretching up to get directly in her face. "You gave me your word."

Lup doesn't make a move but she doesn't back down either, staring the Captain down.


Lup snarls towards Grimaldis one more time before shaking her fists out. Kravitz still has authority over her, even more so now that she's tied to his court. It'd be too much effort to disobey. She makes a noise to clear her throat, still being half-choked by Hammer.

“Let her go,” the Captain says, clearly frustrated. Hammer drops her shirt. Lup huffs as she pulls away, rubbing at her neck.
"You're cutting deals with them?" Grimaldis barks. He stomps up to Davenport and deliberately looms over him. "What do you think you're tryna pull?"

"I am your commanding officer and I'm handling this situation as I see fit," Davenport snaps, chin raised high. He's fought his entire career for the authority he commands. Barry was there, for most of those fights. He's so sick of seeing Davenport—one of the most brilliant men he knows, and a hundred times the leader he'll ever be—disrespected by small, petty men like Grimaldis.

"Some fuckin' commander you are!"

Barry's stuck on the other side of those iron bars. If not, he would've slapped Grimaldis full across the face. The female hunter beats him to it. In a flash of curly hair, she pivots around Lup and slugs Grimaldis in the gut.

"That's not how we respond to insubordination," Davenport comments mildly. "Stand down."

"Yes, sir!" she says cheerfully. She withdraws, leaving Grimaldis doubled over and wheezing. As she shakes out her hand metal flashes on the end of her wrist. It's a prosthetic, steel and iron shaped into a bulky claw that disappears up into her sleeve. Barry's now sure he hasn't met this woman before. She must be a very junior hunter, but she moves like a pro.

"Blue, this is a negotiation with court fae, and you're hindering proceedings. Go cool your head. Two hours," Davenport says. "Hammer, you're with me. I appreciate your help in de-escalating, Prince. I'd like to formalize this conversation as an audience, and move to somewhere more comfortable. Bluejeans?"

Barry jumps in his seat. He didn't expect Dav to address him—he won't even turn to look at him. "Yeah?"

Grimaldis is lingering in the hallway. Davenport turns and glares daggers at him until he crumbles and turns tail. Barry gets a kick out of how terrified he is. He should be afraid of Lup. He's such a coward; he caught her asleep and drugged her before he dared draw a weapon. He looked like he was about ready to piss himself when she snarled at him, hands blazing. She was magnificent. That’s going to be one of Barry’s favorite mental images for a long time.

As soon as Grimaldis leaves, Lup turns to Barry. She can’t say what she needs to in front of the other hunters. Mushy stuff like 'I missed you' and 'you mean a lot to me' and 'we’re gonna get you out of here'.

Instead she says, "Hey, Ba-Bluejeans." She's not sure how she should address Barry here. Do the other hunters know she knows his name? Do they know Kravitz knows his name?

"Is this your changeling?" Davenport says.

"I mean... Yeah," Barry says. "Uh, we're friends."

Davenport closes his eyes and visibly prays for patience. "Alright. We're fully aware you know each other's real names."

"Oh..." Lup says. "Hi, Barry..."

Davenport turns and gestures towards the door back to the hallway. "You two, Hammer, come with me. Let’s go see about a conference room. Tongs will bring Barry to meet us there."
Chapter End Notes

Surprise, Julia lives <3
Bargains and Consequences

Chapter Summary

Barry's actions catch up with him. Kravitz and Davenport discuss terms. Lup stands her ground.

As they leave to follow the Captain, Lup casts one last glance back at Barry’s cell. She doesn't know how sensitive he is, but having so much iron around at all times must be uncomfortable. Kravitz's hand on her shoulder turns her away.

He leans down and whispers, "This is touchy, L. We need to be careful here. You know I’d rather keep you in the room. Please don’t provoke them into asking you to leave.”

Lup turns away, scowling with a mixture of embarrassment and irritation. "I know," she quietly snaps back. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. That bastard almost killed me a few months back."

Kravitz hums in acknowledgment and pulls away as they’re led upstairs, into a wood-paneled hallway, and through a large oak door to a simple conference room. Everything about the room is unwelcoming. A single long table dominates the center, set with old wooden chairs, their cushions so worn she's not sure they do anything for comfort. One wall is taken up by an empty chalkboard, another by an inward-facing window closed off with blinds.

A boxy machine sits on the far side of the table, next to an empty chair that faces the chalkboard. There are spools of paper inside the wood-paneled framework. Lup can’t begin to guess what it’s for.

"Please," the Captain says, pulling out the closest chair, "take a seat."

Hammer stays by the door, guarding the only exit. To sit opposite the hunters, Lup and Kravitz are forced to walk around the table, as far from the door as the room allows, and put their backs to the shuttered window. It's an obvious power play, but Kravitz seems to take it in stride.

"Is there anything you want to say before Bluejeans gets up here?" the Captain asks.

"I'm not leaving until he's out," Lup says immediately. Kravitz nudges her with his foot in warning. "He's been stuck in a room the past five months," she continues forcefully. "It's wrong to keep him in another one, from his mother, after he just got home." She's holding her ground on this one.

The Captain looks briefly taken aback. Before Lup can guess what he’s thinking, Hammer interrupts with a sympathetic "Awww”. Rolling his eyes, the Captain yanks his chair out from the table. Instead of sitting immediately, he stares down Kravitz. He’s barely a head taller standing than Kravitz is seated.

Kravitz remains completely unruffled. He sits regally, an implacable expression on his face. Davenport had called him ‘prince’. After all her lessons, Lup’s pretty sure that’s not how fae courts work. The queen may technically be his mom, but not in the human sense, and he definitely won’t inherit. But he has all the self-possession and experience his status affords. And power and connections in spades. To a human, she guesses he may as well be royalty. That was definitely
"Are those the terms your court demands? His unconditional release?" Davenport says, eyes burning. "You admit that you abducted and imprisoned him?"

"It's not m—" Lup gags on her words. She can't claim it's not her court. It is, even if she doesn't get the benefits she should from it. She realizes that she has no idea what Barry's told the other hunters about what happened. Did they understand how hurt he was? Why he'd been there? Not knowing is making her uncomfortable.

Kravitz puts a hand on her shoulder. "L is a recent addition to the court, not a full member. Her involvement in Barry's position was purely that of desperation. He was not abducted or imprisoned for any reason beyond his own wellbeing. But he is important to the court. We can discuss demands as both sides come to understand each other."

Davenport pinches the bridge of his nose and doesn't look up when Barry slouches into the room, followed closely by Tongs. His silk shirt and jeans are rumpled like he's slept in them. While he looks healthy enough, he's got a half-inch of stubble and bags under his eyes.

Lup perks up and cranes to see Barry better, a pang of worry in her gut. He's awkwardly holding his hands level with his chest, wrists circled by iron cuffs. Tongs pulls a chair out for him on Davenport's left side and he sits, resting his arms on the table. Obvious red marks line his wrists where he brushed the iron too much. She doesn't think it's fair for Barry to be stuck like that, forced to keep his hands in a specific position just to avoid hurting himself.

"Sorry 'bout the wait," Tongs says, flashing her prosthesis as she drops into the chair on the table’s short side, placing her between Barry and Lup. "Took us a while to negotiate the cuffs."

"You were fine. Barely felt a thing," Barry says dryly. He re-positions his hands, leaving them palm-down on the table with the chain flat between them. Only a thin band of fabric protects his wrists from the cuffs.

"You okay, Barry?" Lup has to stop herself from using a nickname like 'Bear' or 'Babe', probably not appropriate for this, even if it’s a casual thing she does for everyone.

Barry's heart kicks. He sweeps a look across everyone else in the room: his bosses, former and present...but also Hammer and Tongs, who he overheard making out in the cellblock not even two hours ago. And he should take advantage of Grimaldis's absence while it lasts. "Yeah," he says, brazenly. "Better, now that you're here."

A faint flush rises in Lup’s cheeks. She prays it's not noticeable. Instead of attempting to say something and making a fool of herself, she just turns to look at her hands. She’s not up for confronting how she feels about what Barry just said.

Davenport sighs. "Alright. Pleasantries out of the way?" He eyes Barry over before turning to more appropriately address the table. "You two are here to discuss the arrest of one of my...ex-hunters."

Lup doesn't miss the tiny pause in Davenport's words. "Arrested under suspicion of fae coercion and sharing sensitive information with a fae court. There's suspected treason, willing or otherwise. I'm sure you understand how serious this could be."

"Yes, I understand how you're framing the issue," Kravitz says, tone sardonic. Barry tenses. "But if I had a copper for every suspicion your organization harbors towards fae, then I'd buy an estate in the capital. And, the crux of this is that, despite everything? Barry's a citizen. If your laws apply to him, then so does due process. You have no evidence that he divulged your secrets or broke your
organization’s confidence—plainly speaking, espionage—because he's done nothing of the sort. Part of his terms with my Queen was his refusal to work against his former allies. He never would have agreed, otherwise, and he said so plainly himself."

"Yeah, they didn't really take my word for that," Barry says with a rueful smile. Lup frowns. Humans and their lies and disbelief.

"Really? They should laud you for your insistence. You chose death over betraying them."


"You would have killed him if he didn't comply?" Davenport says, gaze harsh.

"He would have died, yes," Kravitz says plainly. "He entered our forest unwelcome and suffered the consequences at the hand of the Queen's Thorns, as all humans who trespass do. Frankly, you should be grateful that my Queen was merciful enough to have offered a deal. I would have been entirely justified leaving him to bleed out. It would have been easier on my life."

Lup wouldn't have said 'merciful', exactly. She and Barry had very little choice if they wanted Barry to stay breathing.

Davenport's gaze shifts to Barry. "'Bleed out', hmm? Remind me, Barry. The word you used to describe your injuries was 'inconvenient', wasn't it?"

Barry looks guilty, which is a dead giveaway even for the people who don't know him very well. And Davenport knows him way too well. "Yeah, bleeding out would've definitely been inconvenient... I told you, they gave me a deal. They'd let me uh, go, if I worked for them. I didn't have to go along with it. But—what, what K's been working on, is figuring out if there's any way to stop the Hunger's spread. And you gotta admit, that's been a problem for everyone. Since before we were born. So, I said yes."

Davenport narrows his eyes. "Right, this is now an informal hearing. Hammer, take notes."

Hammer salutes and hops out of his seat, returning moments later with a notebook and fountain pen. He sets to twirling the pen between his beefy fingers, overtly pleased to have something to fidget with. "This is where we're at: Barry's no longer a hunter. Abusing his exemption from the travel embargo was enough grounds to terminate his contract on its own. And then, on top of that, we have the flagrant violations his collusion with fae presents. Even coerced. Which is where we're standing, now. What made Barry think it was a good idea to invade your Queen's woods?"

Barry had done everything he could to conceal Taako's involvement in this mess. He knows what Davenport suspects, lacking that piece of the puzzle: that he was lured in against his will. But he refuses to let any of his mistakes come back on Taako. After murdering his old business partner in self-defense, he's safer if the hunters still think he's missing or dead. "I mean, you can strap me into the CPP again, if you want," he says, gesturing to the machine sitting at the edge of the table.

It's a polygraph machine, a relatively new model that reads nervousness from bodily signs and scribbles its findings on paper. Barry’s surprised Davenport bothered; he knows he’s always anxious. He said his name was Barry Hallwinter and that tracked as a lie. The adjustments to get the thing working took longer than the actual interview, and by the time they were satisfied he’d sweated through the cuff monitoring his pulse. He continues, "I'll give you the same answer. I thought I could just have a civil conversation, and I acknowledge that was stupid."

"Why, though?" Tongs says. "By all accounts you're far from stupid."
"He was helping me find my brother," Lup says quietly. It was her fault. "He got mauled because I wasn't paying attention. I had to take him to the courts. Only a Queen could save him at that point, could lift the charm." Lup's feet fidget under the table, her knees pressed close together. She doesn't like having to retell this. Why couldn't Barry have told them before she got here?

"This is the brother from Glamour Springs," Davenport says to Hammer's questioning look.

"The one who burnt a man to death," Tongs bites off, ferocious. Hammer's next pen strokes on the paper leave deep furrows.

"Why did you have reason to believe he was taking refuge in the court? If you suspected he was affiliated with a Queen, then why was that absent from your report?"

"He's not affiliated with my court. That lead came from me—I had mentioned to a mutual acquaintance that I transported the brother there," Kravitz cuts in. "Severely injured, from his altercation with his former assistant. Who, if I'm not mistaken, also poisoned around forty of your people, leading to half a dozen deaths."

Davenport's gaze is stormy. Barry’s been caught keeping secrets, and if he wasn’t already in jail he’d be worried. Kravitz's status is probably the only thing keeping Lup and him from being kicked out of the room so Davenport can question Barry alone. That's coming, though—Kravitz can demand diplomatic immunity all he likes, but Davenport's an officer with the hunters, not any kind of government official. He is neither obligated nor allowed to extend those privileges.

He can, however, decide whether Barry gets to walk out of here with Lup or back to his cell. He can detain Barry pretty much indefinitely, if he has cause. Like the confirmation that Barry's been magically coerced, the one that he painstakingly danced around through hours of interrogation. "Look, in my former capacity as a hunter, and since I didn't have any active cases— I thought it couldn't hurt to at least question that suspect. I knew I didn't have any active cases— I thought it couldn't hurt to at least question that suspect. I knew I didn't have a shot at, at transporting him back into the country to face any kind of trial, but with all the mitigating circumstances around the case there was no uh, political will to make that happen anyway. But getting a statement was still my responsibility, as was confirming the facts."

Davenport visibly bristles. His mustache curls back over bared teeth. "You were on medical leave after being mauled by a bugbear! Medical leave is typically meant to be spent convalescing, and instead you snuck out of the country to tangle with the nastiest monster you could find, chasing a suspect on a case you abdicated responsibility for! I should've found you home with your mother five months sooner, Barry!" His face reddens as he rants.

"And you—" he turns to Kravitz, "your reason for being here is that you claim us apprehending your "asset" is an offense to your Queen? She's demanding respect she didn't extend! Being charmed means Barry's culpability for anything is completely in question. Your Queen may as well have abducted him. There is no way in hell I'm releasing him into your custody after such a blatant admission of coercion."

Kravitz stiffens at being talked to so disrespectfully and stands from his chair, wings quivering with anger, filling the room with a soft fluttering sound.

"I swear I'm not charmed," Barry says, throwing up his hands. The iron chain clinks and bounces off his wrists. "This is—maybe it didn't start out as my decision, but—"

But he wants to keep working with Kravitz, even under nebulous instructions with no promise of compensation. He can't ever be a hunter again. And part of him screams at the idea of living out his days on the farm. The only place he can picture himself being happy is at Lup's side—and that's
"Look," he continues. "The important thing is that I don't want to be locked up in jail forever. Even if you think it's for my own good, Cap."

"My Queen," Kravitz says, heedless of the way Hammer and Tongs stand to meet his threat, "extended respect when she saved his life after he blatantly crossed our borders. No deals were made while he was under a charm. He fully understood his position and was fully capable of declining. The thorns are not living creatures like you or I. It cast a charm as a cat bites a mouse, and L only cast further to buffer Barry against that magic. You may not speak to me like one of your subordinates, Captain."

"He's not charmed," Lup insists, resisting the urge to stand. She doesn't need to escalate this further. "I swear I didn't even want to charm him before, I had to. He was bleeding out and wouldn't tell me how to help. I-I didn't—" She's spiraling and she has to take a moment to breath. Barry can't be locked up forever. He can't. She doesn't know what she'd do. Maybe she'd forget about him in a decade or two, but she doesn't want to. She wants to be with him as long as his human life will allow her—and wow, that's something to unpack on another day.

"Heed me well," Kravitz says. "L and Barry are important to my court. Barry's an expert on the Hunger's infection. L has lived among it nearly her whole life, and waged war against its spread. All my Queen wants is to neutralize the threat it poses. Anything Barry does outside of that, given that it doesn't directly endanger the court, is his own business. He'll be called when She needs him and left alone when She doesn't. The same treatment L can expect, although her contract binds her more tightly by nature of fae deals."

That's honestly the most illuminating piece of information Barry's gotten about the terms of his own contract, while also being exactly what he expected. He's on a leash, but at least Kravitz confirmed the slack is generous. "L, it's okay," he says reassuringly. "I'm okay. We're gonna work this out. Captain, uh, I'm not trying to come off as rude, but I don't think you have shit on me? Like, in terms of actual hard evidence. I think you just have to trust me, when I say that I'm of sound mind, and that I would never intentionally do anything to hurt you, or any of the hunters. No espionage, no collusion. I'm not enthralled, or enslaved. I'm okay with losing my hunter's license, I don't need any more hearings about that cos I'm not gonna ask for reinstatement, I think ever. And I'm sorry I wasn't more—forthcoming with you. I mean that, personally speaking."

The funny thing is, for how convoluted the events leading up to this were to live through, it's the same straightforward story that's been told a thousand times. The fae take someone away, and if they come back at all, it's with warped sympathies. Barry should've known what to expect when he started associating with Lup. Everyone else did.

He doesn't have any regrets. He's not sure that he even should.

Davenport takes all this in with his face impassive. Barry trusts that he'll reach a rational decision and knows that he's furious, despite that. And, that underneath that fury, is a deep-seated sense of betrayal. Making Dav feel that way might actually be his only regret about how everything's played out. "I'm not gonna disappear again," Barry says, hoping that's not a lie. He doesn't have a great track record with lies.

"What you've laid out for me..." Davenport begins. He stops and drums his fingers on the table, then holds out his hand for the Hammer's notes. Several tense seconds pass while he surveys them. "Violating the travel embargo—we stripped your license," he huffs. "Collusion and espionage...you have to realize that, if it emerges that your Queen ever commits any acts of aggression based on information she could've gotten from you? Then that's treason, Barry. That's an
You maintain that you're walking away from your career, working for a court that charmed and nearly killed you, of your own free will? That you're wholly responsible for everything that comes of this?"

"Uh—yeah," Barry says. "Yeah, I stand by that."

"You lost your pension. Hell, Barry, are they even paying you?"

Honestly? He doesn't think so. He just shrugs.

"We lost you," Davenport says, a little less harshly. "They want you because you're an expert on the Hunger? We need that talent too. That, and I can't think of anyone with as much experience at exorcisms as you. I was always on you to train up an apprentice, and now look where we are."

"I'm not— I'll be around—" he shoots a speaking glance at Kravitz, then realizes that if he can't ask questions like this now, he can't pretend they have a normal working relationship. "Boss, would it be okay if I contracted out, from time to time?"

"Erm," Kravitz pauses and Lup has to hold back a snort of laughter. It feels like things are settling down. Or, at the very least, she isn't worried about the hunters suddenly turning against them. And Lup’s fairly sure that Kravitz has never been called ‘boss’ before; that’s definitely not his title. Hilarious. "I don't see why not? Again, as long as you're available to be called and not endangering the court, we frankly couldn't care less what you get up to."

Davenport sighs. "I think I might be able to work something out that allows us to contract you when needed. " Scratching his chin, he eyes Barry’s cuffs. "I'll be honest here, I'm not sure there's much I can detain you for at this point." He pauses, but before Barry can say anything, he brandishes a finger adds, "Don't think you're out of the fire yet. If I get even an inkling of you giving up sensitive information, charmed or otherwise, I will not hesitate to throw you back in here for a full trial."

"Sure, that’s fair," Barry says. He wants to assuage Davenport’s worries. He understands where he’s coming from; of all the hunters, Davenport was the one closest to him. Barry knows his full name, his relations, his ambitions, everything he cares about. And everyone Davenport has to fight for respect knows how close he was to Barry. A betrayal on Barry’s part would endanger him most of all. "You know you're still welcome to visit me at my mom’s place as far as I’m concerned, right? You freaked her out, but I can try and put in a good word."

Davenport sighs and rubs at his temples. "Take his cuffs off, Tongs. Please don't make me regret this, Barry."

Tongs is deft with her prosthesis, but after a few frustrating seconds of fumbling and metal clacking off metal Barry intervenes and finishes unlocking the cuffs himself, heedless of the iron. At least he doesn't seem any worse for wear afterwards.

Davenport takes over jotting things down in the notebook, doubtlessly planning what he's going to tell the other officers about how he handled Barry. "I can't compel you to report your movements to us if you're just a contractor, but do so anyway. At least for our peace of mind."

Barry understands that what Davenport means is for his peace of mind. While Barry trusts Lup and even Kravitz, Davenport certainly doesn't. And no hunter would turn down an opportunity to monitor a high fae. Fear of retribution from Kravitz's court is, ultimately, Davenport's best justification for letting them all go free—but the other hunters would take it as a small victory if he secured a way to track Kravitz. And he needs to bring them a victory.
The first day in jail was the worst. Davenport turned the full force of his fury on Barry, untempered until it was plain he wasn't an imposter. Barry more than forgives him for grieving. "Yeah, I'll keep in touch. I promise. I can still use the mail system if you hand me work, right?"

Davenport jerks his head in assent. Tongs interrupts. "This doesn't sit right with me. Cuz—I mean no disrespect—I can think of a couple big ways that powerful fae have screwed us over recently. And we just have to trust that the Prince is really here because he wants to help with the Hunger, cuz we're scared of his court?"

"Tongs," Davenport says, "I know you have good reason not to trust fae, but the Prince has had a reputation as a spokesperson for his court for longer than I've been alive. If I have to deal with court fae, I'd rather it be him."

"I've dedicated decades to smoothing out human-fae relations and building a coalition against the Hunger," Kravitz says. "My court may be far from its present influence, but, left unchecked, it's an existential threat to all of us."

"Mmm," Tongs hums, arms crossed and scowling. "I trust Cap's judgment. I don't trust fae. If he says you're fine, then fine."

"It'll be alright, Tongs," Hammer says from the door. "If they try anything we can just kill 'em!" His tone is light and jovial, but Lup, Kravitz, and Davenport all send looks his way that visibly makes Hammer uncomfortable. "Sorry. Bad... uh... bad joke."

"Right," Davenport pulls everyone back in. "You're free to go, Barry. I might actually have an exorcism case for you soon if I can get some papers in order."

With the dismissal, Lup quickly pops up and moves around Tongs to wrap her arms around Barry, judgment be damned; he's safe and she's happy and that's all that matters. "I missed you," she whispers just for him, before pulling away. She trails a hand down to thumb lightly at the pocks of burn marks from the iron. "I could probably get Merle to fix this for you if you wanted, since physical remedies aren't gonna do much."

Barry's lost in a smile, not even minding how she's poking at tender skin. She missed him as quickly as he missed her? He wishes he'd reacted fast enough to hug back; his gaze gravitates towards where her thumb strokes his wrist. He holds very still. "No, but thanks. I'm fine, Da—the Cap'n gave me salve for that straight away, it's just in my cell. I want to check in with my mom. Did she seem worried...?"

Lup snorts. She just said physical remedies aren't going to fix damaged magic, but she didn't expect much more than that. "Honestly? She seemed more pissed off than worried...but I think she might be about two days away from staging a prison break. I know she'll be happy to see you home safe."

"As heartwarming as all this is, I do have paperwork to do," Davenport says, tone unreadable to Lup. "Hammer and Tongs can escort you out."

"I'll say hi for you," Barry calls to Dav as Hammer brushes past to beat everyone else to the door. "You're, um, probably still welcome to stop by for dinner anytime? She can't stay mad forever. Hasn't managed to yet, at least."

Davenport snorts. He'd heard a lot of stories from Marlena about the heartache Barry caused her, growing up. But the smile they share falls off both their faces when Hammer throws open the door to reveal Grimaldis hovering on the other side.
Behind him is someone Barry hasn't thought of in months—Quail, the junior hunter he promoted during the case that ended up being his last, way back in Glamour Springs. They freeze in mutual recognition.

"Wow, you're really letting him go already," Grimaldis drawls. "Just perfect. Glad we managed to catch you on your way out, Barry. It sure would've been something if Quail'd rushed here at the summons only to find you'd already flown the coop."

He didn't—he didn't even think. He'd forgotten what it would look like, for him to promote Quail to lead the Glamour Springs case on his way out, then get caught traveling with the primary suspect's sister the next day, and then, by all appearances, let her lure him to his death. "Oh, shit— I'm sorry— Captain? Quail didn’t have anything to do with this. Absolutely nothing is her fault."

She didn't know he was associating with Lup. Good thing, too: he snuck Lup, disguised as a mouse, to listen in on their last meeting about her brother's case. That might be his most flagrant violation of the rules. At least he was licensed when he went into the forest, which meant he was allowed to bypass the travel embargo "with due cause", at his own discretion. But colluding with Lup to pass her confidential information… Yeah, that would land him right back in his cell. If they catch on.

He tries not to think about the CPP on the table. They brought it out for him after he managed to convince Dav that he was the same old Barry, and not a fae in disguise, so magical methods of lie detection wouldn't do much against him. In the end he did a great job staying truthful without incriminating himself. He doesn't think he'd manage a second round with the thing so well.

Quail’s expression is unreadable. He tries to think back to what he knows about her. She was the only one of his juniors who actually seemed competent, so he...really didn't think too hard, when he put her in charge. "You asshole," she spits out. "Sorry. That was. Unprofessional."

"Blue, what in hell's name are you doing," Davenport calls from around everyone else. Hammer and Tongs move aside to make room for him. "You're supposed to be cooling off. Not spying outside the conference room." Lup glares at him and feels a sense of satisfaction at how his self-righteous posture deflates.

Grimaldis rallies and perks up again, defensively. "I'm showing Quail around, that captain Barry promoted right before running off with her?" He gestures sharply and Lup snarls in response. She's not about to shift again, but she's not at all afraid to remind him of her stance. Lup watches Grimaldis swallow hard and pull his arm back in. "I-uh. I was showing her to you. Since you— Since you were discussing Barry's release." Lup's lip quirks up, smug in her ability to make him uncomfortable.

"I had to come all the way here from Bonneville," Quail says, cool as ice, "because I'm on probation, pending possible demotion, out of the justifiable concern that I may have been involved with whatever you were doing with fae that we thought led to your death, thanks ever so much. Also? You never wrote a single thing about why you promoted me. I only had Freckles’ and Alder's word!"

Barry can't disguise his guilt. It's true, he never did. He fought a bugbear on the way to Berston, let Boyland handle that paperwork without ever thinking to mention Quail, followed Lup to the Miller labs and then up to the border... In all that time, the only report he filed was the hastily-scrawled description of his fight with Grimaldis on the train, and he didn't even drop that off at a hunter office in person.

He's okay with being fired. Looking back, he suspects that Davenport knew he wouldn’t last in this
career sooner than he did. But Quail doesn't deserve to suffer for his mistakes. "That's my screw-up. You're gonna be a damn fine officer, Quail, and I promoted you because I knew I could trust you to manage everything going on in Glamour Springs. The people, they trusted you. You were overseeing the interviews and liaising with the sheriff basically without me already. You deserve full credit for everything that went right down there."

"And we can only fire you once, huh?" Grimaldis says. "Wow, you walked straight from making a mess of the Glamour Springs case to throwing your weight around in my territory? I guess you nearly dying is punishment enough. I, personally, am just grateful that your changeling girlfriend didn't actually get anyone killed, even you, after you interfered—"

If Lup was in her true form, her ears would be flat against her skull. As it is she takes a step towards Grimaldis, a hard snarl on her face and teeth bared. She sees Hammer and Tongs tense in the corners of her vision, but is left unimpeded to stalk up to Grimaldis. She backs him up against the wall in the hallway opposite the door and gets as close to in-his-face as she can without making contact.

"You listen to me, Greg Grimaldis," she hisses his name like a threat and watches his eyes widen. "I don't like you. You tried to drug and murder me on a train and I'm not one to drop a grudge. The only reason I haven't decked you is my word to the Captain. But know this, if I ever even suspect you might try to hurt or use Barry, I will not hesitate to char you to bone. You think what my brother did in self defense was nasty? Try me and I'll show you what an angry fae-born changeling can do."

Grimaldis swallows hard and slides along the wall to curl out of Lup's space. She doesn't move, just watches him with the same glare. He throws a quick, angry glance at Davenport and Lup isn't dumb enough not to see Grimaldis's hand at the knife in his belt. Davenport's hard stare directed in Grimaldis's direction draws him to bring his hand away from the weapon.

"You told her my name," he hisses instead at Barry. "Do you know how much danger that puts me in?"

"Not any more danger than me, Barry Hallwinter," he spits back, clenching sweaty palms. Hammer and Tongs are hovering at his shoulders and he doesn't like the looks they're giving him. Dammit, he was almost home free. There's no law against him disclosing Greg's real name to Lup, not as a civilian at least. It is yet another violation of his hunter's contract, but that was torn up days ago. But, if they think he's likely to hand out names? If Davenport thinks that? "You're just gonna have to trust her to not treat you like you tried to treat her. You only came up in conversation because you terrorized a whole train car trying to kill her. I bet the trainmaster had a lot to say about that."

Lup catches the smug little smile on Kravitz's face, whiped away as soon as it appeared. "With all due respect, Captain," Kravitz says, "I don't believe L is out of line here. Your hunter has threatened her on multiple occasions now without reason." Barry's sure that Kravitz hasn't forgotten how much he and Lup bitched about Grimaldis in his presence.

Davenport doesn't respond to Kravitz directly but says, "Quail doesn't need your escort any longer. Go get some paperwork done."

Grimaldis makes as if to argue, but a sharp head turn from Davenport shuts him up. He glares one last time in Lup's direction before stalking off down the hallway, fists clenched. "Fine," he calls over his shoulder. "But I don't have to take orders from you. We're not on a case together. Remember that."

Well, Barry already knew he wasn’t directly under Davenport’s command. Davenport would’ve
been protective of him, if so. And Grimaldis would’ve been a sight more respectful or else discharged.

"I haven't been giving out names," Barry says to Davenport, tone almost pleading. Hammer scratches the back of his neck. Tongs shoots him a hard-faced glare. "I promise."

The look Davenport gives him is tired. The colleagues Barry was closest to are the most at risk from his mistakes. "You know I can't just believe you. Go home, Barry. You can get your belongings from the clerk downstairs on your way out. And if you really want to keep working with us? Stay where we can find you."

"Right," he says. "Right. I'll be at home. And I'll—be seeing you." He follows Kravitz out of the room, unsure whether he'll get to keep either of those promises. Any of them.
Holding a Kitchen Court

Chapter Summary

Kravitz elaborates on exactly what Lup and Barry owe in his service. Marlena gets a hug goodbye.

Lup trails Kravitz out of the conference room, falling in alongside Barry. As they walk, she silently reaches a hand out to clasp with his, not caring if Tongs or Hammer or Quail or any of the other hunters see. Knowing Barry's no longer in immediate danger has lifted a heaviness in Lup's chest she didn't realize the weight of.

It's terrifying. Close relationships with humans can't happen, she knows that. Something will go wrong, someone will get hurt, probably her. She doesn't want to push it too far. Better to let him decide.

Between one step and the next, Barry’s hand slips out of hers. Lup quickly brings her arm in tight against her side. Right. Of course. She can't blame him, wanting to keep a professional distance. When she looks, he's casting a worried glance back towards the open door. Quail stands at Davenport's shoulder inside, both of them watching intently. They resume their conversation as Kravitz reaches the stairs.

Barry’s stomach is tying itself in knots. None of his guesses as to what Davenport and Quail are talking about give him peace of mind. His word no longer counts for anything; he has no control over what Davenport or Grimaldis or any of the hunters decide for him, in the long run. All he can do is follow Kravitz down to the clerk's desk, counting the seconds off while his palms itch with sweat.

Lup's deliberately silent while Barry talks to the clerk. Once he gets his few confiscated belongings back, Kravitz leads them outside, slipping into a fully human appearance as he crosses the threshold. Lup follows suit, trying not to pout at having to alter her human appearance a bit after the earlier fiasco. Keeping a low profile is probably a good idea after the initial chaos of their arrival.

"Now that that's taken care of," Kravitz says, "unfortunately, I'll need to remain in town for a while longer. I sent a telegram to our mutual acquaintance prior to my first visit to your house, Barry. I should hope a response is enroute."

Lup frowns and says, "So wait, does that mean we're stuck here until you get your message?"

"Unless you intend to walk back to the forest, yes. I'm not expending energy teleporting you back and forth when I expect your presence at Lucas's lab as well."

"What? Why?" Lup was kind of looking forward to more downtime.

"My work with Luce and Lucas pertains to the Hunger." Kravitz takes a quick glance around the slow-moving streets before turning to Barry. "I also believe there's some confusion regarding your position with my court. I'd like to clear that up."
"Uh, I mean, yeah," Barry says, previously unaware he had anything so formal as a ‘position’. He'd been halfway convinced Kravitz would forget about him, sitting in jail. He wants to get as far away from the building as possible before Davenport changes his mind. "Where...do you have a place to stay?"

The thing is, he doesn't have money anymore. Marlena has whatever didn't get taxed. There’s no way he’s getting them a hotel room. There’s no way he can provide for any of his needs, and isn’t that a scary thought. Nothing he’s seen from Kravitz indicates that the guy has an understanding of the mundane necessity of three square meals and a bed. He lived in Kravitz’s room for months and didn’t see him eat or sleep at all, ever, period.

Kravitz clicks his tongue and turns in place, staring at the buildings around them. Barry's not sure he notices how many passerby are staring back. This is a small town, and Kravitz is a stranger in formal attire who's unbelievably, inhumanly handsome. Taako would get a kick out of how conspicuous he is.

"That place sells farming supplies," Barry says, after Kravitz spends way too long scrutinizing the windows of the building across from them. Also on this street: a post office, a church, a saloon, a drug store, and a general store. Not on the street: any hotels. Just the hunter HQ, looming at their back. "Are you sure we don't have time to go back to my mom's? I need to tell her I'm out of the hoosegow."

Kravitz scowls and turns towards the old church, eyeing the cross at the top of the building. "Your mother will find us if she comes looking," he says. "If not, we can drop in before going to the lab."

Lup glances between Kravitz and the church a few times, wondering what he could possibly find so interesting about human religious service.

"Follow me," Kravitz says. He starts off down the road without any further warning. "I know where we are."

Lup stumbles after him, startled. "Uh, Krav. How exactly do you know that? And.... uhhhh. Where are we going?"

Kravitz points at the church without looking back. "That's been there a long time. I have a friend in town who's hosted me before. I'm sure she'd be willing to again."

Barry does not ask Kravitz to define ‘long time’. He dutifully follows with his tiny box of belongings in his arms, feeling like he has a target on his back. His anxiety ratchets up as they cross the bare handful of blocks that comprise downtown to descend upon an unassuming craftsman-style house with a small yard and a deep porch.

Kravitz, to his credit, politely knocks at the door. Barry hangs back on the porch steps with Lup, shooting panicked glances at her, which she returns in kind. She’s not oblivious to how weird this is. They both really hope Kravitz knows what he’s doing.

A clamor sounds from inside. Shortly after, the door opens to reveal a pudgy older man in a rumpled button-down and trousers. "Yeah hello, uhhh..." he says, looking Kravitz up and down. His voice carries a deep drawl. "You folks here to see me? We're outside of work hours, so if you could swing by my office tomorrow instead...?"

"Greetings," Kravitz says, holding himself up in that high fae way of his that makes his presence fill the space. "Is this still the home of the Newtons?"
The man seems to pull into himself, clearly unused to Kravitz's whole...thing. "Uh. Yeah? I'm. I'm Duck Newton."

"Oh, wonderful. You must be related to Jane, then?"

Lup sends a quick look towards Barry that just says 'what the fuck is happening and who is this man?'

"Uh. Yeah. Jane's my sister, she's not here right now.... She's uh... at her job. Train... train stuff. Can I... can I help you? I don't know who you are, man."

"Interesting. She was such a wonderful politician, though. Forgive me for being rude. I am the Prince of the Northern Winter Court." Kravitz gives a little polite dip of his head and Lup watches, ever so slightly mortified, as Duck goes pale.

"Oh-you're-you're," Duck stammers, then under his breath, but really no quieter than he'd been speaking before, says, "Gran was telling the truth. Oh! You're looking for my Gran. Jane's my sister actually... named after her. Uhm." With every passing second, Duck contrives to look even more uncomfortable. No mean feat, as the man seems to be anxiety enfleshed. Barry swears he was never this bad. "You're about four years to late on Gran. S-sorry 'bout that."

Lup is trying very hard not explode, standing here watching this complete clash of misunderstanding cultures of which she only partially understands either side.

"Oh, that's a shame," Kravitz says, his posture expectant.

Duck falters and steps back. "I-uh. I guess you can come in? Uh. Who're those two?"

"I'm, uh, L. A friend." Lup awkwardly waves her hand, deeply uncomfortable with everything happening right now. It’s beyond her how Kravitz can miss how ridiculous this is. He can’t impose on this man for a favor owed by his grandmother from decades ago. Is that a thing?

That’s a thing. It’s exactly the kind of thing Barry would expect. Taako warned him what Kravitz was like, with a great deal of poorly-disguised endearment woven in with the amused incredulity. Barry really doesn’t understand Taako’s type.

"Er, I’m Barry Hallwinter," he says, squeezing past Kravitz and offering his hand to shake. "And I am so sorry."

Duck was doomed the second he gave Kravitz permission to cross the threshold. They pile into the living room, a cramped space with a padded bench serving as both a couch and seating for a dinged-up farmhouse table. There’s a kitchen through the door next to the bench, a pipe that could carry warm air from the stove poking out of a hole sawed above the door frame. Kravitz surveys the room, visibly taking note of the two closed doors across the narrow hallway.

Hopefully they're both bedrooms, because Barry’s gonna have to say something if Kravitz tries to throw this guy out of his own house. Kravitz ignores his heavy sigh and says, "Duck Newton. I have need of your services. I charge you with your family's offer of hospitality, for myself and for my companions."

Barry interjects, "Er, sorry, my mom's place is like three hours away by horse, and apparently we're waiting on a telegram? Uh...there's not...is there an inn anywhere...?"

"Don't interrupt," Kravitz says without much bite, looking at him askance. Barry mouths 'sorry' and rolls his eyes when he can get away with it. "Will you honor your grandmother's bargain, Duck
Duck is staring into the middle distance, like he’s wishing with every fiber of his being to be anywhere but here. Barry gets it.

"Now I'll be honest," Duck starts, drawling thickly, "we always thought Gran was crazy when she talked about hosting a fae. You, I guess. Hey, is that why she cared so much about givin' kids nicknames, what with the whole junk there? And I only really have Jane's room to offer. There's an inn a few blocks out, if you—"

Kravitz cuts him off. "I fear an inn will be less welcoming than the wonderful hospitality your family has shown me. And your Gran meant well, but if you would like protection under a pseudonym, it’s past time you change yours."

Lup can sense the power in Duck's name too; given at birth or not, he’s connected with it. It’s as true a name as any. As ‘Lup’ came to be for her as well, decades ago.

Duck grimaces. "I mean. I guess you can? Can stay, I mean... uh—"

"Thank you, Duck Newton," Kravitz ducks his head again politely. "We won't be long. The telegram I'm expecting should arrive any day now."

When Marlena knocks on Duck's door the next morning, he wearily lets her in. Barry's on his best manners, washing the dishes from a simple lunch of toast and bacon sandwiches. He's been trying to offer a hand around the house. He feels bad enough that Duck is missing work over their visit, and spending the night in Jane's room, with all its homey clutter, made him feel like even more of an intruder.

If Kravitz felt out of place, he didn’t show it. Lup faired a bit more uncomfortably, but took the situation in stride better than any of them. It’s not optimal, but if Duck’s family made a deal, there’s not much she can do to dissuade Kravitz. Best to make the most of it.

Both she and Kravitz abstained from sleep and food, preferring to haunt the living room. Duck and Barry spent the morning in the kitchen. They worked up to an unspoken pact of mutual solidarity in awkwardness. Barry's sure that Duck spent at least as much time laying awake in bed as he did last night. At least if their stilted, sleepy attempts at smalltalk are anything to go by.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Duck says to Marlena, sounding perfectly rehearsed.

"I can't thank you enough for hosting my son," she repeats. Barry wipes his hands dry and goes to hug her. She's wearing the coat Lup let her keep; brand-new, fae-made, and sure to be the nicest garment in town, next to Kravitz’s suit. "And thank you, K, for convincing Davenport to let him go. He's the one who told me where to find you all—is it alright that he and the other hunters know where you are? You three are the talk of the whole town, apparently."

"Mom," Barry says, "I'm not on the lam. Everything's—everything's fine! I lost my license, but I didn't break any laws. They might even give me some work in the future, as a contractor."

Marlena gives him a pitying look of disbelief and turns to Lup for confirmation.
Lup shrugs. "Sounds like what happened to me." Barry got all the buzz words at least, and the hunters definitely let him go. Neither she nor Kravitz would have accepted otherwise. "I don't think the Captain was especially happy about the whole thing, but he agreed Barry didn't do anything actually wrong, legally."

"Yes, that's all sorted out," Kravitz says. "Although there is something else I think we should discuss, in regards to Barry and his deal with My Queen."

"I'll just— Uh," Duck glances around uncomfortably and Lup offers him maybe his thousandth sympathetic look since they'd arrived. "I'll just go finish with the dishes. I guess..."

Kravitz takes a seat in the living room and gestures for everyone else to join him, letting Duck skulk away ignored. Lup hums uncomfortably as she takes her seat. Regardless of what Kravitz says, they are most definitely overstaying their welcome.

Barry’s already sweating as he sits down on the bench opposite Kravitz, with Lup and Marlena on either side. This is it. This is the other shoe dropping, this is Kravitz cashing in on his owed debt. "So, uh, what's up?" he asks, appending a hasty "Sir?"

"Can't this discussion happen back at home?" Marlena asks. "We should be leaving soon, if we're going to make it in time to cook dinner. Unless your mushroom portal is...working? They're still alive, at least."

"I'm waiting for a telegram, actually," Kravtiz says, settling back onto his bench. "Then Barry, Lup, and I are headed directly to the Miller Labs to meet with an associate of mine. I'm sorry that so much of Barry's off-time was taken up by his arrest, but his services are owed to my court. Which brings me to my main point; the exact terms of Barry's contract."

Lup swallows hard and resists the urge to take Barry's hand, clutching hers in her lap instead. Most of what's expected of her was laid out over her many 'remedial' lessons. The mess that was her upbringing left her excruciatingly ignorant of basic knowledge that court fae take for granted. The kind of things that Barry's not permitted to know; he got left behind the curve.

Kravitz doesn't take the breath that would typically come from a human preparing to speak at length on something serious. It makes Lup uncomfortable. "It's important to note that Barry and Lup's contracts are slightly different," he starts. "For Lup, she made a promise to serve the court. Until the Queen tells her that she no longer has to uphold that promise—if she ever does—Lup is inexorably bound to her service in all matters, not only regarding the Hunger."

Lup grips her hands so hard her knuckles turn white. She doesn't like to be reminded. Part of her hates how bothered she is by this situation, as if this isn't how the majority of fae live their lives, bound to a queen and a court. But humans don’t have to deal with that. They just get to exist, exercising their own free will at all times.

Kravitz continues, "Barry's contact is more specific. He will only be called on in matters regarding the Hunger. If that's somehow dealt with, She will consider the debt paid. Frankly, she believes he has nothing else of value to offer her in service. So it's in his best interest to help solve the issue."

The Hunger's been a problem almost as long as Lup’s been alive. The chances of them getting rid of it in Barry's lifetime are slim to none. She doesn’t want to think about that.

"The second aspect of Barry's deal involves him being unable to knowingly endanger the court and its members, directly or indirectly. Unlike a true fae, he could break his terms of contract, but I assure you there would be consequences. This condition does not lift after the Hunger has been
Marlena’s eyebrows knit together when Kravitz says ‘true fae’, but Barry glazes right over that. He’s already fully aware that some of the Queen’s power is lingering under his skin. Of course she’d want a fail-safe, some way to keep hooks in him at a distance. Or maybe it’s a natural consequence of the process she used to save his life. Either way, he can’t do anything about it.

What matters is that Lup got the worst end of the deal. Barry says, "Okay, so it's in everyone's best interest to figure out a solution for the Hunger, cuz it's expanding a couple feet out every year. Did you know that the towns on its border, like Refuge, have some of the worst air in the nation? That's saying something, that even places like Neverwinter don’t stack up. You been to Neverwinter this past decade? They've built all these coal plants; the smog is unreal now."

He doesn't picture the Hunger being solved in his lifetime, whatever a solution would look like. He can't imagine eliminating it entirely. But every little piece of data he's gathered has helped illuminate the scope of the problem, and will hopefully motivate people to direct resources to the communities that need them. How little his government has done for the affected peoples’ quality-of-life has been so frustrating. If working with Kravitz and his Queen has a chance of helping more people, then it's well worth it.

Barry's not going to oppose them. The only other thing he has to do with himself, besides serving Kravitz, is helping his mom out on the farm. And she doesn't really need him. It's just a relief to finally have an inkling of what Kravitz wants. Even if he has no idea how, say, housing and funding or any logistics at all will work. Maybe he'll get to stay with Lup and Taako?

If Lup's stuck doing the Queen's bidding, then the least he can do is be there for her. If she'll have him.

"Yes, I’m aware," Kravitz says. "And while I may be ignorant of particular statistics, I know the danger the Hunger presents to human settlements. The courts greatly fear its spread. You have to understand, courts don't fall. Queens don't just die. We have no idea what caused the Hunger, or how to prevent that kind of infectious dissolution from triggering again. Even if we can't stop it, discovering its origin could be imperative to protecting both our worlds."

Lup sighs and puts her head in her hands. What a shitshow. This whole situation sucks. Everything from the Hunger to their court contracts is such a mess. It doesn't matter how many times Barry insists it wasn't her fault, she still feels bad for dragging him into all of this.

"We're going to have to travel by land to get to the labs," Kravitz says. "I can't safely teleport humans; my connection to my court is not as strong as that of my sisters’, and accounting for even more tenuous threads would be too much for me. I would really rather not risk atomizing Barry. Perhaps we could book passage on a train? Oh! And, Barry, I need all your notes on the Hunger you've obtained thus far. Any information is important."

Oh, just all his notes? Several decades’ worth of research scrawled out on hundreds and hundreds of pages? Barry snorts and scratches his stubble. He should’ve borrowed Duck's razor last night, but he didn't want to place any more demands on the poor guy. "We're gonna need to talk to the hunters for my notes. All that stuff, the data and the papers? There should be hard copies at the biggest HQs—that's Rockport, Goldcliff, Neverwinter, for starters. The office here might have some of my older work. There’s also some data that I hadn't published—mostly just measurements on like, how much more the Hunger's overtaken old roads and settlements since last year—but uh, that's long gone." That was in the bags that he took with him into the Queen's forest, left behind after he and Lup were attacked.
"We could probably do that today?" Lup says, eager to leave Duck’s funhouse of social discomfort. "Krav, how long are we planning on staying here for that telegram?"

"I sent it before our first visit to Barry's house a week ago," Kravitz muses, "so I'm willing to wait a good while longer."

It's at that point Duck comes in, drying his hand with a towel. He sighs deeply at catching the tail end of Kravitz’s statement and says, "Don't mind me," as he walks past the living room to his bedroom. Lup grimaces at the thought of forcing him to host them for an unknown length of time.

"You all can't keep imposing on this poor man," Marlena hisses after Duck shuts the door behind him. "I don't understand why I can't at least take Barry back with me, if you're sitting on your hands anyway."

"Mom," Barry says, shifting uncomfortably, "they're gonna need me to go talk to Dav and get them everything we have on the Hunger."

"That doesn't have to happen now," she insists. "You deserve a break. One week won't make a difference to anyone, not after that forest's been rotting for a hundred years."

"First of all," Kravitz glances towards Marlena, "I fully intend to compensate the Newtons for their hospitality. I don't appreciate the insinuation that I wouldn't."

By now, Lup knows full well how seriously Kravitz takes tradition. Repaying a favor is basic courtesy for someone like him. She's just grateful he's with-the-times enough to recognize that Marlena didn't actually mean offense by suggesting otherwise.

That’s not to say they shouldn’t be concerned by what Kravitz could deem ‘compensation’. That might be anything, from blessing the health of Duck’s house plants to a full favor.

"Secondly," Kravitz continues, drumming his fingers on the tabletop to command attention, "Barry will be staying here, so we can leave at a moment’s notice. It’s not my fault the break I gave him was interrupted." Lup can see the way Kravitz is bristling, ever so subtlety inhuman despite the face he’s donned. "Frankly, I'm not sure we can afford to waste even what little time we already did. We've never known if we have time. The Hunger is a threat even the Queen is unsure about. It blossomed unheralded, slaughtering her sisters at its birth. Barry is staying with me."

Lup clenches her hands tightly into the fabric of her pants. She wishes she could do something, but Kravitz is right. Socially, he’s wrong, but on a level of stopping the Hunger he's right.

Marlena's a tightly-wound coil, anger coursing across the lines of her shoulders. Barry takes her hand and squeezes it. He leans into her side, mind scrambling for how to appease and comfort her. "I don't understand," she says, after a moment. "Barry— You know I say this with love, because I know you're brilliant. I have always, always believed in you. But you're one man."

"I'm sorry I can't, Mom," Barry says. "They need me if they're ever gonna make headway with the hunters’ body of research. Since a big chunk of it is mine anyway. This is important."

"I never said it wasn't!"
He leans over and kisses her forehead. "Things will be okay. You don't really need me on the farm —you've got your hands, and the neighbors—"

"Of course I need you! I need to know you're safe! I need to know what's happening to you, where you'll be, who you'll be with!"

"Barry will be protected," Kravitz says. "We don't want to lose him any more than you do. And it's not like we'll be keeping him forever, or constantly. I can contrive a way for him to take time off, as any human employ would."

"What do you mean, protected?" Marlena asks. "I was worried about—about lodging and food, him getting paid—insurance! What if he needs to see a doctor? What about retirement?"

"K," Lup interjects, earning her a glare without too much heat behind it. "You can't just say that. You don't—" Lup pauses, thinking about how she felt when she didn’t know where Taako was, only that he was hurt. At the back of her mind, she’s always carrying that anxious pain.

She leans out around Barry to meet Marlena’s eyes. "Mar, I'm so sorry. I... I swear to you that between K and myself, Barry will be protected to the best of our abilities. I really don't think there’s gonna be another situation like that last with K. But if something does happen, I'll be sure to make you the first to know."

"If you would—" Kravitz starts to say, but Lup pushes aggressively through his authoritative hold and turns to glare. Kravitz sighs. "Yes. I can’t say I have insurance figured out, but should something happen, you will be swiftly informed. Barry is capable on his own, and I will take reasonable measures to ensure his safety."

Lup rolls her eyes. That's probably the best she's gonna get out of Kravitz for now, stiff and awkward and unable to fully grasp human connections. She is... probably a little off-base as well, but at least she has experience.

"Great," Barry says. "Awesome job with the reassurances, guys. Mom, it'll be fine. I’m not gonna be destitute. Or get killed."

"Really, now?" she snaps, exasperated. "You don't know that! You just want to run off and do this thing, like how you wanted to become a hunter—danger be damned!"

"That's the crux of it, isn't it?" Kravitz says, slow and clear. "He does want to do this. And, even if he were to change his mind, it's too late. His services were bought and paid for. I've assured you that I'll make every effort to be a reasonable...boss. But I have neither the time nor inclination to do anything more to prove myself. Stay and talk to him, if you want. But when that telegram comes, we're going. I won't compromise the future of my court for your peace of mind."

Rising from the table, he turns his back and sweeps out of the room with all the grace of a court-born high fae. The front door slams. An uncomfortable silence settles in his wake. Duck peeks out of his bedroom, meets Barry’s eyes with an awkward grimace, and silently closes his door again.

Lup puts her face in her hands. "I'm sorry about him. I mean. I can't really do much, but. You shouldn't have to worry about doctors, at least. We can handle that. I know K won't pay him. In the eyes of the court, Barry's been more than paid by still being alive. At the end of the day, he did make that deal. He's gotta uphold it."

She groans and looks up at the ceiling, contemplating. It's not like Kravitz can't pay Barry. She's sure he has an assortment of precious jewelry or coins or whatever worth a good bit of cash. But
the problem is, in his eyes, Barry's the one who owes the court. It will never be the other way around unless he does something truly, astoundingly remarkable.

"I get the picture. Thank you," Marlena says. "Just promise me you'll look out for each other. And please, for once in your life," she jabs Barry in the sternum with one accusatory finger, "remember that you're only human. Don't let K yank you around. I mean no offense by this, but I don't trust him to understand what you need. You had best be sleeping and eating, Barry Hallwinter. You have to take care of yourself!"

Barry knows where her worries come from. She'd read him the stories, of fae who charm humans to sleep their lives away, or stay awake for days of manic partying until their hearts give out on the spot. Who invite a new pet to gorge on a feast of their food, or sustain them through famine with magic. The latter, he can say with authority, sucks. Even well after his hunger went away, when his stomach was rendered inert, a clenched ball of muscle, the discomfort never faded.

As for the former, he witnessed glimpses of enthralled figures in the court. He knows the stories hold at least some truth.

Setting aside malice, fae have an infamously poor grasp on things like food and sleep and mortality. Except for how Lucretia, the first high fae he ever met in person, guzzled a mint julep and harangued her human colleague to eat real meals. How Lup sometimes makes herself scarce at night, respectful of his need for rest even when she doesn’t care to indulge. How Taako poured hours into mashing, stewing, and pureeing an improbable variety of foods into concoctions Barry could sip. How Kravitz stormed his Queen's throne room to demand an audience before Barry bled out.

Barry smiles. "Hey, I'm gonna be just fine. It's not like I'm new to traveling. L and I can handle ourselves, and K's done right by me so far."

Marlena shakes her head. "I can't believe it until I see it."

She leaves the next day, after treating everyone, Duck included, to a nice meal. Lup insists on helping cook this time, making sure to get something more interesting on the table than bland dumplings, no matter how much Barry likes them.

All the way up to her departure in a cab paid for by Barry’s money, Marlena barely disguises her bitter malaise at the situation. Frankly, Lup can't blame her. She squeezes Barry tight in farewell and drifts away with bloodless lips, tears welling from her eyes.
A Tale of Fire and Iron

Chapter Summary

Barry gets a job and Lup faces judgment.

Chapter Notes

Hello!!! Sam here. Hope you're all doing well! Thank you so so much for all the kind words and kudos. We are so so happy with the reception this piece has gotten.

I love you all and hope you enjoy today's chapter!

A daily routine quickly sets into place. Lup makes something good to eat in the morning, partially as an apology to Duck for imposing. The poor man never seems comfortable, but appreciates the gesture nonetheless. Lup notes the way Kravitz spends the nights; he’s either reading, making fruitless plans, or drifting around the house to find little things to fix. Duck's shower head should flow better now, his sinks won’t drip, and his cabinets won't squeak. If Duck notices, he never says anything to her.

Lup and Barry spend their time trying to get their hands on Barry's published research. Since he's no longer a hunter, there's a lot of extra hoops they have to jump through before he can order copies from their archives.

They spend a few more days in the conference room, reading over what little information pertinent to the Hunger is on hand. Until Davenport brings up an offer for an exorcism job.

The town Hammer and Tongs are from, Raven's Roost, apparently got targeted by a fae attack. A lot of wayward souls were left to wander the ruins. They urgently need as many exorcists as they can get. Barry was one of the best, and he’s also clearly the closest.

Davenport goes over the layout of the town and the astonishing death count, but doesn’t offer further detail, like the nature of the attack or what provoked it. Beyond telling Kravitz that he wants to commit, there’s not much Barry can do immediately.

He really wants to help. The Burnsides’s animosity towards fae makes more sense to him, now. Rebuilding their home can’t start until it’s safe. And he burns to know how something like this could happen. Lup doesn’t trust the idea of a random fae attack. Most court fae don’t consider humans worth their time unless there’s entertainment or vengeance to get out of it.

A full week passes with no word from Lucretia before Barry approaches Kravitz and says that if a telegram was coming, it'd have arrived by now. After a bit of debate, Kravitz concedes to going on ahead, with only a second telegram to herald their visit.

Perhaps it's thanks to Kravitz wanting to delay dropping in on Lucretia unexpectedly, but Barry manages to convince him the merits of stopping at Raven's Roost to help with the exorcism.
Barry's convinced it won't take long. He could use the money in his pockets, and he wants to do this for Davenport.

On their way out, Kravitz procures a small handful of trinkets from somewhere Lup can't guess and places them delicately on a side table in the living room as a thank-you. Lup isn't positive of the current going rate for gold in the world right now, but she's fairly certain what Kravitz left is of no small value.

He waits for Lup and Barry to tidy the house and they leave while Duck’s at work without another word. They watch as Kravitz sweeps ahead of them with his wings tense and head held stiffly. He doesn’t so much ignore the gaze of passerby as remain effortlessly unaffected. The hunter organization put out an alert to the town Kravitz was there. It allows him to travel in half-fairy form without hysteria, at least.

Kravitz isn't a soft touch. From the outside, it looks like he’s giving way to Barry’s agenda; cooperating with his old colleagues, taking detours to pick up contract work. Marlena was appeased, at least.

But the reality is that Kravitz understands diplomacy. The hunters feel cheated out of one of their own. Barry is useful for exorcisms, but he wouldn't have been given the work if it didn't let hunters keep tabs on him. Having that leverage will make them more comfortable. And Kravitz needs their cooperation to travel freely and access their information. The government listens to hunters when it comes to managing fae. They might not be able to arrest Kravitz without repercussions, but they could certainly throw him out of the country.

Kravitz doesn’t communicate his motivations so clearly to Barry, but Lup knows him pretty well by now, and they had a lot of time to hang out in Duck’s living room and talk over things. The week would’ve been peaceful if she and Kravitz both weren’t both so obviously going stir-crazy. Slow is fine, but in a small, angular, human home only occasionally being able to shift and having nowhere to sleep if she feels like it, Lup can’t quite help it. Barry thinks it’s kind of funny, after how long they kept him on bedrest at the court. The waiting doesn’t bother him at all when he’s with Lup.

Davenport provides two coaches out to Raven's Roost, seating himself in the first with Kravitz and Grimaldis. Barry and Lup ride in the second, opposite Hammer and Tongs.

The journey is tense. Barry spends his time preparing an exhaustive briefing for Kravitz that touches on everything he can think of. He doesn’t know enough about fae magic to guess whether springs or moss or rocks or whatever could be important or not.

The countryside rolls by, flat fields giving way to arid scrub hour by hour as they head west. He and Lup can't talk freely, which is the point of the hunters' presence. Barry's sure Davenport's making plans to attach a chaperone to their party permanently. Kravitz may even allow it, to demonstrate that they're not up to anything nefarious. Lup just wishes they could have five minutes alone again. To talk without her Queen, or Kravitz, or a hunter looking over their shoulders.

The first sign that they've arrived is Hammer twisting in his seat to peer out the window. Raven's Roost comes into view minutes later. The town sits directly on the road to Rockport, perched on the lip of a narrow canyon that leads down to a river.

Or, it did.

There are two sprawling blocks of stucco buildings on dirt roads pocked with gravel-filled potholes and lined with scraggly trees. The first thing Barry notices is that the trees are covered with dust.
The next is the pale sky looming where the buildings abruptly vanish. The first thing Lup notices is the heavy weight of fae magic in the air. It carries with it a sense of stale dread.

They stop the coaches at the edge of a disaster zone. As they step out of the coach, Lup's mouth hangs open in horror. She always knew fae were capable of awful destruction, heard about a few massive attacks in centuries past: deals broken, forests burned, fae played even less nicely when humans didn't understand.

She's never heard of anything this bad. This isn't just vengeful, this is...horrible.

Several hundred yards of devastation stretch all the way down into the canyon. It's a sickening scene. Scorched fragments of wood sit under piles of broken roof tiles. Shattered glass litters the ground. There are dented pots, cracked tabletops, scraps of fabric trapped by heavy stone. Some walls still stand along the border, but at the epicenter there's little left besides stone foundations and a few crumbling walls. The river is dammed by scree where the cliffside collapsed, forming a deep pond of muddy sludge.

The air is choked by dust and something else. Something that makes Barry sneeze, tickling his nose and grating across the back of his throat. It has an electric tang, like licking lemon juice off a copper pitcher. His teeth ache with the taste.

And, underneath that, there's a heavy sense of disquiet. A palpable weight to the devastation. The murder of half a town made manifest by more than grief.

"This used to be the craftsmen's corridor," Tongs says, facing away from them as she surveys the landscape. Barry lingers in the shade of the coach, giving her space and squinting against the flurries of dust kicked up by wind. Tongs pulls her bandanna down over her mouth, hair springing up in dense curls. "That's what this town did. We'd get wood from the south, clay from the rivers, iron from the mines and stone from the quarries, and we'd make things to send to Rockport to sell."

Barry tries to catch Lup's eye. He knows why Davenport decided to bring her and Kravitz here. She stands apart from them, staring at the ruins. She dropped the human charade once they left the city. There was no pretending she wasn't fae around the hunters. The thick aura of fae magic choking the area makes her ears flatten. More than the smoke: the intensity of burned magic, too much for the nature around to reabsorb, makes both her and Kravitz start coughing. Unfortunately they can't pull up a cloth to cover their mouths.

Something bad happened here even beyond the destruction and she can feel the fae influence as it curls around her, looking for something to latch onto.

Surveying the devastation, she can't help but wonder who seriously pissed off a powerful group of fae. It feels the way her magic does when she warps it into flames, which would implicate a summer court. She and Barry never got a chance to see the one of Kravitz's realm. They must have done this. The summer court from Lucretia’s system, the one that left her behind, the one lost to the hunger, has been desolate for a hundred years.

But why? Kravitz's cousins are closest, but hardly close. There’s no reason for any of their fae to have ever set foot in Raven’s Roost.

"What... happened here," she whispers, ears still pinned to her skull, voided eyes wide and afraid.

Tongs turns slowly, rock scraping under her heel. "Your people did," she says, and her voice is blunt and thick. If Lup’s ears could pin back further they would. Kravitz bristles. "Come this way."
She strides into the rubble, not even looking at her feet as she sidesteps the broken pieces of other people's lives. It's obvious she's walked this way many times. Hammer waves two people approaching from the intact buildings over to Davenport while Barry hesitates. There's no fence or police tape to delineate the boundary between the living and dead streets. Just lines of gaping windows, some with shards of glass in their frames, that show glimpses of light inside until suddenly falling empty and dark.

Lup and Barry follow after Tongs, Hammer bringing up the rear. Barry can't even guess the former purpose of the demolished buildings they pass. It's all broken stone and crumbling stucco, caked with dust and soot.

He should've known about this. The story will still be in the papers; it's only been a couple months. He used to read those. He used to follow the news on what was happening in his world.

They're clambering over chunks of stucco, brick, and wood before long. Barry looks back to the civilians talking with Davenport, too far away to hear their conversation, and wonders if there were enough people left to dig their dead out of the rubble. Untended corpses always complicate exorcisms.

Tongs stops them in a field of broken tile shingles before a stone wall. The building is just like any other, except for the way her shoulders shake as she faces it. The felled support beams crisscross the shell, ribs in a shattered carcass. There's one room standing; three stone walls on the ground floor, cradling the collapsed ceiling.

There's an iron anvil in the middle of the room. Hammer catches Barry staring. "This was a blacksmith's. Ju— Tongs's dad's. We got the rest of the iron out, but the anvil was too heavy to move."

"So," Tongs says. She rounds on Lup, glare catching on her void-filled eyes. "Tell me what's fair, for almost three hundred people—mostly folks who'd never seen a fae in their lives!—to die this way. Tell me what we could've done to deserve this."

Lup's ears unpin just to droop. She can pick up the subtext. Tong's dad didn't make it out. A glance around and, well, a lot of people didn't make it out. She's killed before, mostly in self defense, never out of actual malice. She's met fae who've killed for fun or vengeance. Been close to a few. But this? She can't even imagine.

"I--," her hands bunched in her shirt, tugging at the fabric. "I don't know. This is... I'm so sorry."

Tongs huffs and turns away, arms crossed; it makes the pit in Lup's stomach drop further. "Just— Just do whatever it is you and Barry need to do to put the people that died here to rest."

Part of Lup wants to snap that she had nothing to do with this, that Tongs taking her anger out on her is unfair. And yet, she can't fault Tongs for her stance. Lup might distrust most humans--less so than she used to--but they've never done something like this to her.

"I've never seen an attack like this before," Lup says to Barry, just for him to hear. "There's so much fae magic here... Like a giant clog. It's awful."

That might be the buzzing in his teeth. His senses have been haywire since the court; the Queen's presence, or at least the presence of her magic, eventually resolved as a shard of bitter cold seated in his forehead like the crystals encasing his side. He's never been able to sense ghosts, though some might insist that's an essential skill for any exorcist. Still, if he ever felt like he could, it's here and now, where the air's so thick with death that it coats the insides of his nostrils and sticks to
his tongue.

"Was this...a court?" Barry asks. "Who would've...?"

"It must have been," Lup says. "No single fae could cause this much destruction without completely losing themselves, and even then I'm not sure it's possible."

"Which court," Hammer says, gaze turned towards the rubble of the the blacksmith's, mouth set in a hard line.

"I... I'm not sure," Lup says. "Probably a summer one. There was fire magic involved. I can't tell you more than that."

Hammer looks faintly surprised that Lup gave away that much, but she has no natural loyalty to a court. Barry can't catch Tongs's expression. She's hanging her head and breathing hard under her bandana, curtain of hair hiding her face. In one big step, Hammer is at her side, pulling her into a hug and cupping her face to his shoulder. "You okay?" he whispers.

"I'm fine," she says, but she doesn't pull away. "Okay. So it was—the Summer Queen's folk. Friend of your buddy, the high fae?"

"I dunno," Barry says. "I definitely didn't meet any of them while I was up there. I don't think he'd be okay with anyone who would go and, well, do...this. Can you tell me more about, the uh, did anyone see what happened immediately beforehand...? Or, during?"

He almost winces at himself. He doesn't need to know any details to exorcise the ghosts. He didn't ask as a professional, he asked out of curiosity. He should know better.

Tongs inhales and exhales over and over, deep and steady, for a count of ten seconds each. "I was in the forge. The Captain thinks that's why I lived—all the iron, the tools hanging on the walls and piled on the shelves—it was like a cage, keeping the magic out. Protecting me. There was—it went so bright outside that it was like I wasn't actually seeing. The kind of bright you only get in dreams. And there was no sound at all. Just heat. Hotter than the forge was with the furnace running."

Lup's eyes flick towards Tongs' prosthetic. She can make a guess how that might have happened, then. She swallows hard and says, "I'm so sorry. Vengeance for wrong-doings are common in fae culture, perhaps someone broke a treasured deal? I've never seen anger like this before, though. Unless they were angry at the entire town there is no reason to..." Lup thinks for a second about Barry, about his mother. She wonders how he would have felt if this was where she lived. How anyone living in this town must feel. "No. No even if a deal was broken this is...extreme. Innocent lives."

Tongs eyes Lup critically. Lup can't read her expression, can't make out what she's thinking. "Reports say the most sightings happened over there," she says, blatantly changing the subject. Lup only just catches the tears prickling the corners of her eyes as she follows her pointing finger towards the epicenter of the disaster zone. There's not much there that stands out against the rest of the rubble.

"Let's go check in with Cap," Hammer says, putting a hand on Tongs's shoulders and leading her away from the crumbling mass of her father's grave. Lup watches them go, ears brushing her shoulders with how low they dip.
Tansy here! Working with SparkleDragons on this collaboration has been delightful. She's a talented writer with a lot of fun ideas and I'm having a great time playing in this space.

Catch us on tumblr at SparkleDragons and Tansyfandom

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!