THE ROAD OF THE LOST

by

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Abstract

The following is a YA high fantasy novel focusing on a brownie who discovers that she is not actually a brownie and embarks on a journey to find out who and what she is.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished and independent work by the author, Nafiza Azad.
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Family Tree

Carrick ó Maoilriain (d)  
**The Forever King**  

Fiona ó Ceallaigh (d)  

Diarmud (d)  
Nuala  
Maebh  

Diarmud ó Maoilriain (d)  

Kyna ó Nualláin (d)  

Peadar (d)  
Donal (d)  

Maebh ó Maoilriain  

Aodh ó Muireadhaigh  
**The Tine King**  

Croi  

(d) = deceased
A List of the Tír na nÓg Kin and Creatures That Appear in this Book

Fae

There are two types of Fae:

1. **High Fae** are those who are courtiers and royalty. They live in the *Caisleán of whichever kingdom they call home*. Their mastery of magick is far more advanced compared to any other type of kin. They are common across all four kingdoms.

2. **Lesser Fae** are those who turn into animals or birds. They live in settlements around the kingdom and do not have much to do with courtly politics.

The exception to this classification is Uisce kingdom where all Fae have two forms: one that is able to walk on land and the other that is able to swim in the sea.

**Brownies**

These are peace-loving Talamh kin who have strong innate earth magick. They are farmers and provide the bulk of fresh food available in Tír na nÓg. They are known for their domesticity and loyalty.

**Dryads**

There are only three dryads in Tír na nÓg. They are the only ones who can wield all four element magicks. Though they are not Talamh kin, they call Talamh *Caisleán home*.

**Pixies**

Pixies are Talamh Fae who have their own monarchy. The pixie kings and queens have always sworn fealty to the Talamh monarch. Pixies usually spend their entire lives in one meadow except for the year they are granted to travel and have new experiences.

**Redcaps**

Redcaps are abominations that depend on kin flesh and kin magick to sustain them. They exist in circles of five or six, sharing one magick between all of them. It is difficult to communicate with them as they do not speak Faerish and their language is difficult to learn. After continued terrorization of the common kin, the Redcap population had been locked up by the Forever King. Redcaps are Talamh kin.

**Horse Goblins**
Horse Goblins are a type of Tine kin that are skilled in the art of horse handling. They are peaceable creatures and never so happy as when they are in stables tending to horses.

**Fire Imps**

Fire imps are excitable creatures of the same size as Talamh pixies that breathe fire and attach themselves to Tine Fae. They are great enemies of pixies.

**Catkin**

Catkin are a type of lesser Fae that have the ability to take the shape of Cats. Catkin are Talamh kin. They live in large extended families and for them, familial bonds trump all.

**Wolfkin**

Wolfkin are lesser Fae with the ability to take on wolf form. They are fierce creatures and usually work as soldiers or fighters. They are Talamh kin.

**Night Crows**

Night crows are physical manifestations of Redcap magick. They usually only appear at night. They are portents of death as that is what follows when a kin sees a night crow.

**Will o’wisps**

They are thought to be the unfading magicks of those killed unfairly. They augur danger and death and any kin who sees them is usually afraid.

**Sand Horses**

The current Tine King is known for bestowing upon those they love the gift of sand horses. Sand Horses are horses forged by sand, fire and Tine magick.

**The Hag**

The Hag is a construction of a Talamh King who made a body for his dying beloved. She is of the Talamh Kingdom and her purpose is to witness and record the happenings in the kingdom.
Birdkin

Birdkin are lesser Fae from the Aer kingdom. They have the ability to turn into birds.

Bluecaps

Bluecaps are Talamh kin. They have an affinity for the earth and work the mines of Talamh.

Dragons

Dragons though they breathe fire are Talamh kin. Dragons haven’t been seen for many years and are thought to have left Tír na nÓg for other worlds.
## Name Pronunciation Guide

(in alphabetical order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aer</td>
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<td>Aindriu</td>
<td>Ain-drew</td>
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<td>Aislin</td>
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<td>Bearach</td>
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<td>Ru-a-ree</td>
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<td>Samhradhán</td>
<td>Sow-rawn</td>
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<td>Talamh</td>
<td>Tho-live</td>
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<td>Tine</td>
<td>Tchina</td>
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<td>Uaine</td>
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<td>Uisce</td>
<td>Ishka</td>
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Prologue

The Hag heard the roar of a dragon and, a second later, the wail of a baby.

She stood at the threshold of the receiving chamber in the caverns of Ruaidhri, the Red King of the Dragons. The Hag didn’t usually seek the company of dragons—part of her was made of wood and dragons are known to be indulgent with fire—but the magick had stopped singing the day before, and the trees were whispering impossibilities. So when the daughter of the Forever King summoned her, the Hag had no choice but to make the journey to this place so secret that no one but she and the royal kin had knowledge of its existence.

The Hag took one step into the chamber and stopped, assailed by the grief that thickened the air and granted it a crushing weight. She sharpened her senses and tried to listen through the walls, to seek out the source of the grief, but the magick would not respond.

Torches, fit onto the sconces on the wall, gave a little light and an army of shadows. The Hag tried once again to listen, this time to the earth. She had had little success when the sound of footsteps reached her. The footfalls were coming from the eastern corner of the chamber where a corridor branched off to attach the receiving room to parts of the Red King’s den where the Hag was not welcome.

The brownie-mother emerged first. The Hag found the custom of attaching brownie-mothers to royal children curious, and she had, on previous occasions, observed this brownie-mother with her charge. Monca, as the Brownie-mother was called, was stout, with yellow hair and blue eyes. Her cheerful countenance often stopped others from noticing the strength in her gaze and the clench in her fists. At this moment, the happy charm of the brownie-mother was significantly absent. Belatedly, the Hag noticed the babe in Monca’s arms and wondered if this was the babe she had heard earlier.
Monca carried the babe to a low table on the far side of the chamber and, with infinite
gentleness, placed her on its cloth-covered surface. She did this without a word or even a
look in the Hag’s direction. After she set the child down, the brownie-mother stood by her
charge, head bowed and hands clasped. The Hag followed her lead and kept her silence.

Then the earth shuddered and the temperature plunged. The babe on the table
whimpered but the brownie-mother made no move to tend to her. The Hag waited, her eyes
not moving from the eastern entrance. Her patience was rewarded when the famed earth
princess, dressed in a blood-splattered yellow gown, walked into the room.

She, too, carried a babe in her arms, but the Hag barely glanced at the child. She
could not take her eyes off the face of the Fae-woman for whom countless suitors had penned
love songs. This Fae-woman was the earth princess; she was the source of the grief in the air,
the grief that was now accentuated by the flashes of insanity in her eyes. The princess’s
cheeks were stained with tears and blood, and she trembled as though shock had settled deep
into her bones. She stopped short when she saw the Hag standing a few steps from the door.
Her lips stretched in a wide smile.

“Oh, Blanaid, my father’s favourite! So good of you to come!” the princess trilled
like a nightingale in song. “Have a seat! Oh, but there are none! Dragons don’t need seats, do
they?”

The Hag hadn’t been called by that name in a long time and she felt it sting, like a
burr underneath the skin. Still, she kept her silence.

“You don’t know, do you? Or have the trees already told tales? No? Well, let me put
this child down safe, safe, carefully, ah, yes. Now,” the princess Maebh, as she was called,
put the babe beside the Brownie-mother’s charge and turned to the Hag, “let me tell you.”
The Hag raised her eyes to gaze into the princess’s night-bright eyes.

“They killed him two nights ago. They killed them all two nights ago. I remember blood, screams, the clash of knives, and the stench of death. So much death. They gorged on it. I must have died too. It feels like I did. And yet, here I am. Still breathing, still breathing.” She stopped speaking and the only sound they could hear were her breaths. Ragged, hoarse breaths. When she calmed, the princess tilted her head to the side and looked at the Hag, a slight frown marring her smooth forehead. “Why do you not react? Surely there is some feeling in that stone body. Surely, you are curious about who dared to give an end to the Forever King and all he loved?”

The Hag did not react, nor did she respond.

“Are you wondering why I am telling you all this? You who have seen kings come and go, what does it matter to you who sits on the Talamh throne and whose blood the earth gluts on?” The princess swallowed, keeping her grief limited to the tears that pooled in her eyes.

The Hag noted the scratches on the princess’s arms and the jerkiness to her movements – as though the princess had been taken apart and then put back together, hurriedly and incorrectly.

“You won’t offer me comfort, will you? That’s all right. I will forgive you.” The insanity in the princess’s eyes faded, replaced by a cold purpose. “You may not care who sits on the throne of Talamh, but never forget that your allegiance is to us, to the blood of ó Maoilriain, and not to the usurpers. And since my father, my king, has been murdered,” a spasm of pain contorted the princess’s face and stopped the torrent of words for a second, “you owe fealty to me. You, Blanaid, were saved from death and given this form by the
kindness of my ancestor, Samhradhán, and I ask you now to repay his kindness. How do you answer?”

After a long second, the Hag nodded. “I will repay the kindness that your ancestor, Samhradhán, showed me to you, his blood.” There was nothing else she could do, nothing else she could say.

“Take this child then.” The princess pointed at the babe she had brought in and the Hag turned her attention to the pair of girl babes lying on the table. One of them was a Fae child with bright red hair and ivory skin. She was fast asleep with her hands curled into fists and thick eyelashes fanning her cheeks. The other one, the one Maebh was pointing at, was a brownie child, brown and homely, similar in looks to the brownie-mother who still stood frozen.

“Whose child is she?” the Hag asked. She might owe the earth princess but she would not steal anyone’s child.

“Whose? She’s my child, Blanaid. It hasn’t even been half a day since I birthed her.” The princess brushed a blood-encrusted tendril of hair away from her face and looked at the Hag with satisfaction. “I put a Glamour on her, took her Fae-shape away and gave her the look of a brownie. Her fire loving Tine-self sleeps deep inside her, leaving her free to sing Talamh songs; my child will work earth magick. Tell me, doesn’t she look like Monca’s kin. She fooled you, didn’t she? She’ll fool everyone. Even herself!”

The princess looked down at the Glamoured child with a complicated expression on her face: a sliver of love, a thimble of hope and an ocean of sadness. “Take her because she cannot remain here. Take her because if you don’t, they will find her and kill her. Take her and raise her.”
The Hag looked at the other child, the one who had been allowed to retain her Fae shape. She seemed more the princess’s child than the nut brown babe who looked at the world with wide angry eyes.

“Her?” The princess noticed the Hag’s attention. “She’s Nessa’s child. Nessa, my attendant. They killed her too. But you need not worry about her. She is Monca’s responsibility. Isn’t that right, my darling Monca?”

Monca didn’t raise her eyes from the ground, didn’t respond. She had gone into grief, as the Hag had heard the brownies say. She had retreated into a place deep inside of her where she could heal her hurt unlike Maebh whose grief was a spectacle she would make the world witness.

“Will you take the babe?” the princess asked again.

“What is her name?” the Hag asked.

The Glamoured baby was sniffing piteously. Tears had clumped her eyelashes and she batted the air as though fighting invisible monsters.

“Croi. Her name is Croi,” the princess responded swiftly, looking oddly sly.

“I cannot give her love,” the Hag felt compelled to warn.

“I do not ask you to.” The princess placed the child in the Hag’s unwilling arms.

“Take her to the human world. Raise her in the Wilde Forest, near the human city. Feed her, clothe her and teach her. Give her knowledge but not too much of it. And when she’s three months to seventeen, send her back to me.”

The Hag stared down at the babe in her arms; she had cried herself to sleep. Yellow eyelashes swept her rounded cheeks like half-suns. She was entirely defenseless and unaware that the world she had been born in already sought to end her. The Hag looked up at the
princess who was waiting, anticipating the Hag’s capitulation. Somehow, the princess read
the answer in the Hag’s unchanging face, and she smiled.
The Road of the Lost

“A person often meets his destiny on the road he took to avoid it.” – La Fontaine.

Part One

Chapter One

A hint of red. An alluring curve. The anticipation of sweetness.

The apple promises and I fall. Eyes wide open and hand grasping. My teeth bite into the flesh with a satisfying crunch and my chin becomes sticky with juice.

The fruit-selling human will wonder about the missing apple later. He will think one of the dirty little humans took it. They run wild in the market—it is their fleshy forest. Right now, as I crouch under the fruit cart eating the apple, Mr. Fruit-Seller is talking to Madame Big-Nose and her three daughters. The third one, I like. Her eyes are like purple grapes. She leaves me food in her garden next to the well. Deidre, they call her, dirty Deidre.

I am not supposed to be here in this sticky, stinky collection of moving humans. The rich ones try to mask their stench with perfumes. They sacrifice flowers and the bees mourn. The poor ones cannot afford the floral sacrifice so theirs, at least, is an honest stink.

I look around the market and spy an old woman with too many toffee sticks. I ease her burden. The merchant across from the baker sells scarves the colours of the sunset. I help myself to a few. This market is my favourite place in the human city. It is set up by the big gates, and is always full of sounds, smells and colours. The smells are not always pleasant, but the colours frequently dance in the sunshine. Humans set up shop in any space they can find. Sometimes they quarrel in loud, ugly voices, and I study the shapes their mouths make as they throw their words at each other.
These humans cannot see what walks amongst them, what runs, skips, and breathes amongst them. The animals do. A Meow purrs from her perch on a wooden fence as I pass by, and I hiss at her. Meows do not make music for me.

The Hag said this morning that I can no longer come to the human world. She stood up tall and told me in her grandest voice. “You cannot, Croi,” she said. “A little brownie will be discovered much too quickly.”

“But I am invisible to them!” I put on my most hurt face. “I have been there many times. Down the river path, through the hole in the wall and into the grounds of the castle. They never see me.”

“It must stop now,” the Hag commanded. She looked at me with her stormy eyes and made me feel like a boat about to be capsized.

“Why?” I wailed.

“No questions,” the Hag said.

She tells me not to ask questions, but when I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror, all I see are questions. My body makes no sense to me. My fingers, arms and shoulders are whys, my torso and legs are hows, and my head is a who. I am a billion questions the universe keeps asking. So far, no answer has been forthcoming.

I follow a little boy-human home from the market and watch him clamber onto the lap of a woman-human. She is a mother. Humans have them. Mothers, I mean. They hold, they kiss and they love. Brownies don’t. Well…this brownie doesn’t. I have a Hag. She is part stone, part memory and part tree. She doesn’t hold, doesn’t kiss and she most certainly doesn’t love. She talks in the voice trees use when they rustle to each other, and she expects me to listen. She teaches, and she expects me to learn.
The sun is climbing in the sky; it is getting hotter. When I return to the market, I find it too crowded. I follow the main road deeper into the human city. As I move farther from the main gates, the houses get bigger and bigger until I reach the castle, the biggest of them all. I have seen the king and his family on December days and August mornings. They travel among their people then, white handkerchiefs pressed to their noses as though they don’t stink as well. The city is surrounded by a grey wall that keeps humans within and the Wilde Forest, where I live, without. Humans do not venture into the Wilde Forest; the Hag says they are not allowed. The Hag doesn’t come into the city. I don’t know how she can resist it.

The human world has a rapid pulse. Everyone is in a frenzy to breathe, to live, to couple and to gobble. A maelstrom of emotions eddy in the air: hunger, greed and lust. I try to imagine living here forever, trapped within the metal and the stone, and captive to decay. I look around at the little humans shrieking with laughter as they play a game of chance by the road. The next second, I leap out of the way of two oxen that grunt their displeasure at me. It wouldn’t be all bad, living here.

I reach the castle and as usual, the entrance is crowded. Guards stand in front of the hoard of people seeking audience with the king. I wait for a bit but this brownie doesn’t have much patience. So I start moving. I become a phantom, shoving people, hitting their sides, invisible elbows evoking yowls. I step on feet and pinch any flesh available. Humans react quickly to pain. Once I have crossed the sea of people, I start running. I run till there is no breath left in me. I run until I can breathe again. I slow down and come to a stop beside a fountain in the courtyard of the castle. A stone mermaid stands upright in the middle; water spurts from her mouth and she looks like she is drowning; green mold decorates the scales of
her stony tail. Her eyes are closed and her head is tipped up to greet the sun. I wish I could take her into the Forest with me.

I leave the mermaid and move toward the castle grounds which are immense. I pass through stone pavilions where people gather to watch others sing and dance. There is a maze that is not very difficult to navigate and I walk slowly through it, leaving holes in the hedges.

When I come out of the maze, my feet suddenly want to move fast so I start running again. At the back of the castle, in the rose gardens, I find more people. Courtiers are arranged around a princeling like the feathers in a peacock’s tail. I run straight into him and he careens. He would have fallen too had it not been for a quick-thinking attendant who rushes to steady him. The princeling looks around, as do his attendees, for the missile that almost knocked him over, made him stumble and, for a lightning second, stole his dignity. They are looking for me.

So I do it. Because I can. Because he is called Prince Charming. Because he looks ridiculous in his blue doublet with shiny buttons that do not show my reflection and white pants that mold his parts in ways that cause the maids to stare and giggle. I stand on my toes, reach out a hand and pull his nose.

He yelps and I laugh. Then it happens.

I didn’t think it was possible. Invisibility is supposed to be my magic and my magic is not supposed to fail. It should not be able to fail. But it does. People look in my direction and they see me.

They see me!

A short, plump creature with long straight buttercup yellow hair, wearing a baggy, brown dress that looks like the bark of a tree (only because it is). They see a brownie with
eyes the color of the sky on a happy day, a brownie who has a round face, a button nose, large ears, and sharp teeth. They see a creature whose feet are bare and dirty, and whose cheeks are probably stained by the apple she ate earlier. Nobody moves, nobody speaks, and for a second, nobody breathes. Then hysteria conquers the masses. Someone screams and someone else swoons. I stand, fixed into place like the drowning mermaid. The humans’ eyes have cast chains around my legs; my legs have cast roots into the soil. The princeling is screaming for guards. I can hear them running around the corner, and I know they have their shiny sharp swords at the ready.

I take a breath of the suddenly suffocating air and squeeze my eyes shut.
Chapter Two

One second taut with the possibility of death. I shape my lips in a prayer I don’t know where to direct. Then sweet air fills my mouth as I take a breath. A long breath. A precious breath. I look around. An uneasy murmur rises and bewilderment shades the expressions of the humans. They blink and rub their eyes. The humans can’t see me anymore; I am invisible to them once again.

The murmur crests the gathered crowd when the soldiers point their swords and find that there is nothing to poke. The princeling opens his mouth and closes it. The courtiers glance at him and whisper behind their jeweled fans. Titters and twitters flood the air and the princeling’s cheeks turn red.

I walk away from the crowd—my feet want to flee but my heart has been given a jolt. Brownies are supposed to be unfailingly invisible to humans. They do not believe in us so they cannot see us. It is our natural Glamour. So the Hag says. But they saw me! I saw myself reflected in their eyes. How? Why?

A wall surrounds the human city and in the portion of the wall behind the castle is a hole hidden by two pink rose bushes. I crawl through it and into the leafy embrace of the Wilde Forest.

My breath is shallow and my heart is beating erratically but I am still me. There was no discovery, no blood, and no pain. Things could have gone wrong in a thousand different ways but they didn’t. I’m here and I’m alive.

I am feeling pleased with myself when I see her.

The Hag is standing under a tree with large waxy leaves. In the fractured light that filters through the gaps in the forest canopy, she seems as strange to me in this moment as I must have seemed to the humans. She is tall, this Hag, though I cannot say whether height is
a common feature of all hags, never having met any others. She has smooth, unmarked cheeks that are reminiscent of the stone she is made from. Her eyes are the green of a seedling pierced by sunlight. Her stone and tree body is animated by the memories of the land she lives on.

“I told you that your excursions into the human world are no longer allowed,” she says to me without expression; she might as well be a talking rock.

“You did tell me that.” I look at the forest floor. Green plants grow over each other. I lift my chin. “I chose to go anyway,” I say and take a deep breath. She has an arsenal of thorny words and I prepare myself to receive them.

But she disappoints me. She simply gathers up her leafy skirts and starts walking the path home leaving me no choice but to follow silently.

The forest drinks in our footsteps. Quarrelsome birds abound high in the branches of the trees. I crane my neck to see their colours so I miss seeing the Hag come to a sudden stop. I walk into her and then bounce off. It hurts.

“What happened in the human world?” Her question gives me a jolt. If she finds out, she will make sure I never set foot in the city again. I will never see those fever-burning frenetic humans again. I will never steal apples and taste hot sugar cakes again. There will be no relief from the narrow corners of my loneliness; there will just be the Wilde Forest, the Hag and me. But I cannot lie. I have tried many, many times. My tongue refuses to cooperate.

I cling to silence. I wrap it around myself and stop breathing. The Hag looks at me from her great height, sighs, and the trees echo the sound. Then she walks on and so do I.
The path that we are walking on belongs only to us. The Wilde Forest belongs to no man though the Hag tells me that many have tried to conquer it. It grows between kingdoms and suffers no king. A road for human traffic is allowed to run through it, but any human who ventures off the road is absorbed into the verdant darkness. I am not certain of the truthfulness of the Hag’s claims. Though she cannot lie either, she has, in the past, exaggerated certain points to make me behave. The forest paths can only be used by the kin to travel through the forest without destroying the things growing in it. The paths exist for, and are visible to, only those who travel on them.

Our dwelling, located in the middle of a large clearing, is shaped like a human cottage. Its roof is made of the branches of living trees that have bent themselves to create a shelter for us. These trees and some bark create the four walls that I call home. A ring of beech trees farther hides our dwelling, an unnecessary precaution as we have never had so much as one visitor in all the time I have lived here.

Wildflowers grow in front of the dwelling. The Hag likes their fragrance. Vegetables and herbs are planted between the wildflowers because I need to eat. A cow that lives at the back gifts me with sweet milk and I keep two hens who begrudge me their eggs. A well by the far side, in a crooked corner, gives deliciously cold water for the hottest days of summer.

The dwelling is one room divided into three parts: Croi’s sleeping place, Croi’s eating place and Croi’s learning place. I love to sleep. I fling myself into sleep every night. I love eating too. The Hag doesn’t sleep or eat. The learning place is where the Hag teaches me about Fae lore and Fae law. Fae are a type of kin as are brownies, goblins and other things I don’t yet know the names for. Kin is what we call ourselves; humans call us Otherfolk. Kin
feature prominently in human stories, usually as villains. Humans like to think they have made us up.

I do not know why the Hag is so insistent I learn Fae ways. According to the books she makes me read, Fae rarely leave Tír na nÓg and even if they did, why would they seek out the Hag? It is not likely I will ever run into one here.

“Tell me what happened in the human city,” the Hag says again as we step into the dwelling.

I keep my back to the Hag, seeking haven in the shadows of the room. I wish I could lie.

“Croi.” My name is a command. I turn and look at her with baleful eyes. This tall, wood-stone being. Does she have a heart?

“They saw me,” I say flatly. “For half a second.”

To her it will be an eon. She closes her eyes and is still for a long moment. Then she straightens up and looks at me with piercing regard. I meet her gaze, a false bravado lifting my chin. I don’t want to think what the consequences of my failing invisibility will be.

However, she doesn’t castigate me. Instead she sighs again and says gravely, “I must travel. I will be back in two days. You cannot go back to the human city while I am gone. Will you give me your word or do I have to bind you here?”

Her words are abrupt and alarming. She hasn’t traveled anywhere in the time I have lived with her; she hasn’t ever left me alone for more than a few hours at a time.

“Well?” the Hag prompts.
I blink and then remember her question. I purse my lips because I know that she is not
giving me a choice but an edict. Giving my word will be equal to a binding because I cannot
break it. I have learned that.

“My word,” I say stiffly. “I give you my word that I will not go.”

“Go?”

“I give you my word that I will not go to the human city!” I spit out. My anger is in
my cheeks, in my eyes and in my voice.

“Very well then.” She is gone and I am alone.

I am always alone. Why am I not with other brownies? When I was younger I
realized that someone had to have birthed me (brownies are birthed, not hatched). A family,
surely I must have one somewhere. I couldn’t have wandered into existence all by myself.

I asked the Hag about them. She simply closed her eyes and suddenly, I was speaking
to a stone wall. It is not that she doesn’t know. I know she does. She just doesn’t want to tell
me. Her reticence makes me angry and my anger serves as a catalyst for hers. My defiance,
the Hag tells me, is not a trait looked upon fondly in brownies.

This is what I know about brownies from the books I have read about them:

1. *They are domestic.*

   I already fail at brownie-ness. I detest housework.

2. *They are fiercely loyal.*

   I suspect this one as well. I have scoured my heart and mind for this quality; I am still
   looking.

3. *They live in large extended families.*

   Large families that do not include a Hag as a beloved relative.
4. *They have a fondness for sweets.*

This is the only one that is true. I am dangerous around pastries. The bakers in the human city keep setting mouse traps and I keep avoiding them.

I have come to the conclusion that I am a strange brownie. Perhaps a stolen one or even an abandoned one. Maybe my brownie parents abandoned me in the Wilde Forest because I was strange and the Hag accepted me as her own out of the goodness of her heart.

Somehow I doubt that.

For one thing, I don’t think the Hag even has a heart.

The first day the Hag is gone, I exult in my freedom. I go berry hunting and return late with my hair tangled and my lips stained.

The second day, I spend sunning by a river that runs near the dwelling. In the afternoon, I return home and chase the chickens around the dwelling. Their cheerful clucking offends me. When I tire of them, I milk the cow and weed my vegetable garden. Finally, for want of something to do, I go inside and turn my attention to the learning space. A rickety shelf leans against one wall, filled with ancient tomes from which the Hag taught me the ways of the kin. I like reading about the kin; the books make me feel as though I am not quite as alone as I feel inside. On the floor is a beaded cushion, another item taken from the human city, where I sit while the Hag teaches—she prefers to stand. What’s this? I squint in the fading light of the day. Against the far wall, in the shadows, is a chest I have never seen before. A wooden chest with symbols carved on it. Has the Hag had it all along and I just have never seen it? No, that’s not possible. I know this cottage inside out; there is no place she could have hidden it without me seeing. The Hag left this chest for me to find.
I reach out and pull the chest toward me. It has a comforting weight to it and, as more light falls on it, I see that it is old. I don’t recognize the symbols but it is evident from the detailed work that it is precious. I wonder if it is unlocked. It seems to be. I kneel in front of the chest and lift the lid.

The musty smell of books grabs my attention. There are two. They are thick, with covers that have been creased by time, and vellum pages with gold lettering that announce their importance. I pick up the first one. It has a black cover and on it is the title: *The History*. I flip through the pages and it is all about the Fae. Most of what is written in the books are things the Hag has already taught me. The Fae live in a world called Tír na nÓg—a world that exists alongside the human world and belongs only to the kin. I have never been there. The Hag has, but she doesn’t want to talk about it even when I ask. I continue reading. The Fae are tall, they are royalty, and during moments of extreme passion and pain, they manifest wings the colour of their element. I read some more and find out that they have an inordinate fondness for blood and war. Just like humans. In the last chapter, the book talks about the Forever King who was killed by his most trusted advisor. He’s not really the *Forever King* if he’s dead now, is he? The Hag didn’t mention anything about the Forever King so I read some more but soon lose interest. What role could little brownies play in big wars?

The second one is heavier and feels cold and alive in my hands, like a snake. The title reads: *Magick*. The pages are shiny and the illustrations slither around as though looking for the most comfortable spot. The first page lists the contents.

1. **Distill the Night into a Cloak of Darkness**
2. **Charm the Wings off a Butterfly**
3. **Hex a Fire Fae**
4. Cast Glamour on kin

My eyes snag on the word “Glamour” and I frown. Glamour, the Hag taught me, is the magic kin do on themselves to appear in a shape other than what they are. With Glamour, a brownie could make herself look like a human. Not that I ever would. I don’t have the magick for it. I turn to the spell and try to read it but I can’t. The words shimmer and seem to vibrate on the page. I didn’t know that it was possible for Glamour to be cast on one kin by another. I thought it was something one could only do on oneself. I shrug and close the book. Glamour is no concern of mine. This is probably another one of the Hag’s methods of teaching. She has lots of secret ways.

I put the books back into the chest, close it and shove it back into the shadows. Then I walk out of the dwelling and into our little garden of flowers and vegetables. Early night has painted the skies dark. I lie on the ground, surrounded by the Hag’s wild flowers. They are vain creatures with velvet petals and bright colours. Stars are blinking awake and the birds have fallen silent. It is time for the crickets to reign. I reach for peace but it eludes me; I feel restless as though my feet were keeping count of the steps I am not taking.

I think of the humans snug in their beds. They are, unknowingly, the only companions I have. I was six years old when I first discovered them. I had been playing near the walls of the city without the Hag’s permission when a tantalizing smell wafted into my nose. Following the smell led me to the hole in the wall and I wiggled through it. On the other side, I found humans, food and music! I tried to play with the little humans but they didn’t seem to see or hear me. Being ignored angered me until I learned what I can get away with when no one knows I’m there.
It is comfortable in the wild flower and vegetable garden. I remain sprawled on the ground and dismiss the thought of sleeping inside. I will collect the starlight in the shadows cast by my body. The dew will fall tomorrow morning and wash me clean, but tonight I am almost made of stardust. I am nearly asleep when I think of the books the Hag left for me in the learning space. The book of magick is a sly presence in my mind, a burr snagging on my thoughts. After a minute pondering its existence, I tire and think about something far more pleasant.

I am dreaming about sugar-sprinkled crust on strawberry pies when I first feel it.
Chapter Three

Pain is a curious thing. It blooms and grows. Breaks and shatters.

My pain begins with my tiniest toes. Initially, I feel a tiny ache that feels like the bones encased within the flesh have woken up. Their awakening awakens my other bones which feel as though they are sitting up and stretching—trying to move out of their fleshly prisons. The pain moves from my toes to my ankles, journeys up my legs to my thighs. My hip bones creak a protest and my back arches when my spine rebels against the pain. I clutch at the earth because there is nothing else to hold on to in the garden and take deep, gasping breaths. My body burns as the bones shift and twist, and I come closer to the word agony than I have ever been before.

When the pain fades, I am aware of the absence of sound. My throat is raw, and a welcome silence pools around me. I must have screamed. I breathe deeply and stand up shakily. The ground seems farther away now than it was before and when I take a step toward the dwelling, I stumble. I lift my hand up and stare at my fingers. They look longer in the starlight. The night is quiet now, darker. Even the crickets have fallen silent. The trees that surround the dwelling seem to be looking at me and for the first time, I am aware of how alone I am.

What was that pain? More importantly, will it happen again?

My questions will remain unanswered. The humans don’t know I exist, and I don’t know any other kin whom I can ask. My world has shrunk down to the memory of one Hag and a brownie who hurts.

I wake late the next morning. The sun is spilling into the cottage through the spaces in the branches. It lights up all the shadowed corners in the room and seeps through the thin blanket
I had pulled over my head. There is a direction in my mind when my eyes flutter open. A tug in my middle as though a rope is attached there and someone has begun pulling on it. My feet seem bent on answering a summons my ears cannot hear. I sit up in bed, my heart beating fast. I get up without even thinking about moving. My hands wash my face, clean my teeth and feed me fruits while my mind tries to regain control of my body. I don’t know what is happening to me. Is this what unraveling feels like? I must wait for the Hag because she will have answers, but I am milking the cow, battling the hens and packing a bag without choosing to. My newly awakened bones demand and my brain insists on answering.

I put stolen bread in my bag, a flask full of water, gaudy scarves I took from a milliner in the human city and a spare dress made of green bark. I pack the books as well because they feel like they are mine.

The bag is slung over my shoulder, and my hand is on the door knob when I grit my teeth and dig my feet into the earthen floor. I have spent a lot of my hours in this dwelling, sunk many of my minutes into the ground here. I have a bond to this land that should anchor me here until the Hag returns. I pull myself to the learning space, my body fighting against the direction I’m moving in. I sit down on the cushion and hold on to the shelf tightly. Time passes and the urge to leave becomes so intense that I am standing and walking to the door without realizing it. My fingers close around the door knob and pull it open. I will not go! I hold on to the door even as my feet start moving forward.

It is then that I feel the Hag’s presence. She feels like the lack of pain, like deliverance from this compulsion to move; she feels like safety. I take a deep breath and hold on to the door with all the strength in my mind.
She emerges from the trees like an answer to my prayers. Her steps are unhurried, and she moves with a grace that is unique to her. She flows up the path, through the garden and comes to a stop in front of me.

I look up at her. My eyes are wide with questions and desperation, but before I can say anything, she speaks.

“You are leaving.” She sounds unsurprised, as though she has known that this day would come, as though she is prepared for it. It’s true. I did plan to leave. I did think of going to Tír na nÓg after my eighteenth birthday. But I want to leave on my own terms. I want to choose my own destination and the path I will take to get there. I want my leaving to be something that I decide, something that belongs only to me.

“What is happening to me?” I ask her, my fingers tightening their hold on the door.

“Who is compelling me?”

The Hag closes her eyes briefly as though looking at me is difficult. My eyes feel heavy like dark clouds must do before it rains.

“Take this.” The Hag holds out something wrapped in dark green leaves. It’s a paste that smells of herbs and the earth. “It will help with the pain.”

“You know about the pain?” I frown and ask again. “What is happening to me?”

Surely she has the answers.

“I left you the books for a reason, Croi.” Her eyes are infinitely old, and in this moment of half-truths and impending abandonment, I can feel her age in my own bones.

I think about the history of the Fae in the first book and the spells in the second one. I don’t understand.
“Think, Croi.” The Hag’s voice is rough and if I didn’t know better, I would think she is weary.

“Why don’t you just tell me?” I glare at her, thinking furiously. What was in those books that could give me an answer—I’ve studied the history of the Fae with her so that wasn’t it, but the Hag has never discussed magick with me before. No, that’s not right. She has mentioned magick before, a specific spell… All of a sudden, the knowledge slams down onto me and I almost let go of the door. I gape at her for a long moment.

“A Glamour spell? You put a Glamour spell on me?!” I say when I can speak again. Surely she’ll deny it.

“No.” Relief weakens my knees, but the Hag is still speaking. “This is not my work.” The Hag avoids my gaze and looks out at the Forest as though she gains strength from the stillness of the trees.

“I really am not a brownie?” I barely know how to be a brownie, and now she says I am not even that. “You said I was a brownie! We cannot lie!”

“I did not lie, Croi. You were a brownie. You are no longer just a brownie.”

Not just a brownie? What else am I? Is she lying to me? The Hag finally turns her face toward me, and I see my answer in her eyes.

“What am I?”

“You will find out.”

“I want to know now.”

“It is not allowed.”

“Whose law are you following?”

“I cannot say,” she replies coolly.
“You won’t say!” I scream at her. “You make up these rules and force me to follow them! You bind me, you leave me and now you tell me that I am not what I think I am! You keep me alone and away from anyone warm! Why?” Why won’t she tell me? Is it so terrible, whatever lies beneath this skin I wear?

“Tell your mother that I did my part, that I kept my promise,” the Hag continues as though I haven’t spoken. “Tell her my debt is paid.”

Time, that trickster, freezes. The Hag stands serene in front of me. I stand wild-eyed and gaping in front of her, my hands still clutching the door.

“My m-mother is calling me to her?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

The Hag looks away. She will not answer this either. Who is this mother? Why is she calling me to her? No, the question should be, why is she calling me to her now? Why did she leave me here in the first place? I feel like a marionette whose strings are being pulled upon.

“Do not tell anyone about what is happening to you. Do not trust anyone. The forest paths will no longer work for you so you will have to forge your own way.” The Hag rattles off this set of rules as though she has them memorized.

“Why will they not work? Where am I being called to?”

“The forest won’t recognize you as its own,” she says and pauses, gathering her thoughts. “While the Glamour is in the process of breaking, you are not kin but something in-between. Until the glamour is fully broken, the Forest will consider you a stranger.” She doesn’t answer my second question.
“Can you break this compulsion? I don’t want to leave like this.” I am desperate. I will beg if I have to.

“No.” She shakes her head.

“Then can you tell me what I am going to be? Please?”

“I will remember you,” she says instead. She won’t tell me. Not even at the end. Why am I surprised? Why does it still hurt?

I used to play a game when I was little. I would try to find the softness in the Hag’s eyes because it would be a good enough substitute for love. I was sure that I could catch her unaware and see the emotion on her face, in her eyes, or in her voice. It took some years before I finally understood. You cannot expect softness from a creature made from stone.

I let go of the door, and my feet start moving. I do not say anything as I shove past her and away. I do look back once however, and murmur a farewell to the trees, the garden and the dwelling. To the cow I can’t see and to the hens at the back.

My goodbye tastes of pain, feels like forever, and smells like the earth wet from the rain.
Chapter Four

I walk for what seems like hours. The Wilde Forest is a stranger to me now. I no longer know her curves and she in turn shows me no softness. I stumble over roots, slip on muddy patches, and am attacked by briars. I suspect the vines of harboring sinister plans and the trees, with their coarse barks, of providing less comfort than they used to.

My feet seem to know where to go so I let them carry me away. The pull in the middle of my stomach is steady and no longer as intense as it was before I started walking. I wonder what would happen if I tried to resist this compulsion. Will my mother be aware that I am doing so? The word feels too big on my tongue. Who is this woman? What does she look like? Why did she give me away? Why does she want me back? What is she? A goblin? Another Hag? Not a brownie. A brownie-something? Where is she?

The Hag has kept me isolated for nearly seventeen years. All I know about the kin is what I have learnt about them from the books and what the Hag has told me. How should a brownie-something talk to another kin? What if I mistake the species of kin they are and anger them? What if I say the wrong thing and anger them? Now that I think about it, there are many ways this brownie-something could anger the kin. Angry faces don’t bother me much, but what if their anger moves to their hands and they hurt me? I stop by a muddy patch and rub some mud into my hair. The yellow is entirely too bright and eye-catching.

When the light in the forest dims and a chill finds its way under my dress, I find a hollow in a wide-trunked tree and examine it cautiously. Trees and I have always had an amicable relationship. Perhaps it is because I am—no, I was—the Hag’s, but I have always felt a warmth emanating from them. Now that I have left the Hag, no, now that I have been thrown away by the Hag, they have become strangers. But I have no other place to go, and I’d much rather be in the hollow than on the ground so I shrug and crawl in. It’s a snug fit,
and I have to curl up tight but I feel safe and warm. Exhaustion slides its gnarly fingers up my body. I hurt all over but it is the uncertainty about who I am, what I am, that makes me shiver. I try to curl up into as small a brownie-something as I can be. Fear is an unfamiliar emotion. It resides in my chest and when I poke at it, it bites my insides.

My insides are different from my outside. I am a non-brownie. Could I be human? I dismiss the thought almost as soon as I think it. The Hag likes rules too much to keep a human; kin and humans just don’t mix. Perhaps I am a sylph or even a goblin. A centaur? I don’t fancy being part-horse though. I would like to be a pixie, but they are supposed to be tiny so I’d be shrinking instead of growing taller. Why can’t I be a brownie?

These questions make me feel empty so I decide to think about food instead. I think about chicken, roasted with onions and rosemary, baked potatoes sprinkled with herbs, and savory vegetable stew. Sweet cakes dripping with honey and custard tarts hot from the oven. Hot apple cider. My stomach growls its longing and my mouth waters.

All I have are slightly squashed berries and some stale bread with tepid water on the side. No one would call that a feast. I deflate and hug myself in the hollow, deciding that my need for sleep is far greater than my need for food. Just as I am on the cusp of unconsciousness, the pain begins again.

I grit my teeth, determined to be braver tonight. I bite down on an orange scarf to drown my screams. The pain is doing its best to splinter me like wood under an axe. The moment of agony stretches halfway to forever and just when I think the pain is gone, it returns.
I don’t know how long this continues—minutes may have been screamed into hours—but when it’s over, I am draped over the roots of an obliging tree. Sitting up hurts. Breathing hurts. Existing hurts.

I have seen old human-women in the city with their joints swollen by age. I am not old but my bones have become unfriendly. I open my bag with shaking hands and find the unguent the Hag gave me. Wrinkling my nose at the smell, I slather it on my elbows and my knees. It doesn’t help. There is a twig digging into the small of my back so I stand up and realize that I will no longer fit into the tree hollow. I have grown again. Hunger quakes my insides so I eat my berries and bread, and curl up by the roots of a tree. The forest is singing itself night melodies, and I let them lull me to sleep.

The next morning greets me with a kiss from a curious fawn. I open my eyes to see her nose descending for another sniff and I scramble away. We stare at each other until she blinks and gets distracted by a bush.

Breakfast is staler bread and sips of water. I shake my flask and find that I’m running low. I need to find a stream.

The Wilde Forest is full of trees that have different kinds of leaves, a chaotic harmony of shades of green. Red, pink, yellow and lavender flowers snake up the trunks of some trees and along the branches of others. The forest floor has been claimed by ferns and shrub-like plants. But no matter how numerous the plants are, it is the trees that rule here. I pet the tree I spent the night leaning against and thank it like Hag taught me to, sniff the air and follow the scent of moisture.
I am almost at a stream when I hear a horse’s neigh coming from behind me. A stream means water to drink, but a horse may mean humans. I have never seen a horse without a human pulling it, pushing it or riding it. The tug of the compulsion spell is somewhat faint right now—still there but not as insistent—so I can walk as fast or as slow as I want to.

I choose to slake my thirst first. I drink, fill my flask and then when the horse neighs again, I follow my ears to a clearing. I stop just before entering it—something about this space feels like lightning on my skin; it does not feel like a natural clearing.

Trees are greedy things. They crave space the same way I do pies. So why would they not grow here? I lean my forehead against one of the trees surrounding the clearing, thinking. Almost immediately my mind is inundated by images.

*Tall, white robed men in a circle.*

*Dead trees.*

*Empty space.*

I leap back from the tree, trip on a root and fall on my back.

I think the tree just spoke to me. In pictures.

I stare at it suspiciously. It is old, this tree, with wide branches that are trying to embrace the sky. Its leaves are a curious green shot with veins of gold. I think back to the images the tree showed me. The tall robed men were not human; they were Fae, with sharp angled faces, working magic to create a clearing. For what purpose?

I peer into the clearing. A horse stands beside a man-human sitting on the ground. A slumped man-human whose shoulders are hunched and whose head is hanging. A very familiar-looking human... The round shape of his head, the black hair, the hideous clothes...I
step into the clearing for a closer look. The horse swings its head towards me and the
human’s head snaps up.
Chapter Five

The princeling screams. The shrill sound hangs in the suddenly still air and shocks even the
birds into silence. We are all frozen for a second. Then the princeling jumps to his feet, his
eyes not leaving my face. When I take a step toward him, he abandons his horse and backs
away, slowly at first and then faster until he reaches the edge of the clearing and can go no
farther. It is as though a wall stands between him and the rest of the forest. A wall that I can’t
see and that exists only for him and perhaps the horse. The princeling flattens his back
against this invisible wall and lowers his head while his shoulders stiffen. Bracing himself as
though he is preparing to be attacked. A thrill shoots through me at his expression.

A human. A delicious impossibility. His fear smells like raisins and other things I like
to eat. What is the princeling doing in the Wilde Forest? His yellow cape is stained by grass
and dirt. His eyelashes clump together like he has shed tears, and his lips are parted as he
sucks in air as though each breath he takes may be his last. Should I speak to him? I learned
how to speak the human language by listening to the humans speaking, but I have never
spoken to anyone besides the Hag, and she wasn’t much for talking. Should I start by asking
how he is? Then again, he cannot be very good if he is trapped in a clearing.

The horse snorts, and I turn toward it. Horses fascinate me. I have never seen a wild
one. They are always bound in servitude to humans: carrying their things, bearing their
bodies and dragging their carts. Do they do it willingly? Has anyone ever bothered to ask
them? Can I speak to it the same way I spoke to the tree?

“If you touch my horse, I will kill you!” The princeling has drawn his sword and is
pointing it at me with trembling hands. It is not very effective as far as threats go because he
still has not moved one step from his position near the edge of the clearing. I choose to
ignore him. Humans are easy to ignore.
The horse is munching some ferns and seems unconcerned by my presence. When I step nearer, its liquid eyes look at me warily though it doesn’t seem to be scared. I wouldn’t be scared of me either. Compared to the horse, I am tiny.

“Hey! I’m warning you!” the princeling yells across the clearing. “My horse is not for eating!”

*Eating?*

“Do you eat horses in your city?” My voice sounds rusty since I haven’t used it for anything but screams for a while. I have visited many of the taverns and eating houses in the human city, but they have never served horse meat before. Maybe it’s a delicacy only served in the castle.

“You speak!” The sword lowers for a moment before the princeling appears to remember that I am dangerous and brings it up again.

“What of it? I have a mouth just like you.” I glare at the princeling who still has not moved one step closer to me.

“Just leave my horse alone. I am not scared of demons like you,” he lies. It must be nice to be able to lie. He puffs out his chest in a show of false bravery and I wince. The orange shirt he is wearing hurts my eyes.

“What is a demon?” I have never heard of demons. I wonder if they are a kind of Fae I don’t know about. The princeling looks surprised and lowers his sword again. He is lucky that I do not intend to harm him.

“You are not a demon then? No, demons would know they are demons,” he mutters almost to himself. Then he looks up at me and, reclaiming his grand voice, says, “If you are not a demon, what kind of a monster are you?”
“I am not a monster!” This human is beginning to annoy me.

“You certainly look like one.” He smirks at me from behind the safety of his sharp sword.

What can I say to that? I have no idea what I look like. I know how I feel though—like my skin is stretched too tightly across my body, like my body belongs to a stranger, like a stranger would be more familiar to me than I am to myself.

I turn to the horse and offer it my hand. It nuzzles my fingers, questing for the sugar I don’t have. Failing to find any, it licks my fingers anyway. I feel a tickling in my chest.

“You won’t eat my horse, will you?” The princeling sounds worried now. “He is the only friend I have, you know. And I’m sure Morning Glory doesn’t even taste good.”

The horse does not look in the least look like a Morning Glory. I would be ashamed if that were my name. It is a deep brown colour with a patch of white on its forehead. Like a chocolate cake with only its center iced with white sugar.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with this forest. I just rode into it a little ways, I swear it was just a yard or so and then there was this loud sound in my head. I must have fainted or something. I faint often. I’m kind of delicate. Anyway, as I was saying, I fainted and then when I woke up, I was here. With Morning Glory standing beside me.” The princeling pauses and levels an accusatory look in my direction. “It was you, wasn’t it? You trapped me here? I’m telling you, I won’t marry anyone but the girl I love. I told my parents that too. They can’t force me to marry that stupid princess. That is why I ran away from home.”

I wonder if he will stop talking if I throw something at him. He is noisier than the birds.
My feet begin to move without my permission. I suppose the reprieve I was given is over. I grit my teeth and dig my feet into the ground. My bones want to continue on their journey to wherever my mother is. I wonder what kind of a monster she is.

I stare at the horse. I could ride it. But how does one get up on a horse? I am too short to climb up on my own, and I certainly am not asking the princeling for help. He would much rather skewer me with his sword than help me. I grab the horse’s face with both my hands and look deep into its eyes. Maybe I can speak to it just like I did with the tree. Nothing happens.

“What are you doing to my horse?” The princeling, with his sword raised and pointing, is now standing a few steps away from me.

The horse and I stare at the princeling, and he, keeping me in his sight, edges nearer to the animal. I wonder if I should be scared of the sword, but it does not seem as though he would be able to wield it.

“I was trying to talk to it,” I finally tell him.

His eyes widen. “You can talk to horses?”

“Apparently not.”

A spasm of pain jolts me at that moment. The air inside the clearing seems to have gotten heavier somehow. It presses against my skin, whispering danger. I look over the princeling carefully. He doesn’t seem to have noticed the change.

He has eyes the colour of a midday fog and hair that seems to have borrowed its sheen from midnight. His skin is pasty as though it doesn’t meet the sun very often and his body is lean. He probably doesn’t eat much. If I were a prince, I would eat a lot.

“Please let me go! I have promises I need to keep! I have a beloved waiting for me.”
“You are here because you broke the rules. Not because of me.” I cannot fight the compulsion for much longer. My feet are moving, and I am being jerked along.

“The rules…?” The princeling forgets his fear and grabs a hold of my sleeve. It doesn’t stop my feet from moving.

“Humans are not allowed in the Wilde Forest,” I say over my shoulder.

“Stop! Where are you going?” The princeling walks alongside me, looking worried.

“Can you help me get out of here? My father has money! I will pay you handsomely.” The princeling lowers his sword. His voice is all honey now. Has he decided that I am not dangerous anymore?

“I don’t know how to,” I tell him. “And I wouldn’t even if I could.”

“Why not?”

“I have no reason to.” I step out of the clearing and grab a branch of the talking tree to stop moving.

“Will I die here?” The princeling stands on the edge of the clearing and gives me a scared look.

“You might. I am not sure.” I am finding it difficult to breathe. My body jerks forward and I clutch the branch tighter. A splinter digs into the soft skin between my thumb and my forefinger. I flinch and feel a familiar emotion flood me. It tastes bitter and smells acrid. Anger. I am angry. Is it my mother who pulls on my limbs like a puppeteer?

I look back at the clearing. The princeling and his horse stand at the edge of the clearing, looking at me. I have no reason to help the human. He called me a monster and would leave me to my fate were our positions reversed. But what of the horse? Nobody asks it whether it wants to walk the same roads the humans do, whether it wants to bear their
weight or pull their carts. The horse’s eyes meet mine and unlike the princeling’s, I see nothing in them except a calm acceptance for whatever fate holds for it.
Chapter Six

I push aside everything and take one moment. I listen to the forest, to the sun hitting the upper surfaces of the leaves that arch in abject worship of it. I listen to the birds marking their territory on the branches of the trees. I feel the insistent pull in my bones and the sharp sting where the splinter burrows into my flesh. The human waits, his finite life fracturing into minutes.

Should I, can I, will I?

The universe presents me with a fresh platter of questions.

I stand here, my hand clutching a branch of the speaking tree, grappling with decisions that I have no power to make. How do I save the princeling and his horse? I don’t have any magic. I cannot even walk back to him; the compulsion in my bones will not let me. At least not without some agony, and I don’t know if I want to suffer pain for a human.

If I let myself be carried away from here and they die—then what? Will my soul, whatever colour it is right now, be smudged some kind of black because of my refusal to take any action? Do I care what colour my soul is? What does it matter? The human and his horse will die anyway. If not today, then some other day.

Perhaps it is because I am lost in my thoughts that I don’t notice the vine emerging from the tree. I am only conscious of it when I realize that it has wound itself several times around my wrist. I pull at it wildly but it is no use. I am as captive to the tree as the princeling and his horse are to the clearing. I cannot rescue them, and there is no one to rescue me.

The tree has wound the vine around my wrist so tightly that I no longer need to grip it, but my feet are still trying to walk away. I must present a comical picture to the princeling but when I look in his direction, he is not laughing. In fact, his face presents an unattractive
caricature of fear spiced with astonishment. I follow his gaze to the trunk of the tree currently holding me.

The surface of the tree trunk is rippling as though something is alive underneath it, struggling to get outside. We watch breathlessly, the human and I, as a face, sculpted by unseen hands, appears. First to appear are thick lips, high cheek bones, large eyes that are closed and a pointed chin. Then slender limbs push out of the tree trunk, and with an audible *plop*, a body is birthed. This creature has the shape of a woman, but her face does not know age the way human faces do. Her hair is dark and ropy, threaded with tendrils and vines. Her skin is the colour of the tree trunk, and she is clothed in linked leaves that reveal more than they hide. She smells green, like the forest around me, and the Hag I left behind.

The dryad, for that’s what the Hag told me tree creatures are called, opens her eyes. They are the same golden green as her leaves. She takes a deep breath and then smiles widely. Sharp pointy teeth give her smile a dangerous edge. Her teeth concern me. The dryad twirls around once, and then again. She spreads her arms and embraces the air. Done, she turns to the princeling who quails beneath her gaze, his words deserting him. Dismissing him, she turns to me and looks me over with an intensely curious gaze. She is the very first of the kin (apart from the Hag who does not count) that I have met. It is an exciting moment. Unless she eats me. In which case it will be a tragic one.

“Well, well, well,” she lingers over each word. Her voice sounds like an afternoon breeze rustling the leaves of a poplar tree. She speaks in Faerish, the lingua franca of the kin. “I have caught a little kin.”

“And a gaudy human, too. What shall I do with the two of you?” She rubs her hands together as though contemplating something pleasurable. I am not sure I like the direction her thoughts are going.

“Are you going to eat us?” the princeling asks in a small voice in the human language. Oh good, now I don’t have to. “I wouldn’t taste very good and that…thing doesn’t look like it would taste good either. And don’t even think about Morning Glory! I should tell you now that if—”

The dryad snaps her fingers and immediately the princeling’s voice disappears. His eyes bulge and he falls to the ground, clutching his throat. Handy trick. I wonder if she would teach me.

“What are you, little kin?” She comes nearer and sniffs the air around me. I haven’t bathed for a while so the smell should be ripe. The compulsion spell falters in the face of her regard. My feet stop moving. “I am trying to read your blood but there is an obstruction…”

Blood? Suddenly the splinter in my hand digs deep and the dryad closes her eyes as though savoring some taste on her tongue.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Your blood tastes as though I know it, but its name is veiled and I can’t speak it. It vexes me. Is what you are a secret? I do so love secrets. Tell me.” She moves closer to me with each sentence until her face is barely a breath away.

“I used to be the Hag’s brownie.” I see no reason not to tell her that.

“The Hag?” Her voice drops several octaves and a peculiar expression arranges her features. A look of loss, it is. A story is limned on that face, perhaps a secret or two.

“The Hag of the Wilde Forest. Perhaps you know her.” I hope the Hag’s name and reputation are important enough to save me.
“You used to be the Hag’s Brownie?” The dryad eyes me. “Are you no longer?”

“I am no longer the Hag’s, nor am I a brownie,” I say. That particular betrayal is too fresh to speak about.

“What are you then?”

“I don’t know.”

She doesn’t seem to believe my words. The splinter burrows farther, and I hiss.

“Your blood has been magicked. I have never seen a Glamouring as strong as the one on you. But ah! It’s breaking, is it not?” She beams at me and then walks around her tree, nearly skipping, infused with a glee that I cannot understand. “This is all very exciting. I haven’t been out of my tree in nearly a millennium. I have a lot to thank you and your human for.”

“Did someone trap you in there?” I ask her, remembering the white-robed Fae.

“Trap me?” Her laughter is a rich concoction of confidence and power. “No one can trap me. I got tired of the world so I retreated from it.” Shadows darken her eyes for a brief second. “I am the keeper of this clearing, little kin. I take care of the humans who wander where they should not.”

“There hasn’t been a human in your clearing for a millennium?” I cannot believe that. Humans break the rules all the time.

“Mmm…maybe it was your strange blood that woke me this time. Or perhaps your colourful human.” She lifts a careless shoulder.

I look at the princeling. He is slumped on the ground, his shoulders hunched with what looks like defeat. He gives up easily, that one.

“What are you going to do with the human? And me? Why do you hold me?”
“The human? He’ll be returned to the earth.” Does that mean she’s going to kill him? I hope he doesn’t understand Faerish. “And if I didn’t hold you, you’d be walking to wherever the compulsion spell is summoning you.” That is true.

“Do you have to kill him?” I have no desire to help the human. None at all. I’m merely satisfying my curiosity.

“Why would you care?” That is a good question. I don’t. I shouldn’t. The dryad gives me a sly glance. “Unless you called him here. In which case you share his guilt…”

“What would happen if I did?”

“You’d be returned to the earth as well,” she replies.

“Can’t you let them go?” I ask. He is my human; I found him. No matter how annoying he is, I don’t think he should be returned.

“Why would I want to?” She stops in front of me and the full force of her hits me in my empty stomach. She is old, far older than the Hag. Her age is an uncomfortable weight on my shoulders. The flippancy drains away from her eyes, and she looks at me seriously for the very first time.

“Do you know what happens if humans think they can wander in and out of the Forest at will?” she asks softly. A cricket chirps to punctuate her question.

“They come in and kill the Forest because they covet the land it sits on?” I am no fool. I know how humans think. I have heard them planning and seen their maps. They have constructed imaginary cities in the spaces currently ruled by trees.

The dryad raises a black eyebrow. I lift a shoulder, pretending I am indifferent to her proximity.
“This human is a princeling. If he disappears, they may come anyway. They love to shed blood, the humans do.”

“What do you know about humans, little kin?”

“Certainly more than you do, Madame Tree.”

The dryad swoops in, invading my space once more; I move back only to press against the tree trunk. My heart is running amok in my chest. Perhaps it wasn’t a good idea to bait her. She raises a finger and presses it to my cheek. Immediately, I hear a crackle, and the smell of burned wood infuses the air. The dryad springs back, holding her finger to her chest in a gesture of protection.

“A shield.” She narrows her eyes. I have a shield? “Who are you?” I wish I knew. At my silence, she tries again. “What is your name?”

That I won’t tell her. Names have power and I have too little of it to start giving it away.

“Very well then. I shall get rid of the human first.” She turns and sashays towards the princeling who pales at her advance. He springs to his feet and runs to hide behind his horse. Brave of him.

I cock my head and watch her step over the intangible barrier and into the clearing. She moves toward the princeling.

The itchy feeling in me becomes more difficult to ignore. I glare at the Forest and am awarded by the titter of some birds. Do I have to save the princeling? I don’t want to. I really don’t want to.

“Dryad!” A loud crystal clear voice is what I thought would burst forth from my throat. A voice that commands attention and demands obedience. What comes out is a pitiful
croak that frogs would blush to hear. I try again. “I’ll tell you my name if you let the human and his horse go!”

With a speed that belies her natural stationary state of being, the dryad is standing in front of me again. No sound comes from the princeling. I hope he hasn’t been returned.

“Yes?” Her eagerness pools in her eyes, making me rethink my decision. I grit my teeth. The human will owe me his life.

“Croi,” I finally say defiantly, handing over the only thing I own.

“Croi,” she repeats. On her tongue, my name is not just a sound but a touch, a power, a summons. The breeze that had been playing with the leaves dies down, and the insects stop their chittering. Even the trees seem to hold their collective breath. She says it again, “Croi.”

My bones twinge. That is the only warning.

My eyes. I squeeze them tightly closed as they begin to prickle. Like they’re being pierced by needles after being scrubbed by sand. My insides shift, hesitate and then shift again. My head feels like it will burst and my fingertips feel hot like they are on fire. My soles arch as my feet are reformed. The world slips away from me and I fall into a darkness that delivers me from the pain.

Soft words spoken in a language I don’t understand bring me to consciousness again. Something has changed. The knowledge is a cold realization and I shudder. I can feel the difference fluttering under my skin. I feel alien to myself. I open my eyes and the world explodes.
Chapter Seven

The colours are rioting.

The green flings itself off the leaves of the trees and commands an assault. The brown of the barks obliges by fracturing into a thousand shades. Patches of blue visible through the forest canopy shimmer smugly, and little flowers are bewitched by their white petals. Shades of red and orange undulate, and threads of acid pink knot the veins of leaves. The sunlight separates into golden motes and then comes together in a flash. Blinded, I squeeze my eyes closed and concentrate on breathing.

I am not certain I remember how.

The dryad did something to me. She said my name. No. She didn’t just say my name, she called me forth. Not this halfling that I am—this broken Brownie-something—but the me who beats like a heart somewhere inside this Glamoured body. She called that Croi. And that Croi answered. I can feel her now, this person I was supposed to be. She is a warmth in my chest and a whisper in my mind, waiting to wear the skin that lies underneath this cracked Brownie shell. Will her awakening be the end of me? I flush cold at the thought.

I open my eyes slowly, ready to close them again if the colours refuse to behave. Everything is still too bright and painfully intense, but the green eventually settles down and the brown stops dancing. The red and orange glower, however, and the white flowers pierce me with their regard but if I don’t focus on them, it doesn’t hurt.

I look around, and take in the Wilde Forest around me. Though all I can still see are trees, I can see farther than I could before. I can see into the nooks, the hollows, and the dips. Light refracts in strange ways and reveals things that weren’t previously visible. My eyes paint me a new picture of the forest, a clearer, brighter picture. I look up and I can see the
leaves high in the trees which glow as though they are infused with light. The smallest plant has a glow. Even the ants have a shine to them.

“Take a breath,” the hoarse voice of the dryad commands me.

I take two.

At that moment, I feel a prickling sensation on the soles of my feet and I look down. There are silver brown lines dissecting the forest floor, crisscrossing and intersecting in seemingly random directions. Some of these lines rise up from the ground and wrap around my middle. I touch one and it stings my fingers.

“What do you see, little kin?” the dryad speaks in my ear, wheedling. “Won’t you tell me?”

I turn to look at her; she is ablaze with a light that is the green-gold of her eyes and the green-gold of the leaves on her tree. A smile tugs up one corner of her mouth up and her anticipation is fairly a song on her lips. Currents of her light run underneath her skin; her eyes are refulgent.

I crane my neck and look at the horse—it, too, is glowing. Beside it is the crumpled and dark form of the prnceling. He has no light. Even his flamboyant clothes fail him in this silent competition for glory.

“Is he dead?” I feel a strange ache in my chest at the idea. I don’t know why I ache for the death of a human but I do, and it annoys me.

“No. He has merely fainted,” the dryad replies. “Does it matter?” There is something very wrong with the relief I feel at her words.

“It matters that you haven’t kept your word, dryad.”

The dryad smiles thinly at me. “Tell me what you see, and I’ll set them free.”
“I see you not keeping your word,” I reply, meeting her eyes. I don’t know where this audacity comes from. I cannot even blame it on food as I have barely eaten anything today. I have a knowing inside of me that I should keep my seeing of this light a secret.

Her eyes narrow and a different smile twists her lips. I choose to ignore it and instead examine my new fingers. They are longer; the nails are half-moons. Pink and clean. That won’t last very long.

“Croi…” the dryad says once again, her voice catching on the end of the syllable, the sound lingering in the air. A chill sweeps over my suddenly fevered skin. A command is laced through the sound my name makes on the dryad’s lips. She is trying to claim my name as her own. I lift my head and look at her. The light keeping her ablaze surges in response to my attention.

“Croi.” And again. My name has become a weapon she is trying to wield against me.

Broken brownie-something; Glamoured, fractured, hurting brownie-something. My legs point in a direction I don’t want to go, and my body is coming apart, trying to assume a shape I am not sure it can be. And now, yet another being with power tries to steal me from myself.

I have never before felt this fire, tasted this kind of rage. I don’t know how I do it but I open my mouth and suddenly I am willing the dryad’s light to me. I am deaf to its song but somehow I know that it will listen to mine. I am singing to the light with words I forget as soon as I speak them, and the light responds slowly and sluggishly. It spills through the dryad’s skin and bleeds through her eyes. Her light tries to make me shine.

The dryad screams, the sound of trees falling in storms, and scrambles backward, falling down and abandoning her grace.
I let go of her light and it returns to her. Dimmer. Muted. I watch as fear settles uneasily on her face. If power is the only language she understands, I think I can learn to speak it.
Chapter Eight

Here we are.

One very surprised dryad, lying on the ground with limbs awkwardly splayed; two broken halves of one Croi, still held prisoner by the tree; one princeling, just stirring; and the horse whose brown eyes witness us at our worst.

I don’t take my eyes off the dryad and her glowing orbs do not move from my face. We are at an impasse. She may try to claim my name again and if she does, I will fight with everything I have. I don’t know how or what I did the first time around, and I don’t know if I can repeat what I did but the dryad doesn’t know that. I have to hope that the idea of me stealing her light is frightening enough to discourage her from trying again.

The trunk of the tree is rough behind my back; twigs dig into my hip. I plunge my hands into the earth, an old habit, and dirty my nails. My hair is crusted with mud. My tree bark dress is filthy, and my soles hurt. My hunger is an ache and fatigue, a heavy weight on my shoulders. Yet, I have never felt as alive as I do now, in front of a being who could destroy me so completely that even yesterday would refuse to remember my name.

“Uaine.” Oon-ya. The dryad breathes after one moment turgid with silence. I look at her cautiously and she sits up, meeting my eyes with an inscrutable look in hers.

I look at her and my incomprehension must have shown on my face. “My name. Uaine.” She rests her elbows on knees she has drawn up to her chest, props her face on her hands, and looks up at me. “I am giving it to you.”

Giving it to me? Like dessert?

“Will you accept it?” There’s a glint in her eyes that warns against complacency.

“Why?” First she tries to steal my name and now she offers me hers. No one just offers their name. At least, that’s what the Hag has taught me.
“Consider it a test.” The dryad seems to have recovered her equilibrium. Did I not scare her at all? She gets up from the ground and stalks over to me, peering into my new eyes. I try to keep my face blank and probably fail. “Are you brave enough to take it?”

Brave? No, I am not brave at all. But if I don’t take her name, what else can I do? I cannot stay here, tethered to the tree forever. Besides, how many other ways can I break? How much more can I hurt?

So before I can consider the consequences, I speak her name and even before the second syllable leaves my mouth, I know I have made a mistake. Too late, I remember the Hag’s warning about true names. She told me that true names can only be taken by those who are stronger than the person whose name they are taking.

The dryad is ancient—numbers surrender their meaning in the face of her age. Her experiences are vast and ponderous; they have rubbed smooth the curves of her name and sweetened the sound of it. On my lips, her name becomes a living thing and presses down on me. I sag against the tree trunk; I am drowning, or I may be burning, as the essence of everything that she is tries to subsume all that I am. I feel both too full and too small, like I am being asked to hold the entire world inside of me. I gasp for breath, for relief, for mercy. Uaine’s name stretches itself all around me and then sinks into my skin. And the moment it does, a peculiar knowing fills me. The heaviness of the dryad’s name dissipates as though I have held it before, if not on my tongue, then in my blood. The name finds a place in my chest, somewhere near my heart, to call home.

I breathe, too shocked to do anything more. I am still alive; I’m very certain I am. That means I survived taking the dryad’s name. How did I do that? I can still feel her name in
my chest—it feels like a hot needle. I swallow and look at the dryad, foolish pride lifting my chin.

I expect her to be angry, but the dryad, Uaine, confounds me. She smiles—no, smile is a rather pallid description—she beams at me and her light brightens.

“What now?” I ask flinching from the light. “Will you let us go?”

“I will keep my word,” she says serenely.

I give her a suspicious look.

“You don’t believe me?” She sounds wounded.

“No,” I reply, pulling at the vine holding me to the tree. I peek at the princeling and find him watching our exchange with a rapt look on his face. I wonder what stories he is making up in his head.

“What if I remove the compulsion spell cast on you?” she says and I freeze.

Can she? Will she? I wet my lips, my throat suddenly dry. Do I dare hope?

“If you will grant me a boon,” she answers my silent question and I deflate. She probably wants my soul.

“You cannot have the princeling. Or his horse.” I probably should sacrifice them first but I have discovered that I have scruples. It is very annoying to have scruples. I will get rid of them as soon as I can.

“I don’t want them,” she smirks at me.

“You can’t eat me either.”

“The sunlight gives me enough sustenance that I do not need the insides of a little half-kin.” If only she had told me this before.

“Then what is the boon you would ask of me?” I ask.
She pauses and her eyes sweep across the clearing, looking across a distance I do not understand, at something I cannot see. My new eyes see hers grow filmy with an immeasurable sadness and then she looks back at me.

“Would you take a message to my sister?”

A sister. A girl-sibling born of the same mother. Someone to share dreams, thoughts and words with. Even the dryad has someone she can call her own.

“Just a message?” I will do a lot to have this compulsion spell broken. A message seems too little a price to pay. I cannot believe that Uaine would ask me to do such a simple thing.

“And…” she pauses, turning her face away so I cannot see her expression, “my HeartSeed.”

There’s a gravity to those words that steals the bird song in the air. I scrunch up my face and think hard. Has the Hag mentioned HeartSeeds ever before? I cannot remember. But then again, I did not always pay attention to the lessons she taught.

“HeartSeeds are a secret held only by the dryads and those to whom they are loyal,” Uaine elaborates. “It is our essence, everything we are, in the form of a seed. It is the only way we can be moved from one place to another without dying.”

“And you are willing to trust me with it?”

“No, of course not,” she says, shaking her head firmly just in case I do not comprehend what ‘no’ means. “I will require your word.”

If I agree to do what she wants me to, I will just be exchanging one binding for another. Right now, though not insistent, I can feel the tug in my bones. The urgency that accompanies the compulsion pulses softly. While the compulsion spell tugs at me, Uaine’s
binding will be a tether. If I give her my word, I will need to keep it. The Hag told horrible
stories about the consequences of breaking one’s word. There are many, and they all seem to
involve pain and humiliation. But to be able to move as I please, as I wish…is there anything
I would not give for that?

“What will you do, little Croi? Which path will you choose?” The dryad stands in
front of me with her hands on her hips, waiting for my answer.
Chapter Nine

Choose, she says. As if there is a choice to be made. I have longed for a mother, wept for one, for as long as I can remember. The Hag said I have a mother and a chance to see her if I let the compulsion spell pull me along, but what kind of mother casts spells on her child? Not one I want to meet just yet.

“If you can break the compulsion spell…” I pause and bring my newly shaped fingers to my chest where my heart has suddenly decided to beat frantically. “…I will do your bidding.”

The dryad’s lips stretch in a crafty smile. She looks darkly pleased at my decision. I look at the dryad and beyond her, I glimpse my destiny: dark and deadly, poised, like a spider, waiting to engulf me in her web. I put my chin up and ignore my yellow heart.

“But, can you really trust me with this task?” I ask Uaine again. The Hag certainly never trusted me to do anything. Except, perhaps, to grow. I think.

She considers me for a long moment and then shrugs, making the leaves in her hair rustle. “There is no one else.”

I see the human does not count for her either.

“If I lose the HeartSeed and some misfortune befalls it…?” I know myself well enough to want to be prepared for such eventualities.

“I die,” she replies simply. “My HeartSeed is the purest form of me. I told you it is my essence, little kin. What you would call your soul. You will not lose it.”

There is no mirth on her face, no teasing look in her eyes, just a cold command that reminds me, strangely enough, of the Hag.

The hours have been passing and the waning afternoon is stealing whatever light had slipped into the Wilde Forest. Shadows stick to the dryad, cleaving to her curves, and shading
her with their darkness. I shiver. Though we are still warm in the grasp of summer, autumn sends her kisses on the tails of sudden breezes.

“There is one more thing you need to know,” Uaine says and I look askance at her. “When I remove the compulsion spell, the protective shield around you will also be removed.”

I shrug. Being protected at the expense of losing my right to move my body as I see fit is an unfair price. I don’t want protection like that. “I don’t mind. Go ahead and break the spell.”

“You are decided,” Uaine says, the comment more question than statement.

I nod.

“You give your word that you will take my message and HeartSeed to my sister?”

“Yes,” I say firmly, “I give my word that I will take your message and HeartSeed to your sister.” And there, just like that, I am bound.

“I will break the spell now,” Uaine says, warmer, now that I have agreed to dance to her tune.

“Will it hurt?” I ask.

“Does not everything?” she replies.

I have never seen magick being worked. What the humans call souls, the kin call magick. Everything and everyone, except the humans, have magick. Humans have souls or they like to pretend they do. They whine about it lots in their places of worship. But if they have souls then where is their magick? The Hag’s magick is intrinsic. As she is made by the land, she is nourished by its magick—there are no explicit expressions of it. A brownie’s intrinsic magick is to be invisible to humans. That’s what the Hag told me, and that is what I
experienced. Whether it is the only magick brownies wield is a question that I did not think to ask until now when it is too late. It seems apt that my first brush with magick be near gloaming, in a secret place, with a being that has so much power she can fearlessly make a gift of her name.

Uaine stands in front of me, looking down, and I follow the direction of her gaze. She seems to be looking at the threads of silver brown light that stretch up from the ground to wrap around my torso. She brings up her right hand, palm facing me. Her green-gold light, her magick, for what else can it be, brightens and then surges when she spits out some words in High Faerish. These words are all sharp angles and polished edges. For a long moment, nothing happens. Then just as I am beginning to think Uaine may be a beginner at magickery, the silver brown threads twitch and grow unbearably taut. I am yanked forward but Uaine’s tree anchors me.

There is no give and the spell is pulled tight between me and whoever is calling me—so tight that the distance melts away and for a second, for just one blink, I can see the being who cast this spell, the one whom the Hag called my mother. It is a fleeting look, and all I am able to keep from the glimpse is the memory of her eyes: a light brown, flecked with black and ringed by forest green.

I go warm and then cold. I feel as though I want to both cry and laugh. Then I blink and she is gone. The spell cannot withstand the pressure put on it by the dryad’s magick and breaks, severing our connection. All I am left with are the echoes of her emotions: desperation, regret, shock, and finally rage. I sense no sweet tang of love or the slightly bitter taste of longing.

“It is done,” Uaine says, the tension flowing out of her face.
It is. That incessant tug is gone. I feel no urge to move. A feeling of emptiness coils in my stomach. Funny, I thought I’d be happier.

“Now all you need to do is remove your vine from around my wrist,” I shake off the sudden melancholy and ask as sweetly as I can.

“Not yet, little one. There are things we need to speak of, things I need to tell you and things I would hear from you,” Uaine says. I give her a dubious look and fight the urge to whine. I don’t want to have a conversation that requires me to be tied up for it.

“Can’t we speak of these things when I am not tied to your tree?” I jiggle my hand. The vine irritates me much more, now that the compulsion spell is not around to distract me. Then I am struck anew by how beautiful my hands have become. My fingers are long and slender and my new nails, though dirty now, retain their pearlescent sheen. I look up and see the dryad looking at me with furrowed eyebrows.

“Please?” I give her the eyes that used to make the Hag sigh and relent a little but the dryad flinches instead. Ah, I forgot. My eyes are new too. I wonder what they look like. I hope they are pretty.

“If you will answer one question, I will let you free.” What else does she want to know about me? “How did you call my magick to you?”

“Should I not have been able to?” I look at her gold-green light and feel its presence in my mind. If I concentrate, I can feel the light that dissects the earth, makes the trees shine, and the ants glow. I can’t just see magick; I can feel it as well.

“No. Magick only answers to the being it belongs to,” Uaine pauses and then gives me a wry smile, “usually.”
“I do not know what I did, Uaine. You threatened me. You put your glittering smile on and you tried to eat me, name-first, so I sought to cause you the same pain you were giving me. Then I spoke words I do not know or understand and your light came to me.”

Uaine says nothing—we are all made up of little bits of silence–then nods. The vine falls away from my wrist and I take one cautious step away from the tree. There is no pull; my limbs do not do their puppet dance. So I take another step and then another one and soon I am doing a different dance. I laugh raucously and the birds scold me. I whirl round and round until I fall to the ground, out of breath.

Beaming, I sit up and turn to the princeling who is looking at me as though I have lost my mind. Humans. What do they know of freedom?

“Are you done?” Uaine asks me. She is leaning against her tree now, looking as though she would like to disappear into its trunk again. Branches have rearranged themselves to form a bower for her.

“Maybe,” I give a little hum of contentment and make myself comfortable on the ground. “Where is your sister?”

I suppose it is time to find out the details of my errand. It is not as though I have a choice in the matter.

“She lives in the heart of Talamh Caisleán,” Uaine says, her voice thick with memory. “Some say she is the heart of Talamh. You do know where Talamh Caisleán is, don’t you?” Ah. She must have noticed my blank look. I have heard the name before. I am certain I have. Possibly in one of the Hag’s many lessons. I look around for my pack. I dropped it when Uaine’s tree caught me. It is by the root of her tree, looking rather bedraggled. I open it and take out the book about the Fae and flip it open.
“Are you telling me you know nothing about the Fae?” I hear the amazement in Uaine’s voice and frown. “Did your Hag not teach you anything?”

“Oh, she taught me. I just did not always learn,” I reply, trying to ignore the dryad who hovers over me as I try to decipher the writing in the book.

“Tell me what you have learned about them.” Uaine sinks down to the ground beside me and I stifle a groan. She sounds just like the Hag in the middle of a lesson.

“They are the royalty of the kin but I don’t know why. They like to spill blood like the humans. And they do a lot of magick.” I scrunch up my face and try to remember what else the Hag taught me about them.

“Is that it?” There’s more? I should have paid attention. “There are four kingdoms that rule in Tír na nÓg: Talamh, rulers of earth; Tine, rulers of fire; Aer, rulers of air; and Uisce, rulers of water. To get to Tír na nÓg, you have to go through the veil.” What veil?

“We are of Talamh, aren’t we?” Bells are ringing in my head! I remember! Vaguely.

“I am,” Uaine says, “we don’t know what you are.”

Oh. That’s not quite true. I see earth magick. Does that not mean I am a Talamh kin?

“How do you tell?” I ask and then think. “It is the magick, is it not?”

“Indeed. It depends on what element’s magick you use. Talamh kin use earth magick, Tine kin use fire magick, Aer kin use wind magick, and Uisce kin use the magick of water.”

“So Talamh Caisleán is where your sister was…” Will it anger her if I say planted? Are dryads planted?

Uaine goes silent again. Her silences are loud and drown out my thoughts. So I stop thinking and make faces at the princeling who glares at me before turning his back on us.

“Each kingdom has a Caislean where the royalty lives,” she starts in a sonorous tone.
“I know. The princeling lives in one. A drafty castle made of stone,” I interrupt her. She could go on forever if I don’t. The Hag used to.

“Do not compare the Fae with humans, child. The royal Fae do not just live in the Caisleán, they share their life-blood with the heart of it. It in turn succours the land they exist on whether they are the forests of Talamh, the mountains of Aer, the deserts of Tine or the seas of Uisce. The existence of these places depends on the Fae bound to them.”

My lack of understanding must have made itself explicit by the expression on my face because Uaine continues after a long sigh. “The Caisleán in each kingdom binds the land to itself, while the monarch of each kingdom binds the people to him or herself.” That’s a lot of binding. “The heart of the Caisleán and the monarch of the kingdom are in turn bound to each other. As long as that bond exists, there will be peace. My sister is the protector of the heart of the Talamh Caisleán.”

I close the book and put it back in my pack. I did not need it after all.

“Did your Hag—” Uaine starts again.

“She’s no longer mine. I told you this already.” I stand up and rub my eyes. The world is too intense through these new eyes. “I want to go now.”

“Not yet. I am not ready.” The dryad seems to shrink in on herself for a second and then straightens. “Tell my sister that I am sorry. And then give her my HeartSeed.”

“That’s your message? That’s all of it?”

“It is enough. She will understand.”

“What is your sister’s name?”

“You will not need it.”
I hold out my hand for the HeartSeed. Uaine looks at my outstretched hand and then at her tree. She takes a step closer to it and embraces it for a long minute. I let my hand fall back to my side. Then she moves away from the tree and comes to stand in front of me. She meets my eyes, and I start at the look in hers. Terror tinges her irises dark; she is afraid. Uaine takes a deep shuddering breath and before I can say or do anything, she plunges a hand tipped with sharp nails into her chest.

There is a scream. It may have been mine. Or hers. I watch, shock turning my limbs to stone. What do I do?

It is only a few seconds later, or perhaps an entire lifetime, one can never tell, that she wrenches her hand out of her chest and holds it out to me. In her hand is a seed, the size of a small human’s fist, covered in green sap. It is pulsing softly; the dryad’s gold-green magic runs in thin veins around the surface of it.

“Take it,” the dryad says, her voice torn and ragged, her eyes stormy and wet. “Take it,” she pleads.
Chapter Ten

“We are words, Croi. Breathing words, walking words, words come to life and words become flesh and blood. When we gather, we have meaning, we tell stories. But sometimes, we come undone. And sometimes,” Uaine looks at me, her eyes glittering, “our stories end.”

She is sitting on the forest floor as though her body won’t support her anymore. She presses her cheek against her tree trunk, the contact seeming to offer her some comfort. She has been diminished. The fire has left her eyes and now resides inside my pack, wrapped in one of the diaphanous scarves I took from the human market.

“You have thirteen days and fourteen nights to get my Heartseed to my sister.” Her hands shake and her voice is a mere rustle. “My magick will not survive the separation any longer than that.” Her eyes find mine and hold on. “You must not fail me.”

I did not know it would hurt her. I did not know her Heartseed lived inside her. There are so many things I do not know. How will I do what she wants me to? What desperation is it that allows her to accept this pain?

“Why?” I ask now what I should have asked first. “Why do you take this risk? Why do you trust me? You don’t even know who I am.” Of course I don’t know who I am either but I am not the one handing my heart to strangers.

“Because I must,” Uaine replies and then regards me, her head tilted to one side. “Are you really a stranger, little Croi?” A smile plays around her lips as though hiding a secret it is not supposed to know.

My breath hitches. Does she know who I am? What I am? Will she tell me? I look at her, willing her to reveal all. Instead, a grimace contorts her features and she convulses with pain.
“I will sleep now.” Uaine uses the lower branches of her tree to pull herself. I get to my feet as well, unable to say a word, unable to insist. She faces her tree and then stops.

“Ah…” She turns around as though she has forgotten something and hope, that fool, surges in me. She straightens her shoulders and reaches for a majesty no longer there. Her composure slips and looking haunted, she takes a step toward me, stretching out a hand. I stand still, some previously dormant instinct for survival freezing my limbs. She stops just before her sharp fingernails graze my cheeks and squeezes her eyes shut. Her hand falls back to her side. She presses the palm of the other hand on her chest, right above where her HeartSeed used to be and shudders.

My world hinges upon her decision. Will she take back her HeartSeed? I wait, barely breathing, barely thinking. She opens her eyes and pain tinges her voice rough as she commands, once again, “Don’t fail me, Croi.” With that she is gone, melting back into her tree as though she never was.

For the space of two heartbeats, I do not move. My eyes are stuck on the surface of the tree trunk disbelievingly. Can she really be gone? She did not tell me how to get to Talamh Caisleán. Or where it is. I don’t even know how to get to Tír na nÓg. I turn around and find the princeling staring at the dryad’s tree. She didn’t set the princeling and his horse free!

“Human!” I call to get his attention and he turns to me and his mouth drops open. What? Oh. My new eyes. We do not have time for his histrionics. “Try walking out of the clearing,” I urge.

His brows draw together ferociously and he takes a deep breath to say something. Hopefully, Uaine’s silencing spell is still in effect. It is not. “You think I have not tried to
break through the barrier? I’ll have you know that I have. Countless times. The damned thing,” he raises his leg to kick at the edge where the invisible barrier exists, “will not move.” He kicks on the last word and stumbles out of the clearing. The look on his face is so comical that I laugh. Loudly. Immediately, his jaw clenches and he flushes red.

“Stop laughing, you monster! This is all your fault—” His diatribe is cut short by a strange keening sound coming from Uaine’s tree. He goes pale and gapes, fear slackening his face…

“Get your horse,” I whisper. “We need to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” the princeling says, his lower lip jutting out mutinously.

“Fine, you can stay here and wait for the dryad to come back. I’m leaving.” I don’t want to play nursemaid to the princeling either. I turn and start walking away from the clearing.

“Wait!” he says as I knew he would. I give him three minutes.

We walk in silence. I lead, pretending I know where we are going, and the princeling and his horse follow. The forest is kinder to me; perhaps the Glamour has broken enough that it is convinced I belong to it, and the horse is completely at home among the trees and the bushes. The princeling, however, is not so lucky. Any insect that can bite him, does. Thorns seek him out just to get their bloody due and branches belligerently present themselves as obstacles. Even the roots do not leave him alone. We have been traveling for only three hours when he throws himself down on the ground and wails, “I can’t do it anymore!”
He looks as though he has been trying to make friends with a blackberry bush. His hands and face are scratched and there are leaves in his hair. His clothes are filthy and a scrap is all that remains of his garish cape. I look at the way we came and sure enough, pieces of the cape cling to various bushes and low-hanging branches, announcing our path to whoever may be searching.

“I’ve decided that I’m not going to take another step until you tell me where you are taking me!” he tells me haughtily. Funny how he can sound so imperious even with a leaf in his hair.

I turn my back to the princeling and think. How do I get him and his horse out of the forest? I cannot take him with me to Talamh Caisleán, wherever it is. The Wilde Forest hates humans so Tír na nÓg is bound to be deadly to him. The forest has to end somewhere but I do not have the luxury of time to meander around with the princeling in tow.

The Hag told me about a road for humans that runs through the Wilde Forest—the only one of its kind but she did not tell me where it is. I scowl as fiercely as I can and am rewarded by the sight of the princeling’s face losing the little colour it had. Why do I have to be responsible for this human? But I am because if I am not, who else will be? I don’t want his death on my conscience.

“I’m going to send you back home,” I say, mimicking the princeling’s haughty tone. I am doing him a favour and it is best he not forget it.

“You are?” What looks like hope fights for place on the princeling’s miserable face.

I nod and look around. I am tired too, and we are far enough from the dryad so we may as well stay. A tree with overhanging branches that stands apart from the others catches my attention. We can take shelter under it for the night. I pick up a stick and stalk under the
tree, making enough noise that any critters and slithery beasts know to leave. Setting my pack gently down by a fallen log, I brush the ground beside it and then settle there. I lean against the log and draw my legs up to my chest. Night will blanket the Wilde Forest soon, but darkness has no meaning to my new eyes. I can see clearly as though it was day.

The princeling watches me for a while, and then perhaps realizing I don’t intend to harm either him or his horse, follows me into the cover created by the tree. He ties his horse to a branch, leaving enough slack in the rope that the horse can graze. Then he sits down on the ground gingerly, some distance from me. Watching the horse munch on the grass makes my stomach growl.

“How can you think of food at a time like this?” he replies huffily.

“I can always think of food. Don’t you ever get hungry?” My stomach growls again.

“I am a prince. Royalty does not have time for common things like hunger.” Hunger is common? “Besides, why should I give you food?” His hostility is beginning to annoy me.

“I saved your life, didn’t I? I am still saving it. Or would you like me leave you to the dubious mercy of the Wilde Forest?” I am very tempted to do so.

He bites his lip, looking chastened. Without another word, he goes to the horse and rummages in the saddlebags before pulling out two packages. They are nice, big packages. My mouth waters. He leaves both packages on the ground a little ways from me before retreating warily. Surely he doesn’t think I am going to hurt him. I wouldn’t! Not unless he deserves it! I ignore him and pounce on the packages. Food! Glorious food!

I wanted meat pies! Oh but maybe the second package will be better. I unwrap it carefully.

Honey cake! I am somewhat mollified but then a thought occurs to me. I look from my bounty to the princeling. This isn’t much. Is he hiding the meat pies in his saddlebags?

“Is there more?” I ask.

“Is that not enough?” He sounds incredulous. I really don’t like him.

“Should I leave some for you?” I don’t want to but the Hag taught me better.

“Oh,” he waves a regal hand, “you can have it. I’m not hungry.”

I leave him a quarter anyway. As I eat, I see him sneak glances in my direction. Night has fallen so I doubt he can see much in the dark but he tries anyway.

“What?” I give him a look he cannot see but he gulps anyway. Scaring him gives me such a delicious feeling. The Hag probably wouldn’t approve.

“Your eyes changed,” he mumbles.

“So? You can see in the dark?”

“They are glowing. I don’t need to see in the dark to see them.” Oh. Well. That changes things. He shivers. “Can you make a fire?”

“I don’t know how.” The Hag never let me play with fire. She didn’t even let me go near one. I have always wondered why. “Can you make a fire? Wait, never mind, of course, you can’t.”

He sniffs but doesn’t respond.

“What do my eyes look like? Can you tell me?” Uaine didn’t seem to like them too much.

The princeling straightens, looking animated all of a sudden. “Well, first they are ringed by orange, the colour of maple leaves in early autumn. And then they are ringed once
again, around the iris, by green, the green of young wheat plants, you know? And the colour between the two rings is gold but the strange thing is that this gold, it shimmers. Strange, yes, your eyes are strange. But I have this velvet jacket that would go splendidly with them. If I paired it with a green shirt and an orange scarf, people would not be able to resist me!” he finishes with relish, and I stare at him, bread halfway to my mouth.

“Human-.”

“Fergal. My name is Fergal,” he interrupts me, all stiff dignity.

“Human,” I insist, “why do you dress like a peacock?”
Chapter Eleven

He is quiet so long that I think have to repeat my question but before I can, he looks in my direction and, in the darkness, his mouth makes a shape that tries to be a smile but does not quite succeed.

“I have nothing else,” he says softly. He pokes at the ground in front of him with a stick. “My eldest brother is brawny and athletic. The heir, you know. My middle brother is smart and calculating. People look up to him even though he will not inherit. What do I have?”

“You have food to eat, a big castle to live in, and many gaudy clothes to wear. You also have other humans who laugh at you because of your gaudy clothes,” I point out after swallowing some cheese.

“I know,” he says and shrugs. “I’d much rather be laughed at than invisible.” He shoots me a baleful look. “What would you know about what it feels like to be ignored?”

I stare at him for a long time for two reasons: one, it scares him when I do and two, this is the first time I have ever understood a human.

“What’s your name?” The princeling interrupts my thoughts to ask. Do I tell him?

“I thought you called me Monster.” I am not certain that appellation is wrong. I may turn out one after all.

“I told you my name,” he grumbles.

“Your name doesn’t have power.” And he doesn’t have magick either.

He scoffs. “And yours does?”
He has a point. If my name lets others have power over me, I cannot reveal it to them, but if I do not give them my name, what are they to call me? I don’t fancy being an “it” though I may be all right with being “you.” Oh!

“Why don’t you give me a name?” I suggest.

“Give you a name?” He echoes, looking interested.

“And I will tell you right now that if it is something stupid like Morning Glory, I will feed you to a tree.”

“Saoirse,” he says, not seeming to hear my threat.

“Seer-sha,” I roll the syllables around in my mouth. I haven’t heard the name before, and the sound of it pleases me. “Why?” I ask him.

“Saoirse means freedom and you gave me that from the clearing.” He smiles crookedly and all of a sudden, I know why the girls call him Prince Charming.

“Thank you for naming me, Fergal.” I will do him the honour of using his name once. Just once. Before he can start talking again, I lie down beside the log and close my eyes. I don’t have a blanket and a cold-edged breeze frolics with the night. Perhaps we should have tried building a fire after all. How difficult can it be? I crack my eyes open when the horse makes a strange horse-noise. The princeling has settled on one side of it, and seeing him gives me an idea. The horse is big and will block chilly breezes so I pick up my pack and stand. The princeling comes to attention.

“I am going to sleep on the other side of your horse. It’s cold. And if I die from the cold, you will die too.” There, that should take care of his protests. I settle down a small distance away from the horse’s hooves and sit on the ground with my back to the horse and the princeling. I feel a little peace for the first time since we fled the dryad’s clearing. Along
with the peace comes a little bit of courage. I open my pack and gently take out the scarf that’s wrapped around Uaine’s HeartSeed and unwrap it. The HeartSeed pulses softly, casting green-gold light and illuminating the ground. It feels far heavier than it should. I rewrap it and place it carefully back into the pack. The human won’t try to steal it, will he?

The promise I made to the dryad is constantly on my mind and the urge to complete the quest she put me on is ever present. I like nothing that tries to bind me and it seems like everyone in the world is trying to.

I hug the pack close to me, lie down and give myself over to sleep.

“Hey!” the princeling’s voice pricks me awake after ten minutes. “Saoirse?” Who? Oh. Me.

I consider not replying. I have talked to him enough for today after all.

“Saoirse!” He should be glad I do not eat humans.

“What?” I sit up and glare in his direction.

“I can’t sleep. The ground is hard, Morning Glory smells and I’m hungry.” How is any of that my problem? Does he think we are friends just because he gave me a name? I find the remaining food packages and toss them over the horse without a word. Giving him one last glare that he can’t see, I lie back down.

“Can you keep me company while I eat?”

“You are annoying.”

“I know,” his voice is a whisper, “I’m sorry.”

In the silence that follows, an uncomfortable feeling wiggles its way into my stomach. I wait for him to say something else but he doesn’t and that uncomfortable feeling
expands from my stomach into my chest. I sit up again and feel my eyebrows curl into a
scowl. A conscience is a very unpleasant thing to have.

He is sitting with his back to the horse. Shoulders slumped and head lowered. He
wears his misery like a second skin.

I take a loud breath and then exhale, hoping he will hear and turn. He doesn’t budge.

Humans.

“I suppose you cannot help being annoying. You are human after all.” This is all he’s
going to get.

He turns to face me. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Do you even need to ask? Would you welcome me into your home with open arms?”

The look of horror on his face declares his answer.

“Have you loved anyone then?” he asks and I am flummoxed.

“Love? What kind of love?” I love food and sweet milk. Sleeping and the smell of the
earth after the rain.

“Romantic love.” The tips of his ears are turning red.

“Romantic love?”

“You know, the love between a man and a woman…”

“Oh, you mean when they mate to make babies?”

“No! I mean, yes! I mean, that’s part of it but not entirely, but-.”

“Human…Fergal,” I interrupt his mumbling. “Why are we talking about this?”

“I am trying to explain why I ran away from home and ended up here.” Why does he
think I want to know?

“Oh. I see. Continue then.”
“So have you loved someone like that?”

“No.” As though there was anyone other than the Hag to love. The Hag has books though, books that contain stories about lovers. They almost always end with someone dying.

“I have. I do. She has the prettiest violet eyes and her lips are as red as an apple! A slim figure and the most beautiful dark hair!”

“I don’t think it’s love if you just like the way she looks.”

“I don’t just like the way she looks! She’s kind! She thinks the most amazing thoughts and she leaves a saucer of food in her garden for cats.”

She sounds familiar.

“Does she have a big-nosed mother and two shrill sisters?”

“Yes. Her step-family.”

“And?”

“I love her.”

“What is love for you?” I am interested despite myself.

“It’s…” he breaks off, “everything,” he finishes reverently.

That tells me nothing, but it does stop him talking. I wonder if I can sleep now.

“She said she couldn’t be with me.” He’s not done yet? “Because I’m a prince and she’s…”

“What does it matter?”

“My parents, to them I’m like a chest full of gold coins.” Bitter, bitter. “They are planning to give me to King David’s daughter in exchange for the land she owns. When I said that I have someone I love and want to marry, they told me to present her at court and only if the court approves, will I be granted permission.”
“So you ran away from the human city?”

He nods glumly. “I had no choice. It was either run away or marry King David’s daughter and I can’t marry her. I don’t even know her name.”

“Are you sure you love this girl with the big-nosed stepmother?”

“I’m telling you I do!”

“But you are not showing it.” It’s true I don’t know much about love, but even I know that I wouldn’t want someone who would rather run away than try to figure out a way to be with me.

“What am I supposed to do? They won’t accept her because she’s common!”

“Why don’t you Glamour her? Make her into what they want to see.”

“I can’t!” He buries his face in his hands. “I can’t ask her to be someone else when the person I love is who she is now.”

“I don’t have any answers for you,” I say when the quiet has covered all the surfaces between us. “All I know is that you shouldn’t have run away.”

“I know that now.” The princeling sighs.

The noise wakes me before I am ready. Something is viciously banging at a branch in the tree while a thousand insects seem to be chittering right in my ear. I open my eyes reluctantly and look up at the tree under which we spent the night. On the branch closest to the ground is a small bird with a sharp beak and a brilliant array of feathers. I wonder what wrong the branch did to the bird to deserve the holes gouged into it. It must feel my eyes on it because it gives me a quick glance before it resumes pecking.
The sound increases in volume and reverberates in my head, temporarily drowning out all the other chaos. Then I hear the soft sounds of small footsteps and I swing my gaze around to where a centipede is crawling under a log. My hearing is normally sharp but even I do not mark my hours by the footsteps of critters. I sit up and look at the princeling to see if he has been disturbed by the noise. He has one arm flung over his eyes, asleep and oblivious. I stifle the urge to kick him. The horse whuffs as though it feels the same urge.

My heart speeds up at the thought that I may have to live my life in a constant din. All the sounds of the world try to crowd inside my head at the same time and I find myself on the edges of panic. What do I do? How do I make it stop? I clamp my hands over my ears but it does not help. I close my eyes as though not seeing the world means I won’t be able to hear it. That does not work either. I try to remember what silence sounds like. Ah. The evenings I spent with the Hag in the dwelling. The Hag’s silences—unwelcome then, are memories I cleave to now. It was a soothing silence, a soft silence, not full of unsaid words but empty. One breath. Two. I remove my hands from my ears slowly and then exhale with relief. The noise has receded somewhat. The volume is muted but the knowledge that one thought is all that is necessary to increase it resides in my bones. Feeling immensely better, I turn my head to see the princeling staring at me.

“What?” I growl. I’m not feeling particularly friendly right now.

“Your face…” he stops and then swallows.

“What’s wrong with my face?” Am I growing whiskers? A snout? I hurriedly touch my face but find only skin. “What is it?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing,” he shakes his head.
We gather our meagre belongings and dust ourselves off. I thank the tree for providing us with shelter and then we look for breakfast. The horse has grass while we breakfast on slightly tart berries from a thorny bush. It is not very filling but we have nothing else. I share the water remaining in my flask with the princeling but there is not enough for the horse. However, as always, I know which direction the water lies so we set off towards it. The ground inclines and soon we are all breathing heavily but after about thirty minutes, our efforts pay off as we move through thinning trees and come out to a river that falls a short distance to a mostly still pool before trickling away through some gaps in the rocks to caverns underneath. The horse doesn’t need any encouragement and is soon lapping thirstily. I leave the princeling washing his face by the bank and find the stillest part of the river that I can.

I take a breath, find some courage and close my eyes. Then, before I can change my mind, before the courage flees, I lean over the water, open my eyes and look down at my reflection.
Chapter Twelve

Grey clouds obscure the blue of the sky and at first, they are all I see. Then comes the thought:

I have been a visitor in my body and the invitation has just been rescinded; I am no longer welcome in my own body. Or perhaps the shell that has been cocooning me for almost seventeen years has reached its limit. It is disintegrating and the unkind river refuses to allow me the secrets of my face. I sought it out. I know that. But now that I see it, I wish I hadn’t. I wish I had allowed myself that small charity.

One week ago, I had bright yellow hair, sun-browned skin and blue eyes I considered happy. A snub nose like someone had pressed a thumb against it as I was being moulded, plump cheeks and two round ears growing close to my head. My lips had been wide and were often stretched in a smile. My face hadn’t been remarkable but it had been mine so I had liked it.

Where did that face go? Who is this staring up at me so defiantly?

Her face has been sculpted by nightmares. She has a misshapen bump for a nose and her skin is cracked, like parched earth. Her forehead slopes down and her mouth is too small for her face. There is a suggestion of a chin. Her hair is ropy and tricoloured: yellow, brown and red. The tips of her ears are sharply pointed and her eyes are as the princeling described them: strange. The shimmer of the orange, green and gold of her eyes is beautiful and entirely out of place on her face. What word is she, this girl with the fiery eyes?

Ugly comes to mind. Ugly is what stays. Ugly is what she-I-we are.

I look away from the reflection to see the princeling looking at me. He should have continued calling me monster. It fits.

“Don’t look at me.”
“It’s not that bad…” His eyes avoid mine though.

“Don’t lie to me.” I don’t need his pity. I dip my flask into the water, destroying my reflection with vicious pleasure.

“All right. I admit it. It’s a bit…startling. But it’s still you. Right?” he asks anxiously. He needs the assurance that I am still the creature who saved him.

I simply look at him and what he sees in my eyes must not appease him because he turns on his heels and returns to the horse.

I have never been beautiful, at least not in the way humans define beauty. So it’s not as though I stopped being beautiful. I have just become a little less–fine–a lot less pleasant to look at. How can I ask others to look at me when I can’t stand to look at myself? I open my pack and rifle through the scarves before selecting a black one with silver threads woven through it. I wrap it around my neck and the lower half of my face. Then I find some dark mud on the river bank and apply it liberally on my forehead and whatever skin is showing above the scarf. There. If I am going to be ugly, I may as well go all the way.

The princeling has been watching my ministrations from a distance, and though he has opened his mouth once or twice to make a comment, he has thought better of it and kept his silence. Good.

When I’m done, I wash my hands and stand up.

“What do we do now?” the princeling, his eyes on the ground, asks.

“Now we find you a way out of the Wilde Forest,” I reply. I am still pretending to know what I’m doing.

We start downhill and the forest resumes its assault on the princeling. He curses again, and I learn some new words.
“Why did you save me?” he asks after he trips on a root for the fifth time. The horse walks placidly between us.

I was hoping he wouldn’t ask that question.

“It’s a nice day, isn’t it?” I say gesturing expansively at the forest around us. It begins raining the next moment and I try out one of the princeling’s curses. It doesn’t do anything but it makes me feel better.

“You didn’t answer my question,” the princeling says when we are ensconced under a tree to wait out the rain.

“Should I not have?” I turn and look at him. He has shadows under his eyes and his face is smudged with dirt. He is a far cry from the elegant princeling who used to promenade the castle grounds early in the mornings. He has not complained once, however, about the violence the forest is showing him even though I keep expecting him to. I feel an unwilling spurt of respect for him, and I avert my eyes from his questioning gaze.

“No. I–thank you. But why?”

“I don’t really know.” My voice sounds muffled through the scarf. The mud has hardened on my face though I’m sure the rain will try to wash it away.

“What did the tree creature give you?” he asks next.

“You should not concern yourself with matters of the kin, human,” I say tersely and then add, “It could prove dangerous for your well-being.”

“I am always silenced.” His rejoinder is brief and bitter.

“Don’t blame me for your tragedies. This world is not yours; you do not get to know it. In your world, however,” I stop and think, wondering how to best say it, “you have a voice. You simply do not use it.”
“What makes you think I have not tried?”

“Because you are here.”

He has no response to that.

We have been walking in the direction that I think the road for the humans is but I don’t know if we are anywhere near it. I suppose I could try using my new ears to listen for it but I am afraid. Afraid that the noise will drown me. I glare at the princeling and he gives me a snooty look in return. Surely I have done enough for him that I need not risk more? Maybe I should have left him in the clearing. Maybe that would have been for the best.

I sigh loudly to indicate my reluctance but the princeling ignores me. I hope I get to kick him at least once before I am free of him. Fine, I will do this. I take a deep breath and listen. Really listen. Immediately, the noise swells; I panic and push the sound back until it is muted again. Well, that was unpleasant. Be brave, Croi!

I wait two beats and try again. Slowly. First I hear the sound of raindrops hitting the leaves, sliding down branches and greeting the earth with wet plops. Then the sound of animals stalking through the undergrowth—a large cat is about to devour its prey a good distance away. I filter out the incessant buzzing of the insects and then listen farther. For a while, I hear nothing that resembles the distinctive sound of human voices, but just as I am about to give up, I hear the laughter of a child and following it, a human voice scolding. I open my eyes and point in the direction the voices came from.

“Move,” I snap and start walking. The rain has eased off so, though the ground is wet and the leaves slap wetly against us, we are in no danger of being drenched. Then a thought occurs to me.
“Human.” I stop in my tracks and the princeling tries to stop too but fails to notice the root jutting out from the side of a tree trunk. I wince as he falls. Getting up, he gives me the fiercest look he can manage. “Does my voice resemble a human’s voice?”

“You stopped to ask me that?”

“Yes. Does it?”

He thinks for a minute and shakes his head. “No. When you talk, it sounds like music. Like bells ringing. That’s what you sound like.”

“All right.” I start walking again. “Thank you”

It takes us an hour but we finally reach the road that crosses the Wilde Forest. It is flanked on either side by a dense thicket. I stop the princeling with a hand on his arm when he would have gone blundering out.

“This is as far as I will take you,” I tell him softly.

A myriad of emotions dances across his face: relief, fear, happiness and, curiously enough, sorrow.

“Do not tell anyone about your adventures in the forest. Do not mention what you saw and who you met. Also,” I lean near to him and whisper, “do not ever return.”

The sound of a cart passing by reaches us and the horse whuffs, as though anxious to return to the human world. I move aside to let the princeling leave, but he stands still for a minute, twisting the horse’s bridle in his hands.

“Thank you for saving me. I do not know why you helped me, but I am glad that you did. I… I owe you a life debt and if you ever want to collect—if I can ever help you, seek me out.” There is a ceremony to his words, a sombreness to them that marks his sincerity.
“Be safe,” I say and turn to go but then turn back for some inexplicable reason. “Be happy.”

As soon as he leaves, I walk away and do not look back even once. The quiet pools into the space he used to fill and though barely an hour passes after he leaves, memory is blurring his existence. What was the reason, I wonder as I traipse in a random direction, I met the human? How should I remember him? As the first human I spoke to? As the first being other than the Hag I argued with? The first boy who ever looked at me? I think about what Uaine said.

We are both words, the princeling and I. But together, we had no meaning; we told no stories. Not that I wanted to tell stories with him. But he made me think about the differences between us. I don’t think humans and kin can tell stories that do not have sad endings.

I stop walking on that thought and try to get my bearings. Where am I? The trees are even more densely packed together here and the stillness in the air speaks of a place untouched by anything other than nature. I have never been this deep in the Wilde Forest before. Some hours of daylight remain, so I climb a tree and perch myself on a branch before taking out the books the Hag gave me. Neither of them mentions the veil Uaine talked about. I sigh and lie back on the branch, looking at the little bits of sky that I can see through the leaves.

I am tired of eating fruit; I don’t know how to make a fire so I can’t even cook anything I catch. I could eat a rabbit or a chicken or even fish. My stomach grumbles, and I pet it sadly. I sit up, take out Uaine’s HeartSeed and examine it. It is a bit dimmer than it was yesterday.
“Where do I go now, Uaine?” I address the HeartSeed. I do not expect an answer and I don’t get one. I put the books back and close my eyes against the monotonous landscape of the forest. I hear the sounds of the forest clearer with my eyes closed and for a while, I soak in the various noises made by the living creatures. On a whim, I start listening with my new hearing and what I hear makes me gasp.

What I had thought was noise is actually a song. The forest is singing a song. The flora and the fauna each have their own melodies but instead of being discordant, they harmonize. I open my eyes and look around. The magic does it. The magick takes the melody of the flora and the melody of the fauna and puts them together as one song. I listen to the forest’s song for a long while and gradually realize that there is a different sound, a different song being sung somewhere in the forest. I am tired and don’t want to move but this new song is pervasive. Itchy, like a leaf down the back of my dress. So grumbling to myself, I climb down the tree and follow the sound of this new song. I walk for a little bit of ever and finally reach the place.

At the foot of a hill are two tall trees standing like sentries, two arm spans apart. The new song swells here, and I realize with a jolt what the song is: it is the song of the magick, the earth magick…Talamh magick. I recognise it now; I sang a bit of it to stop Uaine from eating me. The air between the two trees is threaded, impossible though that may seem, with this magick. I go near it and sniff. The smell of sun-soaked honeysuckle wafts through. I can see through the air to the forest beyond but I know that what I see is not what is true though I do not know where that knowledge comes from. I reach out a hand and discover that the air between the trees has a viscosity to it; when I pull my hand away, it is coated with a gold
shimmer that dissipates after a while. The air ripples all of a sudden and I am reminded of a veil. Is this what Uaine was talking about?

There is only one way to find out. I adjust my pack more firmly on my shoulder, make sure the scarf is still securely wrapped around the lower half of my face and take a deep breath. I look back just once, and then take a step forward.
Part Two

Chapter Thirteen

The first thing I see is the sky, a cerulean monster stretching its fingertips to infinity.

The second thing is the meadow I’m standing in. It is the largest one I have ever seen or been in. Verdant and lush, the meadow is lit by splashes of colour from the honeysuckle and wildflowers growing in scattered clusters. A breeze plays with flower petals and the long grass rustles in harmony to the song of the magick. The air is filled with the fragrance of flowers. Far off in the distance, I can see the forest that surrounds the meadow on all sides. Is it still called the Wilde Forest in Tir na nÓg? This is Tir na nÓg, isn’t it? For where else could I be other than Tir na nÓg? I look around at the emptiness and suppress a shiver.

I have been out of the Wilde Forest before, but only to the human city where the sky is interrupted by buildings, where I was tiny and hidden among the humans just as I was hidden in the Forest. Here, in this meadow, the sky is everywhere and I feel bare before it. The blue of it asks me questions and as always, I have no answers. Who am I if not a brownie?

A thought occurs to me, and I whirl around to see if I can still glimpse the Wilde Forest through the veil.

It isn’t there.

The veil isn’t there.

All I can see is the meadow behind me, in front of and around me. There is no veil, no Wilde Forest, not even a sign that the human world exists. It is gone. And yet, I remain. Even though the Hag and the Wilde Forest are no longer here, I still exist.
I want to cry, wail, and weep my feelings out in this strange meadow, in this new world. I want to be back in the dwelling I dreamed myself in and wrap myself in the comfort of home, flimsy though it was. I want the Hag who was mine even when she wasn’t.

I sit down with a thump and find that the grass is wet from the dew. The emptiness expands in my chest and uncertainty chooses this moment to prick my insides. What can I do here? I don’t know anything and the only things I have are my name and the memory of a Hag. This world is not mine—I can hear its music but I don’t know what the words of the song are. I wrap my arms tightly around my pack, the last bit of home I have left, and then gasp and almost fling it away when the HeartSeed’s magick stings me.

I look down at my pack and take a deep breath. No matter how much I wish otherwise, I have a responsibility. I don’t have time for black thoughts. I gave my word to Uaine and I need to keep it. So I get up and dust myself off. I meant to leave anyway. The human world is not my world. The Hag doesn’t love me. She doesn’t want me. She didn’t even try to stop me from leaving. I wanted to come to this world. I no longer have a compulsion spell binding me. Once I deliver the HeartSeed, I can go anywhere I please, do anything I want. I repeat this to myself over and over again.

I take a step into the meadow, stop, and look around. No one appears in front of me. Nothing attacks me. So I take another step, then I am running, getting acquainted with the feeling of moving freely. There are no branches to bump into, no tree roots cropping up suddenly to trip me. I’m running with my arms extended, pack slung over my shoulder. Twirling around so my hair rides the wind and my scarf comes undone. I’m lost to the sensation, determined to forget the darkness inside of me, when I feel a sharp sting on my
forearm. I look down and hiss. A miniscule spear, fashioned from a twig, has pierced through my skin and drawn blood.

An enraged buzz reaches my ears. I look up to see a tiny figure, the size of a human hand, hovering in the air in front of me. His furiously flapping wings are silver with green veins in them. He has bright red hair and fair, freckled skin. He is wearing a pair of green pants, a green shirt and a green cap placed at a rakish angle on his head. A pixie.

From the obscenities he is spewing in a high musical voice, he is not too pleased with me. I have no idea why. I stare at him which he perhaps perceives as insolence as he increases his fervent cursing. Is he going to attack me? Should he not first tell me what I have done wrong so I can mount a defence? How much harm can he do me anyway?

Unless he is not alone. I look around nervously but see no other pixies.

“That’s enough, you overgrown fly!” I did not mean to say that. I really did not but he called my grandmother a goat! I may not know her, but I cannot allow anyone to slur her name and honour.

The pixie stops mid-screech and his magic flashes red. That does not bode well for me. The cadence of his beating wings changes and before I can fully regret opening my mouth, I am surrounded. More than a hundred pixies, all wearing the same clothes and expressions, rise up from the bushes dotting the meadow and are now strategically arranged around me with their hideously sharp spears pointed in my direction.

Why does everyone I meet on this journey try to kill me?

“She insulted me,” the pipsqueak pixie begins in what he probably imagines is a grand voice. It isn’t.

“You insulted my grandmother,” I feel compelled to point out.
He flies to my nose “Be quiet, you lumbering oaf!”

I’m going to squish him if he tries to spit on me. Or sit on me. I am not furniture.

“She hurt the flowers!” a voice chimes in from somewhere.

“The poor buttercup on the north side will never recover her dignity,” someone else says.

All right, fine, I admit it, my frolicking may have been dangerous for the flowers, but it was hardly criminal.

“I’m sorry…” What do I call them? Pixie-people? Kin? “I did not mean to hurt the flowers.”

“Lies!” the pipsqueak pixie crows, prodding me with his spear.

“I cannot lie!” I thunder. Oh. How interesting. I didn’t know I could thunder.

The pixie army immediately go on the offensive. I am steadying myself for the attack I believe they are going to launch when suddenly, they all go still. The reason for their stillness becomes clear when the multitude of pixies part to allow a procession through. First come four pixies in green armour, riding vicious-looking hornets. Their fierce expressions warn me not to take comfort in their tiny sizes. They are carrying hooked spears that promise to cause a lot of pain if I misbehave. Following the soldiers is a lady pixie on a dragonfly. She is dressed in a green dress that looks like woven gossamer, finer even than the ones the humans wear to their parties. She has a crown on her head and beautifully coiffed red hair. Her features are delicate and currently arranged in a frown. On either side of her and behind her are more hornet-riding soldiers. I wonder if she’ll try to kill me too.

They come to a stop in front of me and the pipsqueak pixie flies over to the lady.

“Your Majesty!” He bows once, twice, three times.
“What is going on here?” The pixie-lady looks around, ignoring the pipsqueak and addressing the gathered army.

“The giant thing jumped on all our flowers!” the pipsqueak accuses. I have never been called a giant before.

“Thing, Orange? I know your parents taught you better than that.” As far as rebukes go, this one is gentle but its effect is immediate. The pipsqueak, Orange, flushes red and murmuring excuses hides himself in the crowd. Serves him right.

The pixie-lady flies her dragonfly up to the level of my eyes, and her retinue of bodyguards follow. I have been standing still for a long time, afraid to move in case I incur the wrath of the pixies, but as the pixie-lady looks into my eyes, I fight the urge to fidget. She has brown-flecked pale-green eyes ringed by a darker green. She has power, this pixie-lady, but the source of her power is not her magick. Oh, her magick is considerable, I can see it running under her skin, but it is incomparable to Uaine’s power.

“I am Titania, the queen of the pixies.” Her voice resonates with the force of her words. “You have interesting eyes, kin. Who are you?” She presents it as a question, but I know a command when I hear one.

“I am…Saoirse, brownie-something.” A little more something than brownie these days but the pixies do not need to know that.

A great clamour rises at my words, and the pixies break off in clusters to discuss me.

“Brownie, she says,” I hear one say to another.

“Don’t forget the something!” comes the swift rejoinder.

“So her mam was a brownie and her father a something?”
“An ugly something by the looks of her.” This makes them laugh. I hope they are all mistaken for leaves and eaten by a caterpillar.

“We like brownies, don’t we? They are our favourites!”

“I suppose that means we can’t feed her to the ants then,” someone says.

Ha! I’d like to see an ant try to eat me.

The queen of the pixies, Titania, has been waiting silently for the conversation to subside. When it shows no indication of doing so, she lifts a hand and everyone stops talking at once.

“We did not see you arrive. Which path did you take to get here?” she asks me, and I wonder what answer she expects. Should I tell her? I see no reason not to.

“I came through the veil,” I answer.

Her eyes widen only slightly but I know I have managed to surprise her. She doesn’t raise her voice but simply says, “Leave us,” and the pixie army scatters. Only Titania’s guards remain and even them she waves away. When they are out of hearing distance, she fixes her green grass eyes on me.

“Are you the Hag’s child?” The question is asked very softly, as though Titania is afraid of what the answer may be. I start at the question and my heart gives a hard beat. How does she know the Hag? Is she connected to that elusive mother who cast the compulsion spell on me?

“No,” I reply because it is the truth. “I am not her child.”

Her expression eases.

“Can I ask a question?”

She inclines her head. “Go ahead.”
“Which way to Talamh Caisleán?”

“All roads lead to the Caisleán.” She doesn’t elaborate and gives me an inscrutable look. “What business do you have there?”

“I cannot speak about it.”

“Try,” she insists but even I am not that big a fool.

“I gave my word.”

Titania rears back as though I have said something offensive.

“To the queen?” she whispers.

I say nothing and she purses her lips.

“My soldiers will escort you to the edges of the meadow. Go and do not look back. Go and do not return. We will not be as kind to you if we see you again.” With that, she pulls the reins on her dragonfly and flies away, leaving me befuddled and with five tiny but grim soldiers whose hornets bristle their antennas at me. If this is pixie kindness, I do not want to know what their meanness looks like.

The soldiers do not speak to me. Instead, four of them take position around me while the fifth one is directly behind me, prodding at me with a spear to encourage me to move.

I am tempted to create chaos, but the memory of the pixie army restores my senses. I even try to avoid stepping on the flowers, not that this endears me to the soldiers. Not that I can tell what they’re thinking. Not that I care what they think.

The meadow seems endless, and we walk for nearly four hours before we reach the end of it. Well, I walk. The soldiers ride their horns. Why they need horns when they have perfectly functioning wings, I do not know.
At the edge of the forest, the pixie soldiers draw aside and motion me forward. I stare at the darkness yawning before me and have misgivings. I have so many misgivings that I am almost spilling over with them, but there is no way to go but forward. It only takes one step to know that this forest is not the Wilde Forest. The knowledge sits like the truth on my tongue.

This forest has the same trees as the Wilde Forest: ash, poplar, beech and oak. It has the same kind of vines winding around the branches. However, the leaves glisten wetly even though it is not raining and whatever light manages to shine through the canopy is pallid, like the sun cannot be bothered to light the world inside the forest. This is peculiar because the sun outside, in the pixies’ meadow, is bright.

The undergrowth of the forest has been cleared as though many feet have walked across it and perhaps they have. What do I know? It is colder, too, inside this forest, so cold that it could be winter and not autumn waiting in the eaves. I walk farther in, and I realize that the noise is different. This forest’s song sounds hoarse and rough—as if the trees are forgetting the words; the song is breaking. I let my hearing expand, and instead of the chittering of the insects, I hear whispered conversations, laughter and screams. This forest is alive in a way the Wilde Forest isn’t. Here, the song of the magick is subdued but the forest is abuzz with a cacophony full of notes I itch to read. I take a breath and exhale for the first time in what feels like hours. The pixie meadow was beautiful but the sky is too wide. Forests are where I belong, where I feel the most me, whoever that may be. I take another breath and lose myself to the forest song. I don’t know how long I spend standing there, in the middle of what seems like a well-travelled path, just listening, but suddenly fatigue
comes crashing down and pulls my legs out from under me. I crumple to the ground. I am so weary that even my hair hurts.

I know better than to rest here though. I am vulnerable to any predator who walks this path, anyone who wants a bite of me. So I get up and stagger away from the path and farther into the forest. It gets colder the farther in I go and I hug my pack close to me, hoping the HeartSeed will give me some of its fading warmth. All of a sudden, I smell smoke. I follow my nose for ten minutes and am rewarded when I reach a small break in the woods. There, in the middle of a clearing is a fire burning merrily in a pit. There is no one else in the clearing apart from a napping Meow. It doesn’t look like a wild Meow. Maybe its owner is somewhere around. I wait for a few minutes but no one appears so I walk closer to the fire, ready to bolt just in case. I should be more worried about whoever has claimed the clearing, but I am so tired that I do not mind playing with danger for a few minutes of peace. I make it all the way to the fire and sink down gratefully in front of the undulating flames.

I move as close to the heat as I can without actually sitting in it. The Hag took great pains to ensure I didn’t come in contact with fire. She cooked my food for me and even made me give her my word that I would not play with it in the human city. It didn’t occur to me then to wonder why but I do now. Why did she keep me at a distance from fire?

There are several sticks beside the pit. I drop a couple of them into the flames, enjoying the crackling sound they make as they burn. If only there was a plump rabbit I could catch. I’d roast it. My mouth waters at the thought. I hope there is a lot of food in Talamh Caisleán. I warm my hands over the flames but it isn’t enough so I bring my face closer to the fire and enjoy the heat of it on my cheeks. I look into the crackling depths and suddenly, I hear a raspy, throaty song. The sound is so soft that I can barely hear it even if with my new
hearing. It is irresistible, however, so I lean even closer to the flames, closer than is wise. The fire’s song makes me feel breathless so I take a deep breath and when I do, I inhale the fire into me.
Chapter Fourteen

There is no inferno, no conflagration of Croi, no agony. Though the fire licks my insides warm, I do not burn. I am not singed, scorched or seared. I am feverish but that is more fear than heat. Throughout it all, I keep hearing snatches of the fire’s song, loud one minute and barely audible the next.

I take another breath and feel the molten flames pour into the spaces created by the breaking Glamour. The heat reaches my core first and the Croi-inside uncurls as though the fire is breathing her alive. The sensation is too intense for me so I exhale and when I do, the fire is breathed back out into the crude fire pit. All that remains is the taste of smoke in my mouth and a rawness on the inside as though I have been scrubbed clean by the experience. The fire stops singing, or perhaps, I stop being able to hear its song.

I shift away from the fire but feel reluctant to leave it entirely. I breathe cautiously, turning my face away so the flames do not jump into me once again. The fire writhes, reaching out to me and I, in spite of myself, reach out a finger and watch in wonder as a tendril of flame curls around it. Once again, there is heat but it is banked as though the fire itself is trying not to burn me.

This is the clue I have been waiting for. My unexpected chemistry with fire tells me what the Hag wouldn’t. It tells me what I am.

A dragon!

Or rather, I am turning into a dragon. That’s why my bones are rebelling. That’s why my eyes have that strange liquid shimmer, and that’s why my face looks terrible. I am trying to turn into a giant lizard. I am going to have a tail! I don’t know how I feel about having a tail. I check but I can’t feel any bumps on my back just yet.
Whether it is because I am engrossed in my thoughts or because he is so still that he seems like a part of the forest, I don’t know. Whatever the reason, he escapes my attention until I look up wanting to share my news with the Meow.

Instead of the Meow, a Fae boy is crouched in front of the fire on the other side of me with his hands, curved into claws, digging into the ground. A feral snarl has peeled his lips back to reveal sharp white teeth and when I blink, he growls. His magick has the red edge to it that I am learning to associate with hostility but curiously, he seems to have misplaced all his clothes. Unless he doesn’t ever wear any. I wish the Meow was around so I could use it as a shield. But if this is its master, I cannot blame it for disappearing. I wish I could too.

The Fae boy’s skin is tanned brown with black and yellow stripes overlaying it. His hair is a mix of the same black and yellow colours. He is slender and hisses when my eyes drop lower. He should have worn more clothes if he didn’t want me looking. I raise my eyes to his face.

Even though the snarl is doing its best to disfigure his features, it cannot hide his beauty. A sharp nose and high cheekbones accentuate amber eyes ringed by a deep dark brown. We regard each other silently. What am I supposed to do? Run away? I don’t think my feet will cooperate. Also, I am loathe to leave the fire. Will he even let me leave? Is he going to attack me?

“Look, I’m sorry I inhaled your fire. I didn’t do it intentionally. I just took a breath and it jumped into me. I didn’t know I am a dragon--.”

“You think you are a dragon?” His voice is startled but warm, reminiscent of lazy days spent dozing in a patch of sunlight.
With the snarl gone, he is even more beautiful. His beauty gives substance to my lack of it. In fact, his beauty is an affront to my ugliness. I grimace and pull the scarf tighter around the lower half of my face.

“What of it?” I respond a bit haughtily. Dragons are infinitely more powerful than any other creature or kin. They don’t have to be beautiful. They don’t need to be afraid of being magicked or bound. And no one ever tries to eat dragons.

“Nothing, nothing. Now turn around so I can put on some clothes.” He makes a shooing gesture with his hand that I find very irritating. If he has so much modesty, why is he walking around naked? I turn around anyway, and the flames warm my back comfortably.

“You may look now.” He has dressed in a pair of black pants and a green shirt that seems to be made from some coarse material. The ensemble is strange when contrasted with the stripes on his skin. What kind of kin are striped? There is something very familiar about those stripes. I have seen them before. A sudden thought spears me and I gape at the creature in front of me.

HE is the Meow! What the Hag called a Catkin. A type of Fae who alternate between Fae form (which is identical to humans except for pointed ears) and Meow form. What else did she say about them? I squeeze my eyes shut and try to remember but it’s useless. When I open my eyes, the overgrown Meow has his head cocked to the side and is observing me with not a small amount of amusement.

Why do I amuse him? Is it the way I look? I sneak another look at him and see his lips twitch.
Meows play with their prey before they eat them. I have helped many mice escape their predators in the human city. But he should not think I’m helpless. Dragons are not helpless.

“What makes you think you are a dragon?” he repeats in a perfectly nice tone that makes me dislike him even more.

“I breathed fire, didn’t I?” I try to be as polite as I can because he could still try to use those sharp claws on me.

“But the dragons have already left Tir na nÓg,” he responds. As if I’m going to believe him.

“This dragon hasn’t,” I say snootily.

“Besides, dragonlings are hatched from eggs,” he continues even though I am not listening.

I came from an egg?

“And they don’t change forms,” he finishes.

“Why are you so determined to destroy my dragon-ness?” I jump to my feet and glare down at the Meow. He is leaning against what I realize is a pack much like mine, except larger and the colour of the ground it is resting on.

“How can I destroy your dragon-ness when you didn’t have any to begin with?” He grins, looking unrepentant.

I look around for something to hit him with.

“I’m sorry. I’m just teasing you. What are you doing by yourself in the woods at this time? Didn’t your parents tell you about the dangers that lurk here?” The amusement trickles out from the Meow’s eyes and leaves him looking stern and disapproving.
“They didn’t. I don’t know where my parents are.” I stop and meet the Meow’s eyes and shrug. “They threw me away when I was born.”

His eyes widen and fill with what looks suspiciously like pity. I don’t want his pity.

“If it’s so dangerous, what are you doing here?” He doesn’t seem much older than me. “Don’t your parents care?”

His face goes blank and smooths over.

“I’m older than I look,” is all he says. I wonder how old he is. He looks about twenty winters old but the Fae stop aging after they are twenty winters so he could be a hundred. Maybe even two hundred.

“Can you tell me the way to Talamh Caisleán?” I am resigned to spending the night someplace else. I don’t think I could sleep in the same place as a Meow-Man. I will be sad to say goodbye to the fire though.

The change in his demeanour is immediate. His eyes narrow to slits and his lips compress into a straight line. Anger radiates from him and if he was still in his Meow form, his hair would have been standing on end. I back away a few steps before exhaustion stops me and exasperation loosens my tongue.

“Why does everyone get so angry when I mention Talamh Caisleán?” I ask and his eyebrows snap together as though he cannot believe I do not know.

He looks at me for a long second and then relaxes, his magick finally losing its red edge and deepening into a cool green colour. Watching magick change colour is fascinating.

“What?” the Meow says and I realize I have been staring at him.

I shake my head and thankfully, the Meow-Man does not question farther. With an expression that is almost friendly, he says, “Sit down, let’s have a bite to eat and we’ll talk.”
I am sitting before he has finished talking. I don’t know where my next meal is coming from so I may as well think with my stomach. When I look at him again, a laugh peeks out from his eyes, but his expression remains cautious. I watch as he rummages in his pack. He pulls out a pot, several small packages and a flask. He pours the water that’s in the flask into the pot that he sets atop the flames. The flames spark their displeasure. As the water heats, he adds many unfamiliar ingredients to what seems like a stew and soon a delicious smell wafts over to my side. My stomach growls its impatience and the Meow grins. He stirs the concoction before closing the pot with a lid.

“We’ll let it cook for a while,” he says and throws something at me. I catch it and find a bright red apple gleaming in my hand. I look at it suspiciously.

“It’s fine. Eat it.” I don’t know why I trust him, but I do and soon I am crunching away.

“Why are you being so kind to me?” I ask between bites and pause when I remember the princeling directing the same question to me. Is this prickly gratitude what he felt? No wonder he was so crotchety.

“You sound as though I am the first ever to show you kindness,” the Meow says, checking on the cooking stew.

“You are,” I answer, licking my fingers. “That’s why I don’t trust you.”

He grins at that and shrugs, the mirth fading from his face. “Kindness doesn’t take much. Besides, you remind me of my own siblings.”

“Do you have many?”

“Oh yes, I have fifteen. Eight sisters and seven brothers.”
My mouth drops open. That is a lot of Meows. He notices my shock and laughs. “We Catkin always have large families.”

“I didn’t know.” I wonder if I have many family members. Not that it matters. None of them care about me. If they did, I wouldn’t be here.

“Where are you from, kitten?” He casts an eye over me, his gaze lingering on the scarf I have on and I tense. If he tries to pull it off, I will bite him. “And, this may be a rude question, but what are you. I cannot tell.”

He is not the only one.

“I thought I was a dragon,” I say sadly.

“You were not jesting about that?” the Meow asks.

I give him my fiercest look.

It fails to impress him. Maybe I need to practice it some more.

“And you don’t know what your parents are? Who brought you up?” His concern is like a balm and I soak it in.

“I…” I hesitate and decide to take the plunge. “I grew up on the other side, in the human world.”

He doesn’t reply, and I risk a look in his direction. A frown has marched itself to the center of his forehead and set up home there. It looks wrong on him somehow.

“You came through the veil?” He sounds disbelieving but unable to hide his curiosity.

I nod.

“I didn’t think there were any veils left open. Where did you find it?” He sounds genuinely curious.
“In the Wilde Forest. It’s gone now.” I push down the panic I feel at the thought.

“What is it like over there? Are humans really monsters?” I think of the princeling with his wounded dignity and bruised ego. We are all monsters in some ways. I shrug.

“Who brought you up?” he asks.

“I don’t want to say,” I reply and close my mouth.

“You can keep your secrets,” he pauses and his voice drops an octave, “for now. But whoever brought you up didn’t tell you who are? What kind of kin?” I shake my head and he looks thoughtful.

“I don’t know if this helps you but your eyes reveal you to be a child of the Talamh and the Tine,” he says and I come to attention, anxious to hear more. This is more information than anyone has ever revealed to me. The fire tickles my nose as I lean closer to the Meow.

“How can you tell?” Why hasn’t anyone thought to tell me this? Why didn’t Uaine?

“The rings around your eyes. You must have noticed them.” He waits for my nod.

“Usually, children whose parents come from two different kingdoms have one dominant element and this shows in their eyes. Green and brown rings for Talamh, red and orange for Tine, blue for Uisce and silver for Aer. The rings around our eyes reveal where we belong and what magick we can use. Your eyes have both green and orange rings. They are very distinct,” he stops and adds a smile to the mix, “and very curious. Can you use both Tine and Talamh magick?”

Magick? The idea that I might be able to do magick has not even occurred to me until now. I shake my head at the Meow. “I can’t do any magick.” Unless calling someone else’s magick to me is considered making my own magick and I’m not sure it is. I lower my eyes to
the fire and it burns brighter, as though pleased by the attention. I suppose my affinity with fire is explained then but not why the Hag kept me from it. Does fire help the Glamour break?

“Is that true?” The Meow gives me a considering look and I shrug again. “Now,” a hard note in his voice gets my attention, “why are you going to Talamh Caisleán?”

“I have something to do there. I cannot speak about it. I gave my word and I can’t break it. Even if you try to eat me, I can’t say,” I say in a rush and wait. He doesn’t respond so I ask him a question. “Where are you going?”

“To find my brothers,” he says flatly.

“Where have they gone?”

“Gone? They are just kittens. They wouldn’t leave home by themselves.” He laughs. It is an ugly sound. “They have been taken by the Robber Queen’s soldiers.”

“The Robber Queen?” I echo questioningly.

“How can you not have heard of her?” The Meow sounds shocked.

“Is she important?”

“She seems to think herself so.”

“What is she the queen of? Who did she rob? Why did she take your brothers?”

The Meow looks around at the trees and the encroaching shadows. There are no birds singing here. Not even an insect chirps to interrupt the stillness.

“The woods are no place to talk about the Robber Queen, kitten. But if you’re going to Talamh Caisleán, there are some things you need to know and I shall tell you. Let us eat first. Otherwise, we’ll lose our appetites and that would be a shame.”
The Meow pulls out two spoons from somewhere in his pack and we eat in silence. For the first time in my life, I am too impatient to fully savour what I am eating. It tastes good though, fragrant and spicy, and I gulp it down eagerly. We are both done soon and long draughts of water wash down the food, giving me a pleasantly full tummy. While the Meow washes his pot and spoons with water from his flask, I feed the fire and it sparks.

Finally, the Meow finishes puttering around and returns to his seat in front of the fire. I am waiting, all ears and drooping eyes.

“Tell me your name,” the Meow says.

“You first,” I reply promptly.

“I am Caolan,” the Meow says.

“I am…” Who do I feel like today?

“You are?”

“Saoirse.” Not a lie but not the truth either.

“Saoirse,” the Meow called Caolan says, rolling the name around his mouth and tasting its flavours. It cannot have many and I think he knows because he gives me another considering look. “The Robber Queen holds the Talamh Caisleán as though that will make it hers. As though her blood will not reveal her deception. As though—”

“Is she dangerous? Who did she rob?”

Caolan opens his mouth to speak, perhaps, to answer my questions, but a keening wind rustles the leaves of the trees as though warning us to silence. A jolt of fire bites me on the inside and I swallow my words. This Robber Queen complicates things. I knew Uaine’s errand would not be as simple as it sounded.
“I’m going to douse the fire before we sleep. Do you have a blanket you can use?” Caolan asks.

He’s going to kill the fire? I look down at the flames and open my mouth to protest.

“We cannot risk being noticed in the woods. The Queen’s soldiers patrol these parts regularly.”

“Why weren’t you worried about that before now?” I ask, looking around at the shadows that suddenly seem to have a more solid, a more menacing, darkness.

“I wanted hot food so I took the risk,” Caolan says, with a quirk of his lips.

What can I say to that? I would make the same decision. But the Robber Queen is not someone I want to meet. Ever. I reach out a finger into the fire and curl it around a flame. Then, as though it were a fruit, I pluck it from the fire and bring it to my mouth, breathing it in. It travels down my throat and crosses through to my veins. I feel the heat it leaves in its wake. When I look at Caolan, he is giving me a bemused look.

“Maybe you are a dragon after all,” he says.

I retreat to one side of the clearing when the fire is gone. Caolan tries to give me his blanket but I tell him that the flame I breathed in will keep me warm and it does. I hug my pack close to me but Uaine’s HeartSeed no longer gives off heat. This is worrying but it has only been two days.

I had thought the unfamiliarity of the forest would keep me awake. If not the forest then the Catkin sleeping on the other side of the clearing, or the breaking song of the magick would steal my slumber. As it is, I am asleep as soon as my eyes close.

I don’t know how long I sleep. It could have been minutes or hours. Consciousness finds me in a rush when I am screamed awake by a frantic voice in my ear.
Chapter Fifteen

My eyes open to an abrasive darkness. Do traces of dreams cling to my eyelashes? Is the darkness a dream? I haven’t experienced true darkness since my eyes changed. I don’t think I ever will anymore.

I look around for the voice that woke me. Not Caolan, he’s still sleeping on his side of the clearing. He said he would douse the fire, but embers still smoulder in the fire pit. It is the spherical globes of ghostly blue, though, that give the most light. I sit up when I remember that will o’wisps augur danger, doom and, sometimes, death. Then I notice what they are illuminating.

The tree branches that blot out the sky are laden with night crows. With their sooty feathers and red eyes, night crows are a prelude to nightmares. They sit with an unnatural stillness, looking down at us. The Hag taught me that night crows are the portents of death. Are the will o’wisps present because of the night crows, or are the night crows present because of the will o’wisps? A shiver dances up my spine. Something is either already wrong or about to get wrong. I stand up and walk across the clearing to where Caolan is curled up under his blanket.

“Wake up,” I whisper. He doesn’t move so I shake him. It doesn’t seem to have any effect.

“It’s no use,” the voice that woke me speaks again, and I spin around to see who it is. It takes some squinting as she’s barely a shimmer hovering in the air before me. The only reason I even see her is because her magick, a fresh green like the grass, gives her away. She is small, even by pixie standards. She is wearing some kind of veiling cloak over the green uniform common to pixies. Her hair is a rich red muted by the night. I cannot see much of her face but her eyes are wide, frantic and frightened.
“Who are you?” I ask.

“There is no time for introductions.” She speaks fast, her words tumbling out and running into each other. “They are near. Can’t you feel them? You need to run.”

“Who is?” I poke Caolan. “Why won’t he wake up?”

“Because of the night crows. They put the kin to sleep so the Redcap soldiers can catch them easily.” She looks over her shoulder as she speaks, and I follow her glance. The will o’ wisp have increased in number. “Just leave him and run!”

I look down at the sleeping Meow and shake my head. I will not leave him. Whoever these Redcaps are, they are going to do as much harm to him as they would to me.

“You cannot wake him,” the pixie hisses to me.

“What if the night crows leave?”

“They won’t. Not until the Redcaps get here and once they do, it’ll be too late. For you and for him.” She sounds so certain, this pixie. As though she knows intimately the horrors that await us.

I sit down beside Caolan and put my hand on his arm, intending to shake him once more. His skin is smooth and warm, and his magick runs in a steady current under my fingertips. When I press my hands into his skin, his magick brightens and splashes out of his skin and onto mine. He comes awake gasping and shoves away from me.

“What did you do to me?” he rasps, breathing hard.

“Woke you up,” I reply, a bit nonplussed. “This pixie says we need to leave.”

“What pixie?” He looks around.

I get up and point to the spot where the pixie is hovering in the air between us. “She’s wearing a veiling cloak.”
“Do you trust her?” Caolan is still shaking but seems to be regaining his composure. He gets to his feet, towering over me.

“No. But the night crows…” I trail off and Caolan looks up at the trees. He goes pale.

“They prove nothing,” he says even though that is not true.

“Don’t be stupid.” The pixie takes off the hood of her cloak and her head appears. She, too, is beautiful.

“Who are you?” he asks her, his eyes bright and a smile curling up one side of his mouth. This is really not the time to be charmed.

“My name,” she grits out, “is Tinder. I am Titania’s daughter and I have been looking for you for hours.” She addresses the last bit to me.

“Why would the pixie queen’s daughter be looking for me?” And what kind of name is Tinder?

“This is not the time to have that conversation,” Tinder says casting an anxious look at the night crows. I agree. “We need to go before they get here.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I have some answers,” Caolan says and I sag. I will not go without him though I really would not mind getting the answers later when we are safe.

“The patrolling soldiers picked up traces of five Redcaps in the area. They are transporting male kin kidnapped from all over Talamh to work the jewel mines in the south. I had seen you being escorted out of the meadow, and I didn’t want you to get caught.”

“Why?” Tinder’s mother would have no compunction letting me be caught. “What does it matter to you?”
“Every life matters,” Tinder says fiercely. “Besides, we have a truce with the brownies. We gave our word that we’d help any in need and the way I see it, you are in need.”

I look at Caolan and he meets my eyes but instead of reflecting the urgency in Tinder’s voice, he seems to relish the approaching danger. A hint of wildness curls his lips.

“I’m going to stay and fight,” he says, voice strong, determined and possibly mad.

“Fight?” Tinder doesn’t seem too confident about his battling prowess. “You won’t fight, Cat, you will either be eaten or taken. No one fights the Redcaps.”

Eaten. She said eaten. Like dinner.

“I think we should go,” I say brightly. This shouldn’t even be an argument.

“You underestimate my strength, pixie!” Caolan bites out.

“Strength?” she scoffs and Caolan bristles. “You cannot win against them! You need to run.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” I say. Not that anyone is paying attention to me.

“They took my brothers!” A growl works itself into Caolan’s voice.

Tinder’s expression slips for a second and compassion sparks in her eyes. But the moment passes quickly. “That is none of my concern.”

“Of course it isn’t.” Caolan sneers. “You have never lost anyone to the Redcaps, have you?”

Tinder’s magick blazes red. “They ate my father. Crunched his bones as though he were a particularly delectable morsel.”

Caolan and I both freeze, stunned by the pixie’s words, unable to comprehend, unwilling to imagine.
“So don’t tell me,” she breaks off in a ragged sob, “that I don’t know what I’m saying.”

What am I supposed to say to her confession? How do I respond to that? With anger? Fear? Both?

As it happens, I do not get the chance to say or do anything. The night crows descend on us without warning. A cloud of nightmares. I bring up my hands to shield my face but at the last moment before impact they cast off their physical forms and become smoke, forcing their way into our mouths, noses and lungs. The trees are singing laments even before my head hits the ground.

The sulphurous stench of fear wakes me up. It covers my skin and buoys my insides as though my body has been learning to be afraid while my mind was busy sleeping. I lie still, with my eyes closed for the moment, trying to orient myself. The last thing I remember is the night crows turning to black smoke and violating us, drowning us, forcing us to unconsciousness. Well, I became unconscious. I don’t know about Tinder and Caolan.

I’m in some sort of conveyance that is moving briskly over a rocky road. I finally open my eyes and immediately wish I hadn’t because the first thing I see are the bars of a cage. Bars I am on the wrong side of. Weak light barely illuminates the forest we are passing through. The light makes me think dawn is not too far behind us. We must have been traveling for a while now. Nothing hurts too much so no one has taken a bite of me. Yet. The scarf I tied around my face is gone. I turn my head and almost swallow my tongue. There is Caolan, slumped right beside me in the corner of the cage. Is he dead? I stare at him but he’s breathing. Good. And in front of me, just two breaths away, is another striped kin. In fact, the
entire cage is full of male striped kin. About fifteen or so, not including us. I wonder if they are all Meows. They are all unconscious and in their Fae form. There is no sign of Tinder. I hope she’s safe wherever she is.

My palms are sweating and I am breathing in short gasps like I’ve just finished a race. Why am I so afraid? I sit up gingerly, trying to move past the panic and peer through the wall of Meows to see what’s pulling our wheeled cage, but the Meows are too densely piled and I cannot see through them. I notice that all the Meows, including Caolan, have black patches on their arms. A liquid slime coats small areas of their skin. I touch the one on the arm of the Meow directly in front of me and jump when it coalesces into a night crow. It shouldn’t be possible for them to be here during the day. They are creatures of the night, the Hag told me, animated by the darkness.

The night crow fixes a beady red eye on me. Malevolence fairly drips off it and I flinch. Its magic is a shimmery black and has a discordant melody that grates on my nerves. I accept the challenge in the night crow’s red gaze. I call to its magick with a thought, and the magick roils. The creature falters, losing its bird form and dissolving back into smoke. It collapses back onto the skin of the sleeping kin. I stare at the patch in puzzlement when a noise behind makes me turn and I feel my breath catch.

Behind our cage is another cage and behind it yet another. I am in a train of cages, all full of prisoners. Fear pushes its way to the surface, and I look around for my pack. It is nowhere to be seen. It has been taken. I have lost it. I have lost Uaine’s HeartSeed! She is going to die and if she does, so will I for how I can live after causing her death?

Panic envelops me. I grip the cage bars with my hands and pull. Why aren’t I strong enough to break through? I have been in trouble before but nothing like this. Nothing I
couldn’t get out of. My eyes are leaking already, and my heart seems intent on pounding its way out of my chest. What do I do now?

I take a breath and then another. It doesn’t help. Nothing helps. I put my arms around myself and lean against the bars of the cage and watch the forest we are traveling through. The forest doesn’t seem quite real. The trees appear as though they were etched into existence by blunt crayons. The moss hanging off the branches are undefined and the forest floor is made of darkness… Just like me. All my fears have found themselves voices; there’s a cacophony in my head. I failed Uaine. She was wrong to trust me. No one should trust me. I don’t even trust myself. I am not whole. I am ugly. Broken. Coming apart. That’s why the Hag threw me away. Why my mother didn’t want me. I should just stop existing.

What?

The little flame inside my veins flares and heats me, clearing my head a bit.

Wait a minute.

I will not stop existing.

What’s wrong with me? My throat is thick with unshed tears, and my shoulders are bent by a sorrow that insists it is mine. I feel alone and unwanted. Why am I so sad? I lost the HeartSeed yes, but I just need to get it back from whoever took it. Why am I thinking of death with such longing? Tears wet my face, and I indulge in the feeling of hopelessness that sweeps through me.

My arm itches and when I scratch it, my fingers come away with black slime on them. I have the same patch of black slime that the others do. Irritated, I rub at it with the edges of my dress. It smears instead of wiping off. This is vexing. I scrub harder and my skin reddens from the roughness I show it. I am so worthless.
No, I am not!

I narrow my eyes at the black patch. All right then. I rub my arm against the strange white bars of the cage hard enough that it scrapes and blood beads ruby on my skin. There is a hissing sound, like steam being released, when my blood comes into contact with the black patch and the patch dissolves. Now I’m left with a throbbing arm but at least I no longer want to be death’s bride. I am no longer desperately sad. In fact, I feel somewhat hopeful. Was it the night crow that made me sad?

I look outside. An hour or so has passed since I woke up, but the light hasn’t brightened. We seem to be stuck in perpetual gloom. Has time abandoned us or do we exist outside of it? Where are we going? The road we are traveling on looks endless and the scenery outside is unchanging—just trees with moss hanging off the branches. A taste in the air, like burnt magick, scares me for reasons I don’t know.

Caolan is a warm weight beside me and I get some comfort from his presence. It is better than being alone. I should wake him and I will, but first I need to think. How will I get the HeartSeed back when I don’t even know where it went?

The conveyance travels at a steady speed, and it takes a while for me to accustom myself to its motion. Just when I do, the cage goes over a rut in the road and I am almost buried under an avalanche of kin. I push my way out and wrinkle my nose. They smell as ripe as I do. They all look young. How long have they been unconscious? I shove the two directly in front of me back with my feet. They are all dressed in clothes made of the same material as Caolan’s. I wonder if they are his brothers. He can have a reunion right before we all get eaten.
I haven’t seen any sign of our captors. Maybe they are phantoms with red caps on their heads and an appetite for kin flesh. Are they uglier than I am? Is that even possible? Maybe I’m turning into a Redcap. They wouldn’t eat one of their own, would they?

I pinch Caolan hard on his arm but he gives no indication of feeling the sensation. His lack of response is eerie and tempts me to pinch him more, but I resist. Barely. It is his fault that we are here. If he had listened to Tinder, we could have run away.

I could have left him to his fate and run with Tinder. I am not noble or self-sacrificing, but he gave me food when he didn’t have to. He was kind to me when he didn’t have to be. I thought trying to save him was the least I could do.

Now that I look around though, I wish I had run as fast and as far as I could.

Why do these things always happen to me? I thought once the compulsion spell was broken, I would have control of my feet and the direction they went in and yet, here I am. Not bound but, once again, a prisoner to someone else’s whims, to someone else’s desires.

I turn back to Caolan. How did I wake him before? His magick is dull and unmoving underneath his skin. I put my hand on his arm again and press it into his skin. Nothing happens. Then I notice the patch of black on his shoulder. The infernal night crows. Just looking at the black makes my skin crawl and a fury fills me at the way it violated us, is still violating the Meows.

I turn to Caolan’s black patch with new determination and a lot of sinister feelings coursing through me. I feel dangerous. As though it senses my regard, the black patch slithers on Caolan’s skin, trying to creep under his sleeves. Ha! As if that will stop me from destroying it. I grab Caolan’s arm and rub it hard against the bars of the cage. The black patch doesn’t come off; if anything, it just spreads its sliminess even farther across Caolan’s
That’s probably not good. I rub his arm hard enough that he starts bleeding but again, there is no change in the patch. I pinch Caolan’s arm, or more specifically, the skin on his arm on which the patch has spread itself, and think hard.

When my blood and the black patch came together, the patch lost. Caolan’s blood has no effect on it so maybe it is my blood. Maybe it is the alchemy in my (perhaps dragon) blood that destroys them? There is only one way to find out.

I look at the sleeping Meow and purse my lips. I don’t know why I should bleed for him. He should be bleeding for me. But I don’t know if I can get out of here without his help.

I look around the overcrowded cage, at the slack faces of the sleeping kin, all with their own black patches sinking roots into their skin. I hadn’t noticed it before but apart from the smell of ripe unwashed bodies and the accompanying stench of fear, there is a darker, danker whiff of despair.

I look down at Caolan’s hand. His fingers are callused but his nails are cleaner than mine. It’s a strong hand, a capable hand. Yes, this hand will help me escape. I put Caolan’s arm on my lap and take a breath. My arm is just beginning to scab and this will hurt but I will kick Caolan twice and maybe that will make us even. I rip off the scab and as my blood begins to bead again, I push my arm into the darkness on Caolan’s arm and there is the hissing sound. Ha! However, instead of immediately dissipating into cloud, the night crow reclaims its bird form and squawks loudly. It struggles to retain its birdiness, but loses the battle and thins out into smoke that fades with the wind. Fight me, will you? I smile smugly and wave the air around me to clear it of the stink the smoke left behind.

Beaming, I turn to Caolan. He is still sleeping so I pinch him. Surely, he should wake up now.
As I am congratulating myself on a battle won, the temperature plummets, and my fear returns, becoming a living thing, beating frantically in my throat. I am still holding on to Caolan’s hand and dimly realize that it is clutching mine in a strong grip. Caolan turns so his body is shielding mine, and I hide my face in his chest, somehow knowing that the next few moments will test our courage. We don’t wait long.

First, there is the sound of something like cloth being dragged on the ground, a soft sibilance that freezes the flame in my blood. Then, there is the smell of decay. The smell of death is more rancid than the smell of fear—because fear has small notes of hope. Death doesn’t. Death smells like the end. The sound stops beside the cage that, I realize with some shock, has stopped moving. I sense eyes traveling over the prone bodies of the kin and stopping when they reach me. I feel a gaze prickling my exposed limbs. I know I should keep my eyes closed and pretend to be as unconscious as the rest of them. I know it, but my eyes open anyway. I lift my head, peek over Caolan’s shoulder, and freeze.
Chapter Sixteen

Nightmares would lose their potency in front of this creature.

He stands tall with limbs clothed in a dark material that seems to absorb all the light around it. His skin is as pale as moonlight. His fingers are tipped crimson. White blonde hair falls down his shoulders. The top of his head is a glistening red, like freshly drawn blood. His face is cold carved marble with cracks fanning out on both sides of his mouth and eyes. Cracked like the parched earth during a drought, revealing the flesh underneath.

I cannot see his eyes as they are hooded. The picture is incomplete. A small mercy.

The stench is overpowering, and I swallow twice to repress the gorge climbing up my throat. If this is the creature that has Uaine’s HeartSeed, maybe I should give it up for lost. Surely the consequences of a broken word will be less dire than being eaten by a creature such as this. I shudder and Caolan’s arms tighten around me.

Why didn’t the Hag teach me about these creatures? Are they someone’s secrets spilled out to an unsuspecting world?

I shift in Caolan’s tight embrace and wonder if I should risk another peek over his shoulder. How long are we going to sit here pretending to be unconscious? I needn’t have worried though. With a curious clicking sound, the Redcap leaves, taking with him the arctic temperature and the smell of death. I push against Caolan’s arms, and he loosens his grip.

I feel cold when he takes his arms away—cold and uncomfortable. This was the first time someone put their arms around me, the first time I touched someone so intimately. It felt prickly; I am not certain I liked the intimacy. Especially with a Meow. But I didn’t hate it either. The feeling is odd.

I move back but there’s only so far I can go. We are a tad crowded in this cage. I busy myself for a few seconds by pushing away the sleeping kin. The cage starts moving again
and causes several of them to slide in different directions. When I look back, Caolan hastily averts his gaze. Ah. A curse on whoever took my scarf. I feel naked without it.

“We should have run,” I say, bolstering myself with false courage. My insides are still quavering from the Redcap. There’s nothing wrong with the way I look. Nothing at all. Not everyone in the world, any world, can be beautiful.

“My brothers!” Caolan ignores me for the kin drooling behind me. He shakes one and when he gets no response, he turns to me with imploring eyes.

“Can you wake him?”

“Maybe.”

“How did you wake me?”

As if I’m going to confess to bleeding all over him. I notice how he keeps his gaze focused firmly on my eyes while talking.

“Look, if I start waking up the Meows, that thing, the Redcap, will come back. It came when I woke you up. Do you want it to come back?” Actually the Redcap could have come because of the noisy night crow, but he doesn’t need to know that. I’ve discovered that there is more than one way to lie.

Caolan stares at me for a long second. Then he shoves me aside and clambers over a sleeping kin to a small form snuggled up against another.

“This is Aindriu.” He speaks softly, patting the little Meow’s hair. He has the same colouring and stripes as Caolan though his skin is darker, and his stripes are a burnt cinnamon in color.

“Were all your brothers taken?” I ask. I look around the cage and wonder who else Caolan is related to.
“Four of them. They were out playing on the hills. I had told them not to. I had told them countless times to stay close to home. But they went anyway. They don’t like it when I tell them what to do,” he says rubbing a hand over his face. “I wasn’t around. I went fishing, you see? My father’s dead so it is my duty to feed my family. To keep them safe.”

“Are they all here, then? Your brothers?” I don’t ask who is feeding his family now that he’s here, who is keeping them safe.

Caolan searches through the cage while I cling to a corner as though my life depends on it. It probably does because Caolan is none too gentle with the kin he’s not related to. I watch as he finds an older Meow he calls Diarmaid and another he names Orrin.

“I can’t find Bearach.” He turns to me, desperation adding frenzy to his movements. The cage lurches and I stiffen, waiting for the Redcap to return. It doesn’t so I allow myself a scowl.

“Maybe he’s in one of the other cages,” I suggest and Caolan looks uncertain. He tries to look into the cage behind us as though he can see through the mass of kin and find his brother.

“Maybe, but what if he’s not? Why would they put only him in a separate cage? What if they did something to him? What if they ate him? He’s the youngest. My mother would never forgive me.” He comes and kneels in front of me, catching hold of my hands in his much larger ones. I have decided that I don’t like being touched.

“You’re too close,” I say but it has no effect.

“Please, I beg you, wake one of my brothers. Let me ask him what happened to Bearach.” How do I refuse his pleading eyes? I can’t. Unlike the Hag, I have a heart.

“Could you answer some questions before I do?”
“Ask them. I’ll answer as well as I can,” Caolan says and lets go of my hand.

“Who are these Redcaps? Who controls them?” So I know to avoid them.

“No one controls them. They choose whom to serve. Right now, they are the Robber Queen’s soldiers.” He looks grim. “She must have offered them something they can’t resist.”

The Robber Queen who lives in Talamh Caisleán. The Caisleán I’ve given my word to go to. Then again, my future is looking very bleak so maybe I won’t make it there.

“Where are they taking us? Why did they take us prisoner? We weren’t doing anything wrong, were we? Unless sleeping in the forest is against the law.”

“I am not certain but there have been rumours…” Caolan trails off and his jaw clenches. “We heard that the magick is failing. The Bluecaps in the south can no longer use their magick and therefore the mines no longer yield the precious gems the Robber Queen is so fond of. So the strong and able lesser Fae are being taken to work in the mines.”

“Lesser Fae?” I haven’t heard that term before.

“Fae like me. Fae who spend time in animal forms.” He snarls soundlessly. “Are we done? Can you wake Diarmaid? He’s the oldest among them so he’ll know what happened to Bear.”

“Wait, why is the magick failing? Shouldn’t we be more worried about that?” If the magick fails and the song stops, everything dies.

“We fight the battles we can, kitten. I’ve kept my end of the bargain. Please, before I slip farther into mad worry, wake my brother.”

“Where’s the one you want me to wake?” I step on a foot and someone’s hairy hand to get to the Meow Caolan is pointing at. This one looks about fifteen winters old, and has black hair peppered with white. His skin is dappled with cream and black stripes in a manner
identical to Caolan’s. His sleeping face is tearstained and hollowed. A feeling whispers tragedy to me and I avoid Caolan’s eyes just in case he reads mine.

“Go look out for the Redcaps,” I command his chin. I wait until he has moved to the side of the cage before I kneel beside the Meow. I locate the black patch on his inner wrist. It seems to have sunk deep into his skin, leeching the colour from the surrounding area, leaving it pale and magickless. Hmm. I lift the hand of a neighbouring kin and the magickless area around the patch on his skin is larger. I check the skin around other patches on other kin and they all tell me the same thing: The night crows are consuming the magick in kin bodies. Is that why everyone is sleeping? Because they do not have the energy to do anything else? If so, I wonder why I didn’t stay asleep. Not that I’m unhappy about being awake.

“Is he awake yet?” Caolan asks from his spot in the corner. I say nothing but give him the most eloquent look I can manage. I return to the brother Meow and look down at his sleeping face. I bring up my arm, sigh loudly and rip the scab yet again. There is no blood so I grit my teeth and gouge the wound. That hurt. That hurt a lot. I will make Caolan serve me forever for the pain I’m suffering. Two drops of blood does nothing so I squeeze out another two, cursing the human curses I learned from the princeling. Four drops seem to suffice and I watch as the night crow tries to regain its bird form before it fails and dissipates into noxious clouds. I wave my hand to clear the air, lean back on my haunches, and wait.

I don’t have to wait long. The Meow’s eyes flutter open and the first thing he sees is me. His mouth opens in terror and his lips peel back in a scream but Caolan is faster. He muzzles his sibling before he can scream.

“Diarmaid, calm down. She’s a friend.” I am? The younger Meow sees his brother and sags, the fight going out of him. He hides his face in Caolan’s chest and sobs, great
gasping sobs as though his sadness is a rapid river and he, too small a vessel to ride it. Caolan holds the young Meow tight, patting his back and making crooning sounds. I get a peculiar feeling in my stomach seeing that.

Diarmuid’s sobs subside after a while but he doesn’t move away from his brother. If anything, he clings to him even tighter. Diarmid keeps sneaking looks at me—I can read the disgust in the wrinkle of his nose and the fear in the flare of his nostrils. I give him my most insolent stare and he bows his head.

“Diarmuid, I see Aindriu and Orrin but there is no sign of Bearach. Where is he?” Caolan asks, his voice hoarse with urgency.

The younger Meow stiffens, his face going oddly still, as though he has been reminded of something he was trying to forget. He opens his mouth and closes it without uttering a word. And then he just folds over like his insides have suddenly been liquefied. He writhes on the floor of the cage, captive to some anguish we are not yet privy to.

“Mida, calm down! Breathe!” The last is a plea. Caolan grabs his brother by the shoulders and simply embraces him until the terror passes, until he shops shaking, until he can breathe again.

And for a while, that is all he does. Eventually, comprehension returns to the younger Meow’s eyes but he holds himself up with a fragility that is at odds with his youth.

“Where’s Bearach, Mida?” Caolan asks again.

“They ate—” the Meow breaks off in a choked sob, “Bearach. They woke us up when they took him. We couldn’t do anything. I swear we couldn’t! We tried but they froze our limbs so we could not move even a finger.”
“What are you saying, Mida?” Caolan shakes his head and moves away from his brother. “Surely you are jesting.”

“I wish I was. I would do anything to make this a nightmare I could wake up from. But it’s not. The Redcaps,” the younger Meow swallows and fresh tears wet his cheeks, “ate our little brother.”
Chapter Seventeen

What do I say? What can I do? The same helplessness clutches me now that clutched me when Tinder revealed her loss. I glance at Caolan but he is sitting with his back to me. He has gone granite, his rigid shoulders spelling out his disbelief. The younger Meow has pulled his knees to his chest and is rocking back and forth.

“Caolan.” I lean forward and touch his shoulder. It is not to offer comfort, not exactly. I don’t know how to offer comfort. I simply need to do something, anything. He recoils from me and loses his balance. He hits the cage bars hard, and the conveyance lurches once again. His eyes are wild, spilling their grief down his cheeks. He looks destroyed. A sudden violence; a silent ruination.

I leave Caolan to his pain and his brother to his and retreat to a different corner of the cage. I cannot understand what it must be like to lose someone that cruelly. Or to even have someone you can lose. My heart cannot fathom the horror though my mind understands the depth of the loss; my emotions remain cool, my fire remains banked. Maybe I lost my feelings when I lost the HeartSeed.

Time passes. An hour. Maybe two. I am surrounded by kin but I have never felt as alone as I do now in this full cage, on a dark road, with grief-soaked Fae, and my broken self.

The road continues in front of us and the forest remains unchanging on either side of us. This monotony combined with the unrelieved grief may yet drive me to despair.

“Have they eaten anyone else since?” I finally ask the younger Meow and he raises a tear-wrecked face to me, baleful glare in place.

“Isn’t it enough that they took our brother?” he chokes out.

“For you, it’s not enough, it is too much. For them, it may be too little.” I glance at Caolan, wondering if he’ll ever be unbroken again. “They will need to eat again.”
Diarmaid looks uncertain and afraid. He swallows three times before answering. “I don’t know how long I’ve been asleep. They only woke us up when they took Bear.”

I stare at him, willing him to say more. Surprisingly, he does.

“Then they left us awake for three days. So they could watch us grieve. We were in shock for the first few hours. We couldn’t understand it. The injury was too great. Then Aindriu started screaming. He screamed till he went hoarse. Orrin just went silent. Me? I cried. I’m useless. I was the one who made them come, you know. I called Bear away from Mother. He didn’t want to come but I told him he needed to play with the big ones now. He was only ten. I killed him. I killed him! You see? I should be the one dead. Not Bear. Me.”

His words crash into each other, slurring in their rush to get out, to be heard. As though confessing will vindicate him. He wants so badly to be told that everything will be all right. No one here will tell him that lie.

I look at Caolan again. No help is coming from that quarter. What do I say to this Meow?

“We’ll avenge your little brother,” I say and stop cold because those are not my words. Yes, it was my mouth who said them but they are not mine. I feel the other Croi unfurl in my mind and thrill at the anticipation of blood.

Her eyes must be blazing on my face.

“Avenge? We’ll be lucky to get out of here alive,” Diarmaid responds flatly.

Good. I’m glad he said that because now I don’t have to. I feel the other Croi hum her displeasure. She longs for battle. I would much rather stay safe. I like breathing.

“We will get out of here alive. We will survive this. I won’t fail you a second time, brother.” Caolan’s voice is rough. I look at him and flinch. His sorrow has written us a letter
in the planes of his face, warning us not to ask about his pain. It seems a living thing, this
grief, filling the empty spaces around us, stealing the air we need to breathe.

“It wasn’t your fault!” the younger Meow bites out, looking as though he wishes it
was.

“Can we argue about whose fault it was later? Maybe when we are not in a cage on
our way to being dinner?” I say and both Meows turn to me with identically angry
expressions.

“Can’t you change form and squeeze through the bars?” I eye the younger one. He
should be able to do it.

“No, the bars are made of human bones. They prevent us from reaching our magick,”
Caolan replies.

I turn and look at the bars with wide eyes. They have been smoothed by time and the
elements but there’s not even an echo of magick. I had thought their lack of magick was
because they were old and not because they are human bones. Do humans not have any
magick in them? The princeling had no magick, at least none that I could see. I wonder if his
bones would look like this. I wonder how many humans died to furnish these cages with bars.
I wonder if someone mourned for them.

“What is this road? We have been traveling for hours but time does not seem to
move,” I ask Caolan. He looks outside and his lips set in a straight line.

“We are on a Shadow Road. It’s made by magick and lays out a path where none
exists. Bad magick, Redcap magick. We’re probably halfway to the mines by now.”

“How long has it been, do you think?” Fourteen days aren’t many and I’ve already
spent two of them at the very least.
“I cannot say.”

“We are slowing down!” Diarmaid hisses and all of us tense. The wheeled cages have arranged themselves in a semi-circle, and as the road falls away and gradually disappears, the magick pops. The landscape shifts and comes into focus, and I see that we are in a large clearing. It seems to be afternoon. The day is overcast; the sky has been conquered by sullen grey clouds. I can’t see all of them but there are more than nine cages in total and all of them are filled with sleeping kin. A carriage with ornate trappings, pulled by creatures that I would call horses were it not for their red eyes, stops in the middle of the clearing, and the door of the carriage opens.

Five Redcaps, their cloaks flowing behind them, descend. I bite down the fear that rushes up my throat at the sight of them. I peer from behind a bulky kin as they walk to the cage furthest from us and start to examine the kin sleeping inside.

“Quick, go back to the spot you were and lie down. Pretend to sleep!” Caolan hisses to his brother. I don’t need to be told.

Somehow, we manage to regain our original places without alerting the Redcaps. They have been drawing nearer steadily, bringing with them the stench and the cold. Leaden seconds pool into minutes punctuated by our breathing. Fear holds us still as the stench grows more pronounced. The breath rattles in my chest as it becomes more difficult to keep my eyes closed.

We hear a series of clicks and whistles, a sound like paper tearing and then a laugh. They do not seem to converse in Faerish; I don’t know if they can. The cage door opens and I stay as still as I can. I want to run as far as my feet can take me. I want to be away from these
creatures. The other Croi would like to kill them and she is entirely confident that she can. I, on the other hand, am just as sure that there is something very wrong with the Croi-inside.

There seem to be two Redcaps in the cage now and from the frequent clicks and laughs I hear, they are having a grand conversation. If they don’t go away soon, I am going to do something stupid. Like open my eyes.

I am in the midst of plotting my escape when I feel a touch on my arm. Then the ice follows, seeping through the fingertips of the Redcap into my skin and spreading to my limbs, freezing, numbing, and shackling them. I gasp and open my eyes to see a Redcap leaning over me. He meets my eyes and smiles. His teeth are chiselled to points and like his fingers, tipped with red. He picks me up and slings me over his shoulder easily. I try to make some noise; I will not go silently, but my voice has disappeared along with my mobility. I sense Caolan come alive and try to snatch me from the Redcap but he is no match for their strength. The companion Redcap shoves him and he falls, hitting his head on something I can’t see.

I can’t even look back to see if Caolan is all right. Besides, even if he is hurt, his fate cannot be worse than mine. For the Redcap is carrying me to the middle of the clearing where, in front of the fancy carriage, a fire is being built. I look at the companion Redcap and, like the one carrying me, he, too, meets my eyes. And this time, I can name the emotion darkening his irises: Hunger. They plan to eat me.
Chapter Eighteen

The moment bursts into being with a wicked clarity.

Here I am. About to be dinner. Numb, bound by ice this time. Powerless, yet again. There they are, night terrors realized into day, preparing to eat me. The sun is high in the sky, hidden behind the clouds; nary a breeze rustles the leaves of the trees. Will o’wisps flood the dark places in the forest surrounding us, waiting for another kin to do the death dance, for another story to end.

A chalky, mindless fear grips my limbs and breathes its fetid breath over my skin. Not that I feel it. I can’t feel my body at all and oddly, I want to laugh. Even now, my body is not my own.

The smell of the dead that clings to the Redcaps is even more rancid at such close proximity. A few night crows roost on the roof of the caravan. Theirs is a damning presence.

Is this it? Is this really the end? Do I never get to meet my mother? Find out what I really am? Who I really am? Will Uaine die along with me?

The Redcap puts me down a little ways from the fire, facing me toward the caravan and away from the cages. The ground is hard and I cannot move my limbs though I try. I try very hard but just like when I was under the compulsion spell, my hands and feet do not obey my mind. This is my body, sort of, but there is always someone else controlling it. The Redcaps, all five of them, stand in a circle and look down at me. They have a rapid conversation in their clicks and whistles. One of them sinks to his haunches in front of me and lifts my chin with a long, pale finger tipped with red.

When I raise my eyes to his face, I can see his eyes. They are red with black irises. His magick is black as well but it feels weak as though it has no vitality. The Redcap magick looks washed out like the night just before the morning sweeps away the darkness. The
Redcap touches my cheek, leaving behind a trail of ice and I shudder because I feel his desire for my flesh. No, not just my flesh. The Redcap licks the finger he touched my face with and his magick brightens slightly. He wants what is inside of me, something more potent than my flesh. I haven’t thought about this before but I must have magick in me too. All kin do.

The Redcaps are identical except for their sizes. Some are bigger and taller than the others. The largest Redcap says something to the one kneeling before me and he inclines his head in what I think is a deferential gesture. The largest one must be their leader. I hear, in little muffled pieces, the song of the fire magick and the cooking fire sparks, drawing my attention. The fire blazes when I look at it causing the little flame in my veins to awaken and stretch. The little flame warms me gradually, and I feel the ice magick encasing my limbs begin to melt.

If the flame melts the ice holding me, will I be able to run before I am caught? I look around.

I can run fast but I am not familiar with this land. Not that the strangeness of this world matters. If I have the chance, I will run.

The leader issues a command in a staccato click followed by a sharp whistle and a Redcap disappears into the caravan only to reappear a second later with a small, rectangular wooden box in his hands. The wooden box has symbols carved on it, and a strange sort of magick weaves in and out of them. The Redcap hands the box to the leader who opens it to reveal a large dagger with a dangerously curved blade. When light hits the blade, it sings a song of blood. The hilt is bejewelled with rubies. The Redcaps must like red a lot.

My attention locks onto the dagger and I understand that my time has become finite. My heart thunders in my chest, and my throat is dry while my eyes prickle with unshed tears.
I have never considered Death with any gravity before now. What shape will it have? How much will it hurt? Will I just be gone? Will the Hag remember me? Will the princeling ever wonder about me?

The Redcaps do not lift their gazes from me, and I am too afraid to look away from them. What if I blink and they pounce? I am food to them. I don’t consider the feelings of a chicken slaughtered for my meal. Is that how it is for them? Am I a chicken to them?

This is not the time to think of chickens, Croi.

I tense as the dagger-carrying Redcap approaches me.

This is it. The closest I have been to not being. I start struggling against the ice magick holding me captive. I can see the silver threads of the magick wound around my feet and hands, staying them. The flame has loosened my limbs somewhat, and I push against these bonds with all the strength I have in me.

Why can’t I fight back? Why am I always without power when it matters the most?

A wave of violent anger sweeps like a storm over me, taking the little flame that was in my veins and stoking it into an inferno, shoving the fear away. The numbness disappears and I feel the other Croi at the forefront of my mind. She is angry and her anger bleeds into me until I, too, feel it. Then anger becomes too puny a word to correctly describe the savagery of the emotion we feel.

We are livid.

They treat us as though we are mindless food, as though we are inconsequential, as though we are helpless. We will not be disregarded. I don’t know who moves my hand. Me or the Croi-inside, but just a crook of my finger and the fire outside responds to the fire within. The Redcap nearest to me slams down his hand on my shoulder intending, I am sure,
to re-infect me with the ice magick, but the fire that had been burning in front of the caravan
oversteps its boundaries and comes to me, scorching the ground between us.

Its movement alarms the Redcaps and they give off a series of whistles and clicks. I
don’t know what else they do because the fire slams into me and, for one long moment, I
don’t think at all. I burn. It is a glorious feeling, but the heat fades too soon. The fire forges a
link between the Croi I am and the Croi who was supposed to be. I have become us. We are
fortified by the fire; it gives us the courage to withstand what will come and what will be.

Because the reality is, there are five of them and only one of us. Were we to fight, it
would not be a battle but a massacre and yet, my pride, her pride, our pride, refuses to
capitulate. Our skin heats substantially enough that the Redcap holding us lets go with an
angry sound. We stand then, a fawn testing her new legs, and face our would-be murderers.

Their eyes, their strange red eyes, are trained on us, glittering in the weak light of the
fading day. We are Croi, the one that is and the one that should have been, and we will fight.

The Redcaps have no expressions on their faces; their cheeks are parchment white
and the red cracks allow the flesh underneath to glisten wetly. They are predators and having
scented blood, they will wait for us to falter and quail. But we are not prey. We will not falter
nor will we quail. We raise our chin, take the heat from the fire burning in us, and wait for
them to make a move. We know they will. Their hunger is too great and their patience too
thin. We do not wait long. The leader brings up the dagger, slices the air and marks the earth
he is standing on. It is a ritualistic gesture we do not understand. Nor do we care to. He takes
a step towards us and we burn more fiercely. Ready for whatever fate has been woven for us.

A chant moves through the three Redcaps who have moved to stand behind us,
waiting to catch us if we run. The leader is followed by another at his shoulder. And as they
approach us, we see now what we hadn’t been able to see before. Black coils of magick, the same width, the same length, the same broken song, link the Redcaps to each other. They are five bodies, united by one magick. And that magick appears to be failing. We watch as one of the Redcaps stumbles when the magick sparks and goes still for a moment before moving again like a hiccupping heartbeat.

We call to the Redcap magick, to see if we can. We croon to it. We tempt it with both our selves.

And the Redcaps’ magick listens to our call; it is tempted by the picture we present. We can sense its desire for us in its faltering song. It sees us as fruit, ripe and luscious, to pick, to eat, to suck dry. We offer it a way to stay alive and the magick accepts our invitation. The Redcaps jerk to a stop when they feel their magick move out. The leader throws his head back and screams—the sound nightmares would make had they voices. We wonder why it hurts him the most, and we look closer. The Redcap magick is rooted in him, in his chest, so he feels its loss more acutely than the others do.

We open our mouth to sing the calling song again but the Redcap on our right moves then, faster than we thought he could. He slaps his hand on our left cheek, his nail tearing our lip and we fall to the ground unable to stand the force of the strike. There is pain. Of course there is pain. We feel it but we cannot savour the hurt. We look up at the Redcap who struck us as he leans over our supine body and he sticks out a finger, wiping our bloody lip. He licks his finger and the Redcap magick hums, pulsing stronger, brighter, hungrier.

We try to get up but another Redcap pushes us down. We struggle but they are too strong. They keep us prisoner in that position. The fire still burns within us but we cannot burn anything outside. We do not yet have the power to. Maybe we never will.
The leader of the Redcaps kneels before us and we meet his eyes and see him pause at whatever he sees in ours. The moment has come. A Redcap behind us pulls our head back and exposes our neck. We look up at the sky and wish the sun were out to witness our murder. We sense the dagger, it is heavy with magick, come kiss close to our skin. Then the wind sings as the air is torn apart by an arrow. A moment of confused chaos follows. The Redcaps shove away from us, letting our head fall forward and we see the leader of the Redcaps fallen before us, an arrow protruding from the center of his head. There is no blood.

The night crows leave the sleeping kin, rise up as smoke and reclaim their bird shapes. They squawk loudly and join the remaining Redcaps as they take up strategic points around us. They are protecting the fallen leader. Why? Is it not too late for him? We look more closely at his prone form and see that the black magick rooted inside of him is still pulsing. The other Redcaps are keeping him alive. They are giving him their share of the magick.

Arrows rain around us and the night crows speed off in various directions. The Redcaps pay us no attention as their eyes sweep the surroundings, trying to pinpoint the direction from which they are being attacked. This moment comes as mercy and we use it–we sing a command into our call and send it to the Redcap magick–it turns to us, only too eager to abandon a dying vessel. We reach out to it with our mind and offer it our body. The Redcap magick does not hesitate; it leaps to us. As it fills us, we connect to the other Redcaps. We feel the leader die when the magick leaves him. We feel the Redcap magick root in us. We hear the mind-voices of the remaining Redcaps–the sound of a winter wind–we feel their hunger–their grief for their fallen brother–we feel their need for vengeance. We
feel the things they don’t say–their evil flushes our cheeks red–we fear the things they do–
light and heat. We are us, and we are them.

We gorge on the Redcap magick, fill ourself to the brim and still it pours into us. We
glut ourself with it, but there’s no end; it threatens to shade in the deepest spaces within us.
We only have one way to destroy their magick before it takes over us.

We use the fire in us to burn the Redcap magick. Our fire is stronger, and it consumes
the magick with voracious glee. The Redcaps feel their magick dying and turn to us, rushing
to kill us but before they can, they fall to the ground, clutching their chests. We bear witness
to their pain, we watch them die along with their magick, and we smile.

We don’t burn all the Redcap magick, though. We are too wise for that. We keep just
a little bit of it to flavour our own magick, to give us a bite, to earn us some power, and give
us some teeth.

The death throes are over in minutes. The Redcaps are dead. Their magick is less than
an echo–except for the bit we keep. The night crows are smoke as are the horse-like beings
that pulled the carriage. The fire is pouring out of us. We are emptied. We are one, and then
two. We and then I. Darkness descends.
Chapter Nineteen

I open my eyes to a sky readying itself for the night. The air smells charred, like the aftermath of a fire. It’s not entirely pleasant. I sit up with some difficulty and become aware of two things at the same time. One is the silence within me and the other is the noise around me. The kin are awake and struggling to get out of the cages that remain locked. Some of them are crying and others are yelling out for help.

I realize that I’m sitting in the middle of the Redcap bodies but I have no energy to move. I feel wrung out and tired. So very tired. Besides, there is no urgency to get away from the bodies. The fear is gone. No one knows better than me that all that remain are shells emptied of their magick.

I look at the body closest to me. The Redcap was about to plunge the knife into me when he fell. His pale features, contorted in a snarl, are frozen by death. Are Redcaps truly evil, or are they victims of their nature? I felt their ravenous hunger; it ruled them in the end. Would I, too, rend the magick of others in order to feed myself? Would I feast on their flesh to fill the void that defies filling?

Yes, of course, I would. If I had to. How then can I judge the Redcaps for the things they did, the things they were about to do to me? Very easily, it seems.

The hush within me has sunk deeply into my bones. I think about what happened when the other Croi took over my body—our body. I disappeared to a dark place where I could sense what was happening but I couldn’t feel the pain when the Redcap hit me. The fear I felt was diluted as though I was getting the dregs of the emotions and not the full force of them. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to feel her, the other Croi, but there is nothing. She has retreated to some place deep within me. I shiver, colder without the fire than I thought.
possible. The little flame in my veins still burns but it is a candle in front of the fire that crackles in the pit. The fire is replete now, a robust orange, full of the Redcap magick it ate.

The cries of the kin get louder, and I look at the forest around us. The trees seem anxious to swallow up the clearing, encroaching on its uneven periphery. What will happen to us when night falls? What other horrors live in this world, in this forest? Perhaps I should find Caolan. I try to get up but my feet refuse to cooperate. An errant shadow separates from the surrounding forest followed by many more of its ilk. I blink and they cohere into tall, slim Fae, clad entirely in black, who slip, like shadows, out of the forest and start wrenching open the cages. The freed kin spill out of the cages, stagger and fall onto the ground when weakness catches them unaware.

“You’re alive!” A high-pitched musical voice pierces the air, and I see a ball of light speeding towards me. It’s Tinder. She comes to a stop, hovering in the air before my eyes, her hummingbird wings a blur. Why does she sound so surprised? I should be the surprised one. She’s the perfect size for a snack between meals.

She looks around me, and I watch as she realizes that we are sitting smack in the middle of all the Redcap bodies. She emits a squeak of surprise and flies up a safe distance from them.

“Are they dead?” she calls from above.

“Yes,” I reply.

She looks at me suspiciously. “Are you quite sure?”

“Would I be alive if they weren’t?” I say dryly and watch as she thinks my words over and nods.
“Oh,” She says and flies back down to perch on a knee I have drawn up. “I was so afraid that you’d been eaten.”

“Why?” I ask because I genuinely want to know. I am a stranger to her so why would it matter if I were dinner for the Redcaps?

“I told you, we have a responsibility to brownies. We made a truce with them. Gave them our word. A pixie does not ever go back on her word!” Tinder speaks in sharp bursts, her conviction firm and unshakeable.

“How did you escape the Redcaps?” I ask curiously.

“The cloak protected me. I was flying to the brownies to see if they’d help me get you back because my mother’s useless with things like these. She’s too afraid to go against the Robber Queen anyway.” A spasm of annoyance twists her face before her fine features regain their guileless expression. “That’s when I met them.” She juts her chin at the black-clad Fae who are now going around the kidnapped kin, asking questions it seems. I wonder if the rest of Caolan’s brothers are awake. Why hasn’t he come to check if I’m alive?

“Who are they?” Do they belong to the Robber Queen? But why would she send both these soldiers and the Redcaps?

“The rebel soldiers,” she replies in a loud whisper. Her magick races under her skin, lighting her up like a crazed star. “I had heard rumours of them but nothing definite. They are rumoured to be more ghost than flesh. I ran into them two leagues north of here. Their scout plucked me out of the air. It’s a good thing Ceara was there otherwise I was going to pix the entire lot of them.” I gather getting pixed will hurt and I should try not to make pixies angry.

“Who?” I interrupt, but she doesn’t hear and continues.
“So I told them about how you and the Cat were kidnapped by the Redcaps. Where is he anyway? Did he die?” she asks, flitting up and down in the air till I get dizzy.

“I don’t know. And can you settle down? I’m tempted to swat you and I’m not sure I can ignore these temptations just yet.” She returns to her perch on my knee. “Thank you. Who are these rebels rebelling against?”

I’m pretty certain I know the answer, but I’d still like to hear it.

“The Robber Queen. Who else?” Right. I’ve wandered right into the middle of a revolution. “The scouts sighted the Misery Train—.”

“The what?”

“That’s what they call these cages. Don’t interrupt me. Where was I? Oh yes, the Misery Train. Were you on the Shadow Road? The Redcaps must have left the Shadow Road in order to make camp for the night. They love their comforts.” She breaks off to cast a disgusted look at the bodies. Then she shakes herself and continues. “And the archers climbed the trees on the north side to aim for the Redcaps. They shot the first wave of arrows when the night crows attacked. They put some of the weaker soldiers to sleep but Ceara put them on fire with her magick. There were too many night crows for her to handle though, and for a while I was so sure we were going to end up in the cages right beside you, but all of a sudden they just—” she waves her hands around “—dissipated. Became clouds and were scattered by the wind. It was really strange. What happened?”

She fixes wide unblinking eyes on my face, and I fight the urge to squirm. Why does a tiny pixie, the size of a human hand, have the power to make me feel guilty? What am I feeling guilty about anyway?

I reply with another question. “Why are you asking me?”
“You’re alive. They aren’t. How did they die?” she asks again and I look into her eyes wondering how to respond.

“I would like to know the answer to that as well.” A smoke-soaked voice enters the fray and I look away from Tinder to face the newcomer.

I have read of Fire Furies in the Hag’s books. They are vengeance personified, or in this case, Fae-ified. I have imagined them to look exactly like this Fae does. She is tall like all Fae, with hair as red as danger. Her skin glows as though it is sun-touched. Her features are carved delicately on a face that would have made Fergal cry with pleasure. Her eyes are a light orange ringed by amber and surrounded by long, curled lashes. And her magick, ah. It is red and gold, roiling and rushing underneath her skin. She is wearing a tunic and leggings spun of fine silver material, and in the garb she looks like someone’s dream delivered in flesh, blood and magick.

“Ah Saoirse, this is Ceara, Princess of Tine.” Tinder darts to the Fae, her wings fluttering excitedly. “She defeated the night crows. It was amazing. You should have seen her!”

“I was too busy trying not to get eaten, remember?” I say. I shift my eyes back to Tinder and glower at her. What is a princess doing with the rebels?

“Is this your friend, Tin?” the fire princess asks, allowing Tinder a seat on her shoulder. Friend? First Caolan and now Tinder. I seem to be making friends quite easily in Tír na nÓg. The Hag would be so proud.

“Well, we are not friends…yet. But I hope to be.” Tinder ducks her head shyly.

“With her?” The princess’s tone is disbelieving. Why?

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.
“Tinder is as much a princess as I am. She should consort with people of her own stature,” the fire princess responds coolly. She looks me up and down and her lips curl slightly. “You are not, are you?”

I think about it, and what she has said is not wrong. I am certainly no princess. Neither do I want to be. I ignore her and turn my attention to my aching face. I feel as though someone pummelled me. Wait, someone did.

“How did you escape?” the fire princess asks, coming closer to me. She smells like burnt spices, not an unpleasant smell. She looks down at me slumped on the ground and lifts an eyebrow as though I’m committing a grave offence by keeping her waiting.

“I must have been lucky.” I give her a smile that’s all teeth. I have no intention of telling her anything. It annoys me that she towers over me so I get to my feet.

“Did you grow taller?” Tinder asks me, and I stare at the ground queasily. I managed to get up, but I don’t know if I can keep standing for long. The ground seems really far away. The Glamour must have broken farther and the pain of it breaking was probably eased by the flame. My dress can barely cover all of me, and if I grow a little more, I will need to look for clothes. I wish these things happened with a warning.

“I think so.” Leaving it at that, I turn to the fire princess. Ah, she doesn’t seem so tall anymore. She’s just a head taller than I am. The thought pleases me immensely. I dislike being looked down upon.

The fire princess rakes her eyes up and down my figure and frowns. “You don’t seem like a brownie.”

I shrug noncommittally. This is not a discussion I want to have right now.

“So, how did you defeat the Redcaps?” Tinder again.
What do I say? I set fire to the Redcap’s magick and they keeled over? The other Croi resurfaces for a brief minute. *Don’t.* I clutch at her but she is gone, leaving the warning reverberating in my mind.

“They were attacking me when suddenly they fell over and stopped moving.” I am not lying but neither am I answering their question. I widen my eyes and fill them with fear. “I thought I’d die but I didn’t. Why should I question how I survived?”

“It is important that we know exactly what happened. If we are to help the other kidnapped kin…” the fire princess says. It is funny how coldly a fire princess can speak.

“Why is a Tine princess so concerned with Talamh affairs?” I reply just as coldly. Tinder gasps and the fire princess’s face empties of all emotion.

“Don’t you know anything?” Tinder flies over to me, sitting on my shoulder now, her voice scolding. I fear I have made a gaffe. What? Aren’t we allowed to question royal kin? Maybe the princess and I should communicate via Tinder. We can just pass her back and forth between us.

“Apparently not. Why? What am I missing now?” I can feel Tinder’s agitation, her magick has gone pink.

“That is not important. What—is that a knife?” The fire princess says and stops, her eyes locking on the ritual dagger lying beside a dead Redcap. It is the one they would have used to rend the magick from me. I haven’t touched it. I know better. Its tip has been dipped in so much malevolent magick over the years that it has blackened. Fear perverts everything, even magick. Especially magick.

The fire princess moves past me, toward the dagger. Prickly though she is, I feel compelled to warn her.
“I wouldn’t touch that if I were you.”

“You aren’t me. You never will be,” is what she says. She doesn’t seem to like me too much. I wonder why. Maybe it’s because I smell and offend her royal nose.

As she extends a hand to pick up the knife, a dark figure moving so fast that he’s a blur, crashes into her, picks her up, and deposits her a fair distance from the knife. Tinder and I watch, fascinated. The dark figure, when he’s not moving so fast, is a Fae soldier with high cheekbones and a scar that enhances his beauty rather than detracting from it. His magick is a deep brown edged with silver—so he’s from Talamh. He has black hair that has grown too long, brown eyes ringed by the lightest gold, and a lean figure. His darkness complements the fire princess’s light. They stand together with the fire princess holding on to his arm. I sense a love story in the way they’re looking at each other.

Of course, he disabuses me of that notion when he opens his mouth.

“How many times have I told you not to touch things you know nothing about?” The rebuke is sharp and hits its mark as the fire princess’s face floods with colour.

“It’s just a knife,” she and moves stiffly out his embrace.

“It is not just a knife. This is a Redcap ritual knife. Do you know what that means?” The princess tries to skewer him with her gaze. He doesn’t even flinch. This is very entertaining.

“One touch and your magick is torn from you.” I supply an answer brightly when the fire princess remains quiet. She casts me a withering glare and I smile beatifically.

The soldier Fae turns his attention to me and like everyone else I have met so far, looks me up and down. It is my turn to cast a withering glare. I do not appreciate being looked at.
“Saoirse!” I hear Caolan’s voice. I turn and find him approaching our little gathering. Following him are three other kin, probably his brothers. All of them have tear-streaked faces. Caolan looks surprised to see me. “You’re alive.”

“Was I not supposed to be?” The growl in my words catches me by surprise. His words are probably not intended as such but they feel like an accusation. Their edges prick into me and ask me why I am still breathing when his brother isn’t, why I was spared when his brother wasn’t.

Caolan flushes and shakes his head. “I did not mean that. I don’t wish you dead. I just didn’t think it was possible to escape the Redcaps’ hunger.”

“Indeed, it isn’t. But she did,” the princess says, not moving her eyes from me. “And now she refuses to tell us how she did it.”

I stand there in the middle of the carnage. A spectacle for the beautiful kin that I know nothing about, who ask questions I don’t want to answer. What do they see when they look at me? I wish they wouldn’t look at me. I don’t want them to. I wish I had a scarf. I wonder if there are any remaining in my pack.

I gasp, remembering what I should not have forgotten: the HeartSeed. Uaine!
Chapter Twenty

I look around as if my pack would be lying around waiting for me to find it. Of course it isn’t. The only thing I can see through the darkness that is interrupted by the slow thread of the magick is the Redcap caravan.

Night has fallen rapidly, shrouding the world so completely that were it not for the magick, even my new eyes would be blinded. The fire princess waves a hand and several small fires appear randomly around the clearing. The kidnapped kin have somewhat recovered from their panic and now sit in small clumps, talking softly. Their magick flickers stronger as they recover. Life hums around the clearing, reclaiming those who had been almost overwhelmed by despair. The Fae soldiers have been hunting and meat will soon sizzle over the fire pits.

“Saoirse?” Caolan prompts and I give him a distracted look, my eyes not moving from the Redcap caravan.

“I’m difficult to kill,” I reply with a shrug and continue looking at the caravan. That’s where the HeartSeed is. That’s the only place it can be. I take a step toward the caravan. Immediately the fire princess’s soldier is in front of me, blocking my way with a sword.

The Croi-inside stirs at this new danger, but Tinder is there before I can say anything.

“What are you doing?” she demands, her wings sparking.

The dark soldier looks me up and down, and I feel his distrust heavy on my skin.

“Come on, Tin, you know the Ugly-kin cannot be trusted,” Ceara intones from somewhere behind me. I spin around and regret it when the world continues spinning long after I’ve stopped. Her words prick me when they shouldn’t. It is the truth. I will hear it many times from now on. The fire princess glances dismissively at me before turning to Caolan as though he is far more interesting than I ever will be.
“That was not a nice thing to say, Ceara. I would have thought that you, especially, would know better.” Tinder’s words are softly spoken but they are cutting, and the fire princess stiffens.


“Are you, perhaps, the princess Ceara?” Caolan says to the princess while I glare at the dark soldier. She nods, and he bows. “My lady. I am so glad to see you here. You are our hope.” Why? She doesn’t seem to be very hope-inspiring.

“I thank you,” the fire princess responds. Without sparing another look at me, Caolan gathers his brothers closer to him and walks off to join one of the groups.

His dismissal would hurt if I had the time to consider it. But I don’t. I won’t.

“Aren’t you getting tired of holding the sword in front of me?” I snap at the Fae soldier, and he lowers it with a quizzical look. He doesn’t move aside though. I could try to move around him, but he would probably tackle me. Since I am so dangerous.

“Where are you going, Saoirse?” Tinder asks, perching on my shoulder.

“They took my pack and I want it back,” I reply, staring at the Fae soldier. The flames don’t light him, and it’s unsettling to talk to a being who seems to absorb light. “Can you tell him to move?”

“Faolan, would you get out of her way. She’s not going to hurt anyone. Do you think she could?” Tinder says to him with some exasperation.

“She killed the Redcaps, and she doesn’t want to tell us how. She’s dangerous,” Ceara says flatly.
“How do you know she killed them?” Tinder demands to know.

“They’re dead, aren’t they? Who else could have killed them?” Ceara answers, shooting me a look. I try to seem as harmless as possible. It doesn’t seem to convince her. Maybe I’m going about this the wrong way. Maybe if they think I have some power, they will be wary of me.

“Say I killed them,” I say.

Tinder makes a sound of surprise but I ignore her.

“Wouldn’t my killing them be enough to convince you of my good…ness?” Good nature? Is good the opposite of evil? Is it possible to be both evil and good?

“No.” It is Faolan who answers my question. “You, if you did kill them, only did so because you wanted to live. Would you have killed them had they not tried to hurt you?”

No, most probably not. I only pick battles I can win and I wouldn’t have thought I could win against the Redcaps. Of course, they don’t need to know that. “I just want to see if my pack is in the Redcap caravan. It is important that I get it back,” I say instead. Important is a weak word but it will suffice.

“Caravan? What caravan?” Ceara moves to stand beside Faolan so they both block my way.

“The caravan right over there!” I point and all three of them look in the direction I’m pointing.

“I don’t see it,” Tinder hums.

“Neither do I,” Faolan echoes.

“It is not there.” Ceara, of course. Her tone suggests that if she can’t see it, it’s not there.
“You three must be blind,” is how I respond.

Faolan calls over another black-clad soldier and asks him whether he can see the caravan. Of course he doesn’t, and what follows is an intense scrutiny by the fire princess, her soldier and the pixie who just a minute ago wanted to be my friend.

I ignore them all and train my eyes on the caravan that apparently only I can see. I don’t think I am hallucinating it. Why would I hallucinate a caravan when I could dream up mounds of food? The answer comes to me in a burst of light when Tinder flies up to Ceara to whisper in her ear. I remember seeing Tinder through her veiled cloak before because of her magick. Perhaps that is the reason I can see the caravan. Perhaps it, too, is veiled, and I’m only seeing its magick. There is only one way to find out.

I turn to Faolan because he is the one standing nearest to me. Perhaps he thinks he is the most capable of killing me if I suddenly go berserk. I will take his presence as a compliment.

“How can you see magick?” I ask as politely as I can.

“What do you mean?” What else could I mean other than what I asked?

“For example,” I explain because I am a very patient kin, “when you look at Tinder, do you see her magick?”

Faolan’s eyes narrow as he contemplates my question.

“Can you see that her magick is green?” I burst out when he hasn’t replied for seven seconds.

“She has green magick?” The lilt at the end of that sentence makes it a question and answers mine. He can’t see magick.

“Can Tinder and the fire princess see magick?”
He gives me a long stare—another seven seconds—I feel time ticking its seconds on my skin.

“What colour is my magick?” he asks instead of answering my question.

“Brown edged with silver. That soldier over there has the same colour magick as you except the brown is a smidge lighter. Your princess has red and gold magick.” Not that he asked but I’m sure he wanted to know. I notice that he doesn’t deny that she is his princess. A love story is definitely coalescing somewhere in the margins of their lives. Not that I care.

“You really cannot see magick?”

“She’s lying,” the princess says, her voice cutting though the darkness. She and Tinder have been paying attention to the conversation I am having with Faolan.

“You know kin cannot lie,” Faolan replies to her.

“We don’t know that she is kin. Tinder just told me that she came over from the human world.” I don’t understand the princess’s hostility toward me, the reason why the words she directs at me have such sharp edges. But she makes me angry and the other Croi scents this anger and wakes slightly.

Faolan gives me another one of his piercing looks. He seems to have a lot of them.

“Is there a law against being from the human world?” I ask. If there is, the Hag has a lot to answer for.

“No. But traffic between our worlds is rare,” Faolan replies.

“And impossible, unless someone created a veil for you,” Ceara says. She’s looking at me with a mixture of reluctant curiosity as though wanting to know anything about me is beneath her. “Who created it for you?”
“I don’t have any of the answers you seek.” It was much simpler when I had no one to talk to. I could just do what I wanted to without thinking of the consequences. “My time is precious. I do not care if you believe me or not. But I am going to go into that caravan.”

“I’ll go with you,” Faolan says. I look at him with a great deal of suspicion. His acquiescence is a surprise. Not just to me but also to the princess. She opens her mouth to say something but then closes it without uttering a word.

I shrug and start walking; Faolan falls in step beside me. When the princess moves to follow us, he stops her.

“We don’t know if it is safe. Let me go see if there is anything there that could present a danger to you,” he pauses for a moment, “my lady.” She doesn’t want to but she obeys him. Tinder chooses to stay with her.

We reach the caravan, and its gaping door yawns before us. Well, me. I glance at Faolan. “Some light would be nice.”

He snaps his fingers and little balls of magick coruscate in the air before us. Handy trick, that. I wonder if I can learn to do it.

“I’ll go first,” I say.

“Of course.” Ha. I bet if it was the princess, he would be the one in front. I put a foot on the step leading up to the entrance of the caravan and look back. I raise my eyebrow and pat the side of the caravan, making a loud thump.

Faolan looks bewildered. Beyond him, the princess and Tinder also look gobsmacked. I really like being right.

“I’ll tell you how I killed the Redcaps,” I stop before the entrance to the caravan and say softly to Faolan. He gives me his full attention, his hand creeping to his sword.
“I burned their magick. With that fire.” I point to the fire still burning in the pit.

“How?” he says, the word heavy with distrust.

“I don’t know.” I shrug and turn to face the door again. “I don’t know how I do things. I just do them.”

I take a breath and enter the caravan, expecting monsters to emerge from the darkness and finish what the Redcaps started. Nothing happens. There is darkness and then there isn’t. I hear some shouts behind me, but I don’t turn to investigate. Lights flicker on in sconces on the wall, and I look around. The interior is far larger than the exterior suggests. The entrance widens into a room the size of a small field. I can see lines of magick running the perimeter of the room, stretching it longer and wider than it really is. But this is not at all like Redcap magic; the magick worked on this caravan is of the woods and the earth, brown and green. The magick also veils the caravan from the outside world, which explains why no one apart from me can see it.

The hall, which is what I am calling this room, looks more like a chamber in some subaltern cave than a room in a caravan. The ceiling is high and the walls are made of stone. There are furs thrown on the earthen floor and a cold breeze chills the air. I catch a whiff of the stench native to the Redcaps. The furs need to be burned as soon as possible. There is no furniture in the hall. I can’t see my pack anywhere but the hall branches off into five smaller rooms so I still have hope.

“Wait here,” Faolan commands me when I start walking in the direction of a room. I raise an eyebrow at him and say, “No.” Leaving him pondering my response, I continue walking until I come to a door leading to a room. I wonder if it’s locked. I look down at the knob and squint. It looks harmless, and for that precise reason, I don’t trust it.
“Are you attempting to communicate with it?” Faolan comes up behind me.

“Yes, I talk to door knobs all the time,” I say as seriously as I can manage.

“You must have scintillating conversations,” he says, laughter woven into his words.

“Do you want to try opening it?” I move aside to give him access to the door, and he gives me an amused look but does not refuse.

He puts his hand on the knob and I tense but it turns easily, without him bursting into flames or being hit by a lightning bolt.

“They weren’t worried about burglars, were they?” I say to Faolan’s back as I follow him into the room.

“They were Redcaps,” he replies as though that says everything. When I think about it, it does.

There is nothing extraordinary in the room. Just a sleeping pallet in the middle with a tankard full of some noxious brew beside it. The fear in my stomach starts its climb to my throat.

The next two doors open to reveal the same malodorous pallet and once, a pair of pants that neither Faolan nor I dare get close to. By the time we reach the fourth room, I am worried. There is magick on the knob of this door, a complex net created from the same wood and earth magick that has created the hall behind us. I stop Faolan when he reaches for the knob.

“Magick,” I say, pointing to the knob, and he brings out a glove made out of some silvery material. He drops it onto the knob and it sizzles. We both wince and watch the magick destroy the glove completely before resettling on the door knob.
“How do we remove the spell?” I ask. Faolan thinks for a second and then touches the door instead of the knob. The magick net immediately jumps off the knob to make its way to where Faolan had touched the door, leaving the knob unprotected. I turn it and the door swings open. The knot of magick dissolves with a hiss.

“I didn’t know we could trick magick,” I say.

“Neither did I,” Faolan replies, walking into the room before me. It is clear that this room belonged to someone with more importance than the other Redcaps. For one thing, this room has an actual bed covered with luxurious bedding. Which is probably smelly, but I am not going to check. There are also wall hangings and other furniture, a chair and a small table, both made of pale brown wood. But what commands both our interests is the open chest in front of the bed.

Like the box the ritual knife came in, the chest is inlaid with precious jewels. There are ornate carvings on the sides and the lid. I sidle nearer to it, looking for my pack but scared to touch the other contents just in case they are magicked with malevolent spells. At first glance, I don’t see it and my heart sinks right down to my toes. There is a large crystal ball, the kind pretend fortune-tellers use in the human city, and scrolls jostling for space with, bizarrely enough, cutlery. And there, wedged under a plate with only a strap peeking out, is my pack. I grab it before Faolan can react and clutch it to my chest. The slight warmth emanating from it reassures me of the presence of the HeartSeed. Relief turns my knees to jelly, and I sit down on the ground with a thump.

“What is in this pack that is so precious to you?” I look up and there in the doorway of the room is Ceara with Tinder sitting on her shoulder.
“I told you not to follow us,” Faolan says to Ceara, his eyebrows coming together in an irritated frown. Then he adds, “My lady.”

“You are mistaken if you think that I take orders from you, Wolf,” Ceara says, her chin at a haughty angle. Wolf? He’s Wolfkin? I turn to Faolan. He doesn’t seem wolfish to me.

He gives Ceara a narrow-eyed look, his lips tightening slightly. Ceara strolls farther into the room, a false indolence to her movements. I scramble to my feet.

She extends a hand to me, and I raise an eyebrow.

“Let’s see what’s in this pack of yours,” she says, all teeth and no smiles. She looks more like the wolf than Faolan.

“Let’s not,” I reply with a smile of my own.

“Will you hand it over or do I have to take it from you.” She coats the words with sugar but none of us are fooled.

“You can try,” I say, my words have no sugar, but danger is suddenly thick in the air between us. The Croi-inside is awake.
Chapter Twenty-One

The Croi-inside is all lemon and no sugar while the Croi outside keeps trying to sing a song she does not know the words to. Being two when I should be one is unsettling; it makes me question who this current “I” is and whether this “I” will continue to exist when the Glamour is completely broken. How am I going to negotiate my right to exist when I feel the hunger the Croi-inside feels: to exist unfettered, unrepressed. To be alive and to be whole. To not just feel anger but to express it. Wholly.

I look at the fire princess who is looking down her imperial nose at me.

“Did you not hear me? Hand over your pack.” She pronounces each word exactly, biting them off and throwing them into the world. Demanding to be heard and obeyed.

The Croi-inside wants to burn things unsurprisingly, but I am not too alarmed. I have been on the wrong side of many sharp swords. One fire-breathing princess does not scare me.

“The pack belongs to me and I am not inclined to share its contents with you.” I imitate her manner of speaking but my words lack the imperialness that is native to hers.

She makes a move to take the pack from me by force and Tinder, surprising us both, obstructs her by flying in front of me.

“What in the name of Fionar is wrong with you, Ceara?” Her annoyance elevates the pitch of her voice. “You cannot force her to show you her belongings. You know that!”

“Not even if she’s carrying something that could destroy us?” The princess’s voice, on the other hand, is low and steely. Maybe she’s trying to sound dangerous. She’s not doing a very good job. At least, not if you compare her to the Redcaps and it is difficult not to. A puny princess, no matter how hot the fire she breathes, cannot compare to a Redcap.
“Be that as it may, the laws of our land still prohibit you from making demands on what is not yours.” Tinder is unavailing in her defense. I wonder why when earlier she was telling Ceara my secrets.

“This land is my land as well as yours, Tinder. I will break laws if I have to, to protect it. Do you forget who you are speaking to?”

“Break laws?” Tinder echoes incredulously. “Then pray tell me, Ceara, what is the difference between you and her? Have you forgotten who you are?” Who is this her? Surely Tinder doesn’t mean me. This conversation has the ring of repetition to it as though Tinder and the princess have had it before.

The princess flinches. Colour floods into her cheeks and her eyes turn suspiciously bright. She takes a step back, her posture no longer combative. Tinder makes a sound of distress.

“I did not mean to hurt your feelings but you do not consider mine when you threaten someone I have already decided to protect,” Tinder says, her words soft but firm in the hush enveloping the room. She’s going to protect me? A tiny pixie who is barely the size of my hand is going to protect me? What is she going to protect me from? Hostile hummingbirds?

“Why do you bother with her? Have we not been friends far longer than you have known her?” The princess flays me with her eyes. Why am I the villain of this piece? I don’t recall asking for pixie protection. I glance at Faolan and find him examining the crystal ball as though there is not a bloody war brewing in front of him.

“I have decided that I am going to spend my year with her.” I see the princess’s hurt flash in her eyes before she quickly hoods them. Faolan frowns at Tinder before looking at
the princess with a softer expression. He doesn’t speak, just looks at her with the world in his eyes.

Spend a year with me? I don’t remember asking Tinder to do anything like that. I’m not inclined to suffer her presence if she’s going to be as imperial as the fire princess. Actually, even if she is as sweet as honey-soaked cakes, I don’t want her following me around.

My stomach breaks the swollen silence with an indignant growl. I start.

“My stomach must be hungry. I shall go feed it,” I say to no one in particular and walk briskly out of the room, through the hall, and out of the caravan without waiting to see if anyone is following me. Three soldiers guard the entrance of the caravan and they tense when I emerge. We stare at each other with varying degrees of distrust, and I am wondering whether moving past them will hurt when Tinder alights on my shoulder. Their expressions ease when they see her and they back off. Oh, so they’ll trust a pixie but not me.

Then again, my face is a special kind of hideous so I cannot truly blame them. Ignoring them, I walk farther into the clearing and look around at the little campfires dotting the landscape. The clearing is sizeable; it would have to be to accommodate the cage train and the invisible caravan. The forest looks inky in the night. Not a place I’d want to spend any time in. I miss the familiar paths and turns of the Wilde Forest. I don’t know what lies beyond this clearing, what other dangers lurk in the dark places of this forest.

My stomach grumbles my hunger, distracting me from my sombre thoughts. I choose the nearest campfire and walk over to it. There are only two kin around the small fire. One is solidly built with red hair peppered with brown, while the other has the most intriguingly striped skin I have seen. When they see me approach, the kin duck their heads and touch their
chests. Then they leave, joining a nearby campfire and leaving a whole hare roasting on a spit on top of their fire. I look after them with not a small amount of puzzlement, and Tinder says, “They know you killed the Redcaps. They show their gratitude by giving you privacy.”

“They’d willingly leave food?” If this is the way they show gratitude here in Tír na nÓg, I am in trouble.

“They’d much rather leave food than be food,” Tinder replies dryly. Oh. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but she’s right. They should be thankful to me. I am a hero!

I use a large leaf as a plate while Tinder uses one more suited to her size. I choose to attack the meat with my hands, while Tinder fashions a fork out of a twig. As we eat, Ceara emerges from the caravan followed, one beat later, by Faolan. Faolan immediately turns to his soldiers and starts talking to them intently, discussing the removal of the Redcap bodies, while Ceara starts moving around the clearing. She walks through the night as though it belongs to her; her graceful limbs are an eternity away from my bumbling walk. I watch as she moves from one campfire to another, pausing to accept the obeisance of the kin with an easy smile. I use my extra-keen hearing to eavesdrop on the conversations she has with the kidnapped kin. They call her their hope, and they talk about how much they miss her grandfather—someone they call the Forever King.

Tinder is attacking her portion of the meat with gusto, and I wait until she is done before I ask my question. “How long have you known her?”

“Who?” Tinder says and burps softly. She wipes her lips on her sleeves and folds up the leaf she used as a plate.

“The princess.”
“Ah. We have been friends, as much as one can be friends with the heir to the Talamh kingdom, since five years ago when my mother and her father had some dealings,” Tinder answers easily.

“The heir to the Talamh kindom? Isn’t she the fire princess? Besides, how can she be heir to Talamh when she can’t wield earth magick?” I ask, genuinely curious.

Tinder grimaces and shrugs. “I think we would prefer to have her on the Talamh throne even if she cannot use earth magick. Better than the alternative. Ceara has more right to the throne, even as a Tine Fae, than the current heir. Ceara’s mother was the youngest daughter of the Forever King.”

Somehow I don’t think she means the Robber Queen when she says mother. “So the Robber Queen stole the kingdom?”

“No. That was her father. We call him The Usurper,” Tinder growls.

“Do these Fae not have names?”

“Naming them would be giving them an honour they do not deserve.”

Oh.

“What happened to him, this Usurper?” Nothing good from the satisfied look on Tinder’s face.

“His magick withered. It turns out that there are consequences to spilling blood in a Caisleán. Especially royal blood. He died a very painful death. The Robber Queen inherited the stolen kingdom, and she has been killing us ever since.” The words are grim and I shiver in the cold air. I turn and look at the princess again. She has moved on to yet another group. This one contains Caolan and his brothers. She is sitting by them, talking to them seriously,
offering hope and a promise of vengeance. Can she really keep these promises? She is just one kin against a queen who keeps a Redcap army.

I wipe my hands on my tree-bark dress, open my pack, and pull out the book on Fae history. I flip through the pages until I’m almost to the end of the book. There, in fancy calligraphy, the fire princess’s history is detailed.

“Why do you have that?” Faolan’s voice startles me and I jump, almost losing the book to the fire.

“Because it is mine.” Obviously.

“Where did you get it from?” What is this interrogation? I ignore the solider and close the book, intending to return it to my pack. “Wait. Can I see it please?”

He said please so I hand it over. He holds the volume with great reverence, turning the pages slowly, showing it more care than I have. After examining it in detail, he looks up at me, a frown crinkling his forehead.

“Do you know what this is?” Faolan asks.

“A book that talks about the history of the Fae. According to the book, you are a bloodthirsty lot.” Tinder jabs me in the side.

“This is more than just a book.” Faolan’s voice is low and intense. I lean closer, pulled toward him by some strange magick. “The History is one of the many items that were presumed destroyed during the Betrayal. It has always been with the ruling family of Talamh and records the history of the Fae as it happens. Why do you have it…?”

“…when clearly, it is mine,” the princess finishes Faolan’s sentence. She stands beside Faolan, once again looking down at me. This time though, Tinder remains at my side. I pluck the book from Faolan’s hand and return it to my pack.
“You seem to covet everything that is mine,” I tell the princess in as polite a tone as I can manage.

Her lips curl. Her disdain couldn’t have been clearer if she had screamed it. “Your friend has been quite forthcoming about you.”

Friend? She nods towards where Caolan is sitting.

“He is not a friend.”

“He says that you breathe fire.” She looks at Tinder. “Since when do brownies have fire magick? No, don’t answer that.” I wasn’t going to. “Your ability to do fire magick makes you a Tine kin, and that means you are under my rule. I command you to give me the book.”

“No.” Do we really have to do this again?

Her face tightens, and she leans back on the balls of her heels. I get to my feet, feeling a flicker of the Croi-inside.

What I do next can be blamed on the long day, the fatigue, and my uncertainty. The true reason is the hot surge of anger that feels like lightning in my veins. There she stands, the princess, haughty and hostile for reasons I do not fully comprehend. Trying to command us.

Tinder moves to stand between the princess and me, trying to coax peace from us and I would let her were it not for the princess. The obstinate slant of the princess’s mouth tells tales, and I know she won’t rest until I prove myself.

Her magick is alluring, and she is unaware of how easy it is becoming for me to play with magick not my own. How simple it is to make someone else’s magick spark, burn, and seethe. The fire princess opens a palm and a flame burns on it. Faolan says something to her, but I hear a roaring in my ears, and I know that the Croi-inside is close to taking over. I
remember the screams of the Redcaps as they died around me. I do not want the princess to die.

“Stand down.” My voice is a whisper.

“Give me the book.” Her words sign her fate. There will be no peace here until we make our own.

We do not bother with singing to the magick; it has no song here in the dark forests of Tir na nÓg. We call to the princess’s fire. We do not croon, cajole or sing the siren song. We simply command it to come and it does.

The fire princess screams like the others before her and meets our eyes for all of one terrified second. Then we let go of her magick, and it trickles back into her, pale and subdued. She crumples to the ground. Faolan reacts swiftly. One shout and his sword is out of its sheath and sharp at our neck.

We tilt our head to the side and look at him. He returns our gaze with madness in his.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Embers rule where fires burnt and the only conversations that can be heard around the clearing are those of crickets riding the busy moon to midnight. The kidnapped kin willingly slip into sleep though there are some who lie still with their eyes wide open; they are the ones stalked by nightmares. Fae soldiers are strategically placed around the clearing though whether they are keeping danger out or everyone in is not something I want to think about.

A facsimile of peace rules here–at least for those who do not read the faces of their saviours too closely.

I sit, still breathing, still alive, beside Tinder and across from the princess who is also still breathing and therefore, still alive though her face is paler than snow on its first fall. Her hands are trembling, and she cannot quite hide the shiver that shakes her shoulders. Somehow, I don’t think it’s the chill that’s making her shake.

Faolan, sword sheathed and lips pulled in a straight thin line that broadcasts his displeasure, is the princess’s shadow. His eyes rarely leave me as though all it would take is one blink and I’d have his heart on the ground once again.

“Join the rebellion?” I repeat the princess’s words, not bothering to veil the scepticism I feel. Faolan had been about to press the sharp edge of the blade into my neck when the princess levered herself up with her arm and said in a voice only half full of magick, “Join the rebellion.” This caused Faolan to turn to her with incredulity stretching his features into an ugly mask and me to swallow the words that would have ended him. I took that moment to seize control from the Croi-inside though even now she lurks a bit too close to the front of my mind. Ready, just in case we are not done for the day and someone else finds a reason to try to kill us.
“Your talents are invaluable to us!” The princess’s eyes look at me but they don’t see me. She sees a tool she can exploit. Here’s another one who wants to use me. “With you on our side, we could take back the Caisleán. Right all the wrongs that have been done.”

“Who would I be rebelling against?” I ask, a bit interested in spite of myself. I have no desire to fight anyone. I just want to give the dryad’s message to her sister, pass along the HeartSeed and then take myself off to the brownies to discover what I can about myself.

“The Robber Queen,” the princess replies. As if I need to ask. I glance at Tinder. She has been quiet ever since I…the Croi-inside called the princess’s magick to us. Has that display of power changed her mind about spending her year with me?

The Croi-inside stirs at the idea of battle and the promise of blood, while the same thoughts make me shudder.

“I have nothing against the Robber Queen. This is not my fight,” I say because it is true. I have to find out who and what I am. Matters of the royalty are not my problem. Still, maybe I was a bit too harsh. “I can’t,” I amend my words and offer again, not very apologetically.

“And why is that?” the princess’s voice slips into the arctic range, and I lift an eyebrow in return. She meets my eyes without flinching.

“I have told you this before but I have something I must do, something I have given my word to do. And before you ask me, I cannot speak about it. I am bound not to.”

“Will you not change your mind?” the princess asks. Her face, though wan, is determined as though she can make me change my mind by the strength in hers.

I shake my head. “I may have been dragged into this story but it is not mine to write. I won’t fight for something I do not know, for people who are not mine.”
“Let me end her and we’ll be done with it!” Faolan bites out when the princess moves to speak again.

“You ought to be very careful about the threats you make, soldier. They could cost you more than you would be willing to pay,” the Croi-inside says in a voice that is not truly mine.

“Who are you?” Faolan takes two steps and comes close, so close I can see gold flecks in his eyes.

“When I figure it out, I shall let you know,” I say, wrestling control of my mouth from the Croi-inside. I stand up forcing him to move back. “I am going to go sleep now. If anyone else wants to threaten me with words, magick or swords, can they wait until tomorrow?”

Without waiting for anyone to speak or respond otherwise, I leave the group and walk closer to the one fire still burning in the middle of the clearing. The rest of the kin are sleeping snuggled close to each other, and I leave plenty of space between myself and them. I have no blanket so I curl up in a ball and close my eyes, feeling the weight of the past few hours press down on me. I am exhausted right down to my fingernails but sleep remains elusive.

“We should talk,” Tinder says in my ear, and I open one eye to see her small face looking sombre in the firelight.

“Do you have to go to Talamh Caisleán to do whatever you have to do?” Tinder asks, and I look at her in askance. “I heard you say as much to my mother.”

I grunt an affirmative. That much I can say.

“If you agree to let me spend one year with you, I can get you to Talamh Caisleán.” Tinder offers her deal with an affected casualness that fools no one. I sit up, and she tumbles
off my shoulder and into my cupped hands. I bring her up to meet my eyes and try to gauge her seriousness. She is not smiling.

“Why do you want to spend one year with me? Why one year? Why not one week or one month?”

“Pixies are allowed a year for themselves; they are given permission to travel beyond the meadow of their birth to gain experiences not available to them among the flowers and the grass. We see the mountains, the rivers, and the people of Talamh.” She pauses and corrects herself a bit wryly, “Well, I want to see them. Most of my birth-mates are going only as far as the next meadow to apprentice themselves with Skilled Pixies there.”

“Do you have to attach yourself to someone?” The idea is bizarre to me.

“This world is much larger for us than it is for you. Being with someone increases our chances of surviving,” she says and bites her lips, as though trying to make a decision.

Finally, with a shrug she says, “My mother wants me to pair with Ceara and I wouldn’t mind since she’s a friend but the sequestering is not something I can endure. She’s a princess and though she manages to sneak out at times like this,” Tinder gestures around her, “her life is one of rules and obligations. Much like mine is right now. I want to do something different. Be with someone who can show me what it is not to be bound.”

“And you think I’m free?” I’m surprised the question makes it through my lips. Shock has almost arrested my tongue.

“Yes,” she replies with conviction.

I gape at her for one round second while my mind tries to form sentences and fails. Words denature and fall apart in a mess of letters, and sentences become a distinct impossibility. Tinder may just be the worst judge of circumstances I have ever come across.
“You do what you want when you want. You say what you want without caring whether it is appropriate or offensive. You don’t answer questions if you don’t want to and you fear nothing,” Tinder says, and I am aghast. Is that really how she sees me?

“I fear a lot of things,” I hastily say. “Like hunger, pointy swords and anything or anyone who tries to bind me.”

“But it doesn’t stop you from living!” She’s an angry blur of light, flitting up and down in the air. “I want that. I want to be free, even if it’s just for a year. And I have a feeling that if I am with you, I will find out what freedom is.”

I close my mouth lest a fly go in to explore.

“I will get to Talamh Caisléán anyway. You do know that, right?” I don’t know how to respond to her conviction about my association with freedom. It must be the name. Trust the human to create trouble without even trying.

“More Redcaps wander this forest, and other horrors, the likes of which you haven’t ever seen before, thicken the nights in this world. You don’t know how to avoid any of them, do you? If you agree to let me follow you, I can guarantee that you will arrive at the Caisléán three days from now, safe and…,” she pauses and smiles, mischief in her eyes, “uneaten.”

I think it through. It takes me three seconds. The HeartSeed’s fading warmth is worrying so the sooner I can deliver it, the sooner I will be free. As for Tinder, we can renegotiate once I have completed the errand Uaine set me to.

“All right. I agree.” Tinder flushes with what looks suspiciously like delight. I have never evoked that emotion in anyone before so I cannot be sure. Before she can become too happy though, I should give her a slice of honesty. “But I must tell you some things.”
She settles on my palm and I bring her up so we are looking into each other’s eyes once again. I take a deep breath and ready myself to speak. I open my mouth once and close it. I squeeze my eyes shut and blurt it out.

“First, I am not really a brownie.” It is the hardest thing I have ever said and the admission echoes in my chest. I feel like I have inhaled a tempest and it’s shattering everything inside of me. I am not a brownie. Not even a brownie-something. I have spent nearly seventeen years of my life as a lie.

“Then what you said to Faolan is the truth? You really don’t know what you are?”

“I really don’t know who or what I am, and no one will tell me.” All right. Now to give her some trust I’m not certain she deserves. “Will you give me your word that you won’t repeat what I say next?”

“I give my word not to repeat any secret you ever tell me,” Tind intones and I feel shock slacken the muscles on my face. Her promise is more than I expected and deserve. She has no reason to trust me either.

“I was Glamoured to not just look like a brownie but be a brownie in all the ways that matter. The Glamour started breaking a week or so ago. No one will tell me what I am becoming, but everyone I meet on my travels tries to kill me at one point or another.” I stop speaking so that my words have a chance to sink in. Then I ask, “Do you still want to follow me around? You saw what happened with the princess. I am not in control of my own body sometimes. The one inside has a lot of anger in her and sometimes it spills and burns whoever is nearest to me.”
I go silent once again and let the night noise hold court for a bit. When my words have gained enough gravitas to impress the pixie, I turn my eyes to her, expecting her to cower away in disgust and fear.

But I am astounded once again. Tinder’s eyes are shining, and her face is glowing as though it is her birth-day and she has just received a wondrous present.

“You are an adventure,” she breathes out reverently.

“You mean being with me will be an adventure?”

“No, I mean you are the adventure!” She’s mad. Utterly crazy but I feel my lips stretch wide, and my mouth opens and an unfamiliar feeling of lightness floods me. I am not alone. For the first time since I started coming apart, I am not alone.

“I accept your proposal, Tinder, daughter of Titania. If you get me to Talamh Caisleán in three days, you can spend the year following me around,” I say with as much formality as I can and add, “If you still want to, that is.” Tinder bobs her head twice, touching two fingers first to her lips and then to her eyes, the kin way of sealing promises.
Chapter Twenty-Three

The first rays of the sun skim the tips of the trees, colouring them in. A low hum, full of bird song, is a prologue to the cacophony that will come with the ripening of the day. My body aches fiercely and my lips have swollen to twice their usual size or so I feel with my tongue. The only reflective surfaces around are eyes and no one seems to want to look into mine.

At this moment, I am standing, a bit horrified, in front of a beast. The fire princess insists that it is a horse but I have seen horses before and this beast is nothing like one. To begin with, it is not made of flesh and blood but sand forged by fire. It has big fiery eyes that are fixed on me malevolently. The princess calls the sandhorse a birthday present from her father. I would be suspicious of anyone who tried to gift me such a thing, but that’s just me. Dahy, she calls it lovingly. Me, I think Beast suits it better.

“Will you get on already?” the princess says with no small amount of exasperation. She is already astride the beast, not in the least bit concerned about its sharp teeth, evil eyes and flaring nostrils. I have seen it belching smoke. Perhaps it, too, fancies itself a dragon.

Tinder, that rotten pixie, is nowhere to be seen. I should have known better than to Trust her. She left out some rather important, pertinent information when making her proposal. Like the only way we’ll have a safe and swift journey to Talamh Caisléán is if we travel with the fire princess who is on her way there. Tinder left the princess to break the news to me, flitting off with the dawn to regions unknown. The princess approached me just after breakfast when I had sadly put down what looked like porridge because my mouth hurt too much to eat and told me that Tinder had asked her a favour. I can tell that the princess still harbours hope that I will join her rebellion. Why else would she agree to this odd arrangement?
“We are wasting time.” The princess chooses this moment to break into my thoughts. I was surprised to find out that she is traveling alone. Shouldn’t princesses have guards and other accessories? I wonder if she’ll leave without me if I continue to dither. I am tempted to find out, but then I’d be right back at the start. I don’t want to run into anymore Redcaps or anything else with claws and an appetite. Besides, I don’t want the Croi-inside to take control of our body any more than necessary.

“Do you have to say goodbye to anyone?” the princess asks me, and I look over to where the kin are piling into the invisible caravan. Its interior is large enough that all kin and the soldiers accompanying them will fit into it. I don’t know where they are being taken though I know that none of them are being sent home. I also don’t know how Faolan plans to move the caravan. It is not my concern, but I am curious. I almost looked for Caolan in the chaos after breakfast this morning but then I remembered how easily he had shucked me yesterday.

“No, there is no one here I feel any need to remember,” I say and add, “but you do, don’t you?” She stiffens but she doesn’t reply. Faolan is standing on the side, ostensibly talking to one of his soldiers, but his gaze lingers on the princess, sweeping over the gentle rise of her cheeks, leaving red blossoming in its wake.

“I’m not exactly sure how I am supposed to get up there,” I tell the princess after looks between them have been exchanged. The princeling would have loved this heart-story. She sighs loudly and offers a hand to pull me up. I look at the proffered hand, raise an eyebrow and grasp it with a shrug.

She pulls me up, and I look around with some fascination. The world looks completely different from this height, giving me a false sense of prominence as I survey
everything around us. The beast feels strange and unsettling and I squirm, trying to get used to the feeling of being on an animal. Usually, the things I sit on are not alive. But it’s not really an animal, is it? Nor is it alive. It’s Fae-made so maybe being on a real horse feels different. I will find out one day. I will start off with a small horse. A really small horse that doesn’t look at me wrongly.

“Hold on tight,” the princess says, digging her legs into the sides of the beast. It starts running and I feel the bit of breakfast I did manage to eat slosh around my stomach. For the moment, I will concentrate on breathing.

We speed through the forest, and paths spring up around us while trees arch away. We dissolve pockets of darkness that still cling to the shrubs as we rustle everything we pass. We battle with the wind and almost win. I am half-drunk with glee and wondering how I can procure a beast of my own when the princess brings the sandhorse to a stop. I am flung forward and would have fallen had I not clung to the princess. After directing a dirty look at her back, I look around in confusion. We cannot already have reached our destination. The princess relaxes her hold on the reins and whistles a call that is picked up by the birds in the canopy.

“You’re late!” a familiar voice yells, and Tinder flies out of the underbrush. The princess straightens and glances over her shoulder at me.

“Someone couldn’t decide whether she wanted to come with me,” she says.

“That’s because someone was less than honest about certain things,” I retort with a meaningful look at Tinder, who ducks her head.

“That’s because you wouldn’t have agreed if you knew we had to travel with Ceara,” she mumbles, the tips of her ears turning pink.
“Save that discussion for later. We must go. Tinder, settle down on my shoulder. I need to talk to you,” the princess commands, and Tinder complies after a guilty look at me. Oh? Have a secret conversation, will they? I am a Something that Used to be a Brownie, and I have tricks I will use. I listen with my new ears and sound rushes at me, almost drowning me but I breathe, ten little breaths, and listen softer and soon, I hear them as if they are speaking in my ear.

“What did your mother say?” the princess asks.

“I told her I am going with you to the Caisleán,” Tinder replies.

“You didn’t tell her that you are going off with your brownie?”

“Do you think she would have let me if I did?”

“She would have been right to stop you! What do you know about this creature? She could be the Robber Queen’s spy!”

“You like her enough to want her to be part of the rebellion!”

“I neither like her nor do I trust her! She tried to kill me, Tin! But she was able to best me and that means I can use her!”

“Do you think of everyone in terms of their use to you? Is that how you see me too?” Two shades bitter.

“No, you know how much you mean to me. But that’s not the point here. We’re talking about that creature!”

I tune them out as their conversation cycles. Seeing their familiarity with each other gives me a strange feeling, a wistful one that hurts my chest. The easy camaraderie, the genuine concern, they define the word “friend” for each other. I don’t think I have ever liked anyone to the degree that I’d want to call them a friend. How does it feel to have someone
like you? For what you are and who you are? For them to want to spend time with you for no reason other than it gives them pleasure to do so?

It takes us two hours to reach the thickly wooded area just shy of the princess’s camp. The princess informs us that the journey would have been twice as long had we been on normal horses, but Dahy the Beast is able to travel great distances without needing to stop and rest.

The princess, Tinder still on her shoulder, slides down the Beast with an ease that almost turns me crisp with envy. Reacquainted with the ground, she stares up at me. I stare back.

“What?”

“Do you not plan to get down?” she asks pleasantly.

I look at the ground and shake my head. “I think I’ll stay here. The view is…well, all I see are trees but they are…” I trail off and look closer at the magick of the trees. Am I seeing wrong? The magick in the trees is unraveling. The colour of the tree magick is faint and the movement sluggish, not at all similar to what I saw in the human world and by the pixie meadow. I cannot hear the song of the earth magick either. I frown and closing my eyes, slide off the Beast without pausing to consider the consequences of my action. Fortunately, apart from a jarring thump when I reach the ground, there are none.

I walk closer to an oak tree and extend a hand to touch its magick. It barely prickles me, and for some reason that I cannot comprehend, the Croi-inside starts mourning. It’s a shattered sort of feeling, and I rub my chest, bewildered.

“What’s wrong with the magick?” I ask Tinder and her princess.

“Do you feel it too?” Tinder asks looking around with a shiver.
“I see it,” I say, turning back to the silent song. The princess’s lips tighten but she doesn’t say anything. It must have something to do with the Robber Queen. Bad things always seem to have something to do with her.

“Here,” the princess hands me a lacy cloth, triangular with two string ties on two sides. I take it and look at her askance.

“Put it over your face,” she says.

“Why? Does my ugliness hurt your sensibilities?” It hurts mine. I don’t have to look at myself all the time though.

“I have seen kin more hideous than you,” she says. “Put it on unless you want everyone to know what you look like.”

It chafes but I put it on sourly. The veil hides my nose and mouth, leaving only my eyes visible to the world. Tinder flies over to sit on my shoulder, but she doesn’t say a word and neither do I as we follow the princess and her Beast through the trees. Gradually the trees thin, and the princess stops abruptly. I peer from behind her to see what the problem is. Considering my luck, I wouldn’t be surprised if there are swords involved. However, all I see are three female Fae, half-hidden in the gloom of the forest. Two of them have uncovered faces while the third one is veiled like me. They are wearing dresses in varying shades of red, and the two whose faces are visible are beautiful. It seems that to be Fae, one must be beautiful. I can say with some confidence that I am not turning into a Fae-kin.

“Wait here,” the princess tells us tersely and, pulling her beast along, she walks over to where the Fae-maids are standing.

“Do you know them?” I whisper to Tinder who is a warm weight on my shoulder.

“They are Ceara’s handmaids,” Tinder replies.
“All of them?” They are very well dressed for servants.

“Yes, they were handpicked from the Tine nobility to serve the Tine princess.”

“You are a princess as well, how come you don’t have handmaids?” Things would become more complicated if she had some. I can possibly endure one pixie following me around but a whole lot of them? Blood would be spilt. Probably mine.

“The pixies do not believe in such servitude,” Tinder answers haughtily, and I nod sagely. I don’t believe in such customs either.

The princess beckons us closer, and the trio of Fae-maids look at us with expressions ranging from curiosity to suspicion. Their eyes linger on me for long moments and I look back defiantly. They turn away first.

“You all have met Tinder. This is… Saoirse.” The hesitation is accompanied by a look that I ignore. I am too busy admiring the shiny dresses the handmaids are wearing. “These are my friends, Caoimhe, Aislin and Fiona.” Caoimhe has a long face with red-ringed amber eyes and flushed cheeks while Aislin’s features are delicate apart from her lips, which are generous and hint at a tendency to curve. Fiona’s green-ringed brown eyes are sharp and piercing.

“Fiona will return to Faolan and Saoirse will take her place,” the princess is saying when I finally deign to listen to her again. What? The princess’s handmaid belongs to Faolan?

“She takes messages between the rebels and the princess,” Tinder whispers in my ear.

“Why can’t I just join your group without pretending to be someone else?” I don’t want to be a handmaid. I don’t believe in them.
“Do you think just anyone can be a part of the traveling party?” Caoimhe says stiffly. I see that she has taken an instant disliking to me. I seem to provoke that reaction in a lot of kin. “Everyone, from the cook to the horse goblin, is carefully vetted before they are allowed to exist in the proximity of our royalty.”

“Will you Glamour her?” Aislin asks the princess, and I take two steps back. No one is Glamouring me.

“How else will we convince everyone that you are Fiona?” the princess says, correctly interpreting my actions.

“It’s a risk you’re going to have to take,” I reply. No one is ever Glamouring me again.

A tense silence follows as the princess considers my words. Then she shrugs, her features smoothing over. She removes a set of the dark uniform common to Faolan’s soldiers from her saddlebag and hands it Fiona. She tells me to wear the dress Fiona had been wearing. That is one command I am happy to obey, and I change behind a tree, slipping gleefully into a dress the colour of a sparking fire. I wonder if the shine of the dress will rub off on me but when I rejoin the group, all of them, even Tinder, take one look at me and their faces turn politely blank. Their reaction tells me more than they think. I add iron to my smile and refuse to feel shame.

“Fiona had no conversations with anyone and often kept her eyes downcast so if we are careful, no one will notice,” the princess says to me and turns to Fiona who bows her head deferentially to the princess.

“Find Faolan, tell him we are all right and that…I…we will see him…soon.” Fiona nods once and is gone.
“Why didn’t you give her your beast?” If Faolan is still at the Redcap camp, he is hours away and that is a long way to go on foot.

“She’s a fleet-foot,” the princess replies, rubbing her beast’s flank. “She’ll be able to reach Faolan in less than the time it took us to get here. Did Monca go to Lorcan?” She addresses this question to the remaining handmaids.

“Yes, my lady,” Aislin says, “but we must hurry. She warned that she could not keep him occupied for more than one hour.”

“Who’s Monca?” All these new people are making me feel anxious. How am I ever going to remember what they are all called?

“She’s my brownie-mother,” the princess answers.

A brownie? A real brownie and not a magicked one?

“A real brownie?” I ask breathlessly.

“Are there any other kind?” the princess responds drily. If only she knew.
Chapter Twenty-Four

The dress I am wearing is made of gossamer; it is soft, splendid and strange. It slides against my skin, making me conscious of my body in a way I have never been before. Even though I, Croi, the something that used to be a brownie, put the dress on, it is the Croi-inside who is filling out the sleeves, the bodice and the waist. I exist in parts now. The legs are mine, the hands are hers, the torso is mine, and we’re fighting over the head.

The princess, her handmaids, Tinder, and I are standing right outside the camp, behind three oak trees that grow close together. The handmaids present stoic faces to their mistress but they are nervous—the colour in their cheeks gives them away. I don’t know the reason for their nervousness and it isn’t assuring. The princess clutches the Beast’s reins tighter and with a smile so brittle glass would covet it, she leads the way into the camp.

Tinder has concealed herself in my hair, seemingly preferring it to the princess’s cleaner cloak and I can feel her warmth on the back of my neck. I don’t know what to expect so I am ready for anything sharp and dangerous. According to the princess, the camp contains fifty Tine soldiers, ten horse goblins, seven chefs, seventeen Tine Fae, and countless imps. Imps, Tinder tells me, are pixie-sized fire breathers who attach themselves to Tine Fae. She doesn’t like them at all. We enter the camp through the area set aside for the horses. I see my first horse goblin here. Horse goblins are short kin with sharp faces, gentle eyes and an affinity for horses that make them perfect stable hands. The horses are kept in an enclosure fenced by red-orange threads of Tine magick. At the rear of the enclosure, we meet a horse goblin the princess calls Mim. He takes the Beast’s reins from the princess and leads him away. Freed of the Beast’s conspicuous presence, the princess starts walking with furiously quick steps.
The first glimpse of the camp surprises me. I had expected something similar to the Redcap camp but what I see here is more a tent city than a camp. Colourful tents have been set up in a circle with the largest and grandest smack-dab in the center. An organized chaos choreographs the movements of the Tine kin as they all perform whatever duties have been assigned to them. Rotund creatures I do not recognize tend cooking fires. The air is fragrant with the smell of the cooking and my stomach rumbles. The Tine soldiers have on dark uniforms similar to the ones worn by Faolan’s soldiers. According to Aislin, the Tine Fae sitting in small groups dressed in billowy shirts and pants are soldiers who are not on duty. They are talking in low, hushed voices. Both male and female soldiers make up the royal guard and three quarters of them seem to be on duty. The atmosphere in the camp is restless and watchful; even those soldiers not dressed for duty seem as tense and ready for danger as I am.

The princess tries to hide herself among us but that is somewhat difficult when she is dressed in a fire-red tunic with matching leggings and a hooded, white cloak. Maybe she didn’t learn the fine art of camouflage. Maybe I should have introduced her to mud. A little page-kin with light orange skin and curly black hair notices her first and his exclamation garners the attention of the older soldiers. The princess gives a resigned sigh, puts her head up and walks as though she expects everyone to get out of her way. The soldiers bow in her presence; some even sink to their knees. But behind the deference I hear a wave of whispers and all of them are mutters of surprise at her appearance. The soldiers all thought the princess was ensconced in her tent, waiting for her father. Hmm. It seems that the princess’s trip away from the camp was not common knowledge. How did she manage to conceal her absence?
“The Glamour wore off me this morning,” Aislin whispers apologetically. Ah. Though the soldiers whisper among themselves as we pass them, not one of them moves to stop the princess and demand an explanation from her. I am vastly relieved because their swords have serrated edges, and I do not fancy finding out how they will feel cutting into my skin. We are almost at the largest tent, a pavilion really, and I have begun breathing easier, when the princess comes to an abrupt stop.

It is not with a word or a spell that we are halted; the mere presence of a Tine Fae causes the princess and her companions behind her to come to a standstill. I would have continued walking had Tinder not pinched me. Anger emanates from this Tine Fae, scorching us in its intensity. He is tall and broad, with a narrow face, a pointed chin, and a sharp nose; his skin is dark. His hair is the exact same red as the princess’s. His magick, too, is a shade similar to the princess’s, and I look at him closely, wondering if they are related. This Fae is much older than we are but not as old as Uaine. He is wearing magickally enhanced armour over the dark tunic and pants common to the soldiers. His eyes, a light brown ringed by orange, are narrowed to slits and trained on Ceara. Fury has blanked his expression and I shiver.

So fierce is his regard that Aislin and Caoimhe move closer to the princess, while I edge away from her. If there are going to be flying arrows or daggers or whatever this kin handles, I do not want them hitting me accidentally.

“You were told, were you not, that leaving the protection of the guard is forbidden?” His voice is low, measured, and without inflection. Yet, anger hisses through it. “I will not ask you where you have been because I fear I know the answer only too well. You send your brownie-mother to distract me? Do you think I will fall prey to her tricks?” His anger builds
until his voice is a roar. “You wilfully involve yourself in matters that do not concern you! Your guards,” his gaze flays the soldiers who have arranged themselves around the princess and I feel a spurt of sympathy for them, “will be replaced and doubled. You will not be allowed–”

“You forget yourself, Lord Lorcan,” the princess says icily, cutting him off. “You do not tell me what I am and am not allowed to do.” She is brave, this princess, to ring her voice loudly in front of this angry soldier. She doesn’t see that her words sit ill with the soldiers this Lorcan calls his comrades.

“Your father–” Angry Lorcan starts.

“Exactly. You are not my father.”

Do I imagine the spasm of pain that distorts his features for a second?

“Until I hear directly from my father about what I can or cannot do, I shall keep my own counsel. As you persist in reminding me so often, I am the Tine princess.” With that, the princess walks past Angry Lorcan, with her face smooth and her head held high. The other two handmaids follow her. I cannot resist looking back, however, and I see in Lorcan’s eyes, the frustrated words his mouth is not allowed to shape. I wonder who he truly is, beneath the anger and the hurt.

I put him out of my mind and focus on the kin I most want to see. The princess’s brownie-mother, Monca she is called. Will I be able to identify her as a brownie? Will she look like the past Croi? What if she doesn’t? I look around but I don’t see anyone that looks like a brownie. Mouths shut and eyes looking directly ahead, we walk past more tents, soldiers and fires. Just before we reach the tented pavilion, the princess stops again, and we all tense.
“Monca!” the princess exclaims, her voice fuller than I have ever heard it. She moves to hug a short, plump kin with faded yellow hair and wrinkled skin. I stare at the bits of her that haven’t been enveloped by the princess’s taller frame, and as though the brownie feels my eyes on her, she turns and I see the colour of her eyes. They are the exact same size, shade and shape mine were before I started breaking.

I am struck mute. Looking at her is like looking in a mirror at a Croi given colour by experiences, and fine lines by time. I hadn’t been a complete lie. I had been a true brownie, at least on the outside. This knowledge is both sweet and bitter.

“Who is this?” She has a rich voice, this brownie-mother. It makes me think of nutmeg, hot drinks, and the Hag.

We have paused before the curtained opening of the pavilion and a look at the tense faces of the guards tells me that Angry Lorcan has followed us here. When he hears the brownie-mother’s question, he looks at me as well. I try to look as harmless as possible.

“You’ve met Fiona before, have you not?” The princess’s voice is disinterested as if my presence is common knowledge and does not warrant comment. Monca’s eyes sharpen, and she gives me a closer look.

“Avert your eyes!” Tinder hisses in my ear. I hurriedly look down at the ground, putting in more effort to seem timid and handmaid-like. I don’t know if I succeed, but the princess avoids any farther questioning by marching into the tent. I follow her with my eyes still averted. As soon as we are inside, Tinder flies out from under my hair with a relieved sigh only to yelp loudly. I look up to see everyone, even Tinder, sinking to the ground in a curtsey.
The object of their deference is a Fae man of Lorcan’s age, with hair much like a lion’s, yellow sprinkled liberally with red; body, tall and strong; arms, corded with muscle; and skin, tanned dark brown. He is dressed in clothes made of fine, expensive material. His boots are supple brown and mould to his legs. The Fae man is a king, the crown of phoenix feathers and gold that rests easily on his head proclaims that. I turn to my companions and see that each one of them has bowed their head. His face when I finally give it my attention is smooth and boasts thin lips, high cheekbones, a narrow forehead, and thick eyebrows that frame densely lashed tawny eyes ringed with red. His face is unlined but his eyes give his age away. His magick is so powerful that it drags the inner Croi to the surface. We recognize him on some intrinsic level; his magic is familiar to us in a way we cannot yet name.

“Tell me who you are.” He commands us, and I realize that I have been standing here, looking into his eyes for minutes. Everyone else is frozen in their curtsey until this Fae king gives them release from it. I start a curtsey but the Croi-inside won’t let me finish it. She stiffens my spine and locks my legs. I cannot bow before this Fae so I straighten and abandon the attempt. This earns me a dirty look from the princess.

The Fae king, most certainly the princess’s father, for his is the most powerful magick in the room, nods at the kin around me and they, especially Monca, rise gratefully. Then he starts walking towards where I stand near the entrance. The Croi-inside reaches for him, for his magick. Her yearning startles me and I am unable to resist when she takes control of us again. The Fae king reaches us, and we look up at him in wonder.

“I know you,” he says to us. We start to nod and then stop because there is danger here; danger that she, the Croi-outside, does not yet fathom.

“Who are you, child?” the king asks again, his voice the sound of fire.
Instead of replying, we reach out and touch his hand. At the moment of contact, our magicks shock electric inside us. Our magicks and his sing parts of the same song, undulate to the same tune. We find the word for this Fae king and we know by his surprise that he knows the word for us as well. Then darkness comes to claim us and for once, we surrender to it.

When I open my eyes, I’m in a room empty of all furniture except for the bed I am lying on. I have never slept in a bed before. I take one long drawn moment to luxuriate in its softness. My pack is lying beside my pillow and the veil I was wearing has been placed on it. Large windows are open on one side of the room and a breeze, unlike any I have ever felt before, wafts in through them and traces eolian fingers over my skin. Unlike the cold earthy breezes of the forest, this breeze has an underlying heat to it, like a promise from the sun. I lift my head, look outside and blink twice. When the view remains unchanged, I jump out of bed, walk to the windows and stick my head out. As far as I can see there is dry, arid sand and a bright blue sky, uninterrupted by clouds. Not a single tree is in sight, not even a miserly bush. I can see no green, just shades of red and brown stretching on for leagues. The little flame in my veins, the one I had almost forgotten, exults at the sight; the Croi-inside trembles as well. She takes pleasure in the desert while I recoil from it.

The sight of the Tine desert does not bode well for me. I am certain I was in Talamh not even an hour ago. How did I come to Tine so quickly? What kind of magickery was involved? What do I do? How will I get back?

I am just one blink away from full panic when a flash of a magick thread grabs my attention. I see Tine magick winding round and round the room before spilling out of the
open windows and weaving the living picture I see outside. The fire magick is familiar, the fire song muted, but with a brilliant shade. With relief, I realize that the desert is an illusion created by the Tine King; it is his magick that pulses softly around the edges of the enchanted horizon. My breath gets short, and my heart beats faster when I remember what happened before the darkness claimed me. The Croi-inside took over our body; she found out what the Tine king means to us. I try to remember what she knows, but she has drawn that information to a place so deep within us that I cannot reach it. My depths are her domain and no matter how much I entreat her, the knowledge is denied to me. It is probably not wise to smack myself even though the urge is getting stronger.

“Awake, are you?” I start and turn to see the brownie-mother standing at the door. I retreat to the bed without taking my eyes off her. She has an impressive scowl on her face and she looks me over as though I am a stain she has to remove. This brownie-mother, does she not recognize something of herself in me?

“Who are you?” She has a gruff manner of speaking. Her voice is low and rough, as though she has spent her life whispering and has forgotten how to speak normally. She asks me nothing new, regurgitating a question many others have asked before. A question I still have no answer to. I do not respond and she comes closer, shutting the door on her way in. Is that supposed to scare me?

“Where are we?” I ask.

“In the royal pavilion, of course. Where else would we be?” she says, coming to a stop two steps away. I look down at her and she cranes her neck up at me. I am taller now than I was an hour ago. I wonder if her neck hurts like mine used to when I spent hours with the Hag.
“You are not Fiona.” I would have thought that was obvious enough not to need a comment. “The pixie says you call yourself a brownie-something.”

“I am something that used to be a brownie.” I correct her.

She looks at me dubiously. “And you’re not anymore? No, you don’t need to answer.” She looks me up and down, and I grab the veil and tie it around my face. “When did you stop being a brownie?”

“Why do I have to answer your questions?” I glare at this Monca-brownie and her forehead bunches in a ferocious frown. I refuse to be cowed and do not take my eyes from hers.

“If you hurt my Ceara,” she hisses, drawing even closer to me, “I will…”

“You will?” The Croi-inside stirs and slips into my eyes, staring through them at this brownie who gives me all her thorns and none of her warmth. Did I think that just because I used to be a brownie we would have some kind of bond between us? A shared appreciation of being small and helpless? That I would find in her the beginning of the answers I need? I was wrong. Even in Tír na nÓg, I am made of questions.

The Monca-brownie blinks, a strange expression settling in her eyes, and steps back. The power of my eyes is wondrous.

“You will see what I will do,” she says, doubling the gruffness. “Now, follow me. It is dinner time. The king wants to see you.” The Croi-inside jumps at this tidbit while I frantically think of excuses. Seeing the king again will be a folly; I try not to be a fool when I can help it.

“I’m still not feeling well. Can I not sleep some more?”
The Monca-brownie sniffs her contempt. “No one refuses the king’s summons, child. That is the first lesson you should have learned.” She walks to the door and pulls it open before looking at me over her shoulder. “What are you doing? Hurry up and follow me!”

Clutching my pack tightly, I give in and follow the Monca-brownie through a myriad of corridors. The magick used to increase the space inside the pavilion runs underneath our feet in thin orange threads. The floor is covered with a thin carpet, and feels firm, like wood. The inside of the entire pavilion has been woven by magick yet the outside is, I am sure, made of some kind of canvas. How do these Fae play so easily with space?

I want to ask the Monca-brownie things. I want to know how it feels to be a true brownie. If I know, maybe I can properly quantify my loss but I don’t know what to say. How do I translate this void inside me into words? What tone do I use to present them to her? Can one question contain my entire query and if not, what parts of “who I was” are the most important and should be included?

In the end, I follow her silently into the dining room. A large chandelier hanging from the ceiling gives the room a golden glow. I see Tinder sitting next to the fire princess’s plate on a table in the center of the room. She sees me and nods. We are playing parts here: she, the honoured visitor and I, the inconsequential servant. The princess sits on one side of the Tine King and Lorcan on the other. A chair remains empty beside the princess, possibly for the Monca-brownie. Other Tine kin sit at the table besides these four, but they are thrown into shadow by the Tine King. Does he have a name or does everyone call him Tine King?

“Take your place,” the Monca-brownie says. I notice Caoimhe and Aislin standing at attention behind the princess’s chair.
“We don’t get to eat?” This is crueller than if they had just lashed me with a whip. How am I supposed to endure watching food that I cannot eat pass right in front me? I look at the Monca-brownie with wounded eyes.

“Servants eat later,” the Monca-brownie says and pushes me farther into the room. I am tempted to turn on my heel and go, tempted to take my chances with the unfriendly forest, but the lack of warmth emanating from Uaine’s HeartSeed makes me stay. So I grit my teeth and take my place behind the princess’s chair, but not before I send a glare her way. The princess does not look at me or give any indication that she has even noticed my presence but the Tine King does. He gives me an indecipherable look before turning back to his conversation with Lorcan.

The torture begins.

Platters of food are carried into the room by the same rotund creatures I saw before. They are a kind of kin I do not know. They are not important at the moment; the food is. Different types of meat, gravy, fruit, and dishes I do not recognize but wish I did find their places on the table. Artistically arranged desserts and colourful drinks in pewter jugs are carried out for the enjoyment of the diners. The fragrance of the food nearly makes me swoon, and I furtively wipe the drool from the sides of my mouth. Then my attention is caught by the princess and her father. A father. The thought is novel and I shape the word out, confident that no one can see my lips move beneath the veil. The word has a weight to it, a resonance, like the peal of a brass bell. Who is this king? Why does his kindness to his daughter make me want to weep? He speaks to the princess and pays attention to her replies. He offers her choice bits of meat, and she glows as though he has given her the world. The Croi-inside aches and aches, and suddenly the sorrow twists into a white anger. I know I
should leave before she takes over again, but my feet won’t move and my eyes refuse to look away from the two of them.

Then, swifter than before, the Croi-inside takes hold.

There is something of the lightning in the air. We look silently at the king, but he does not give us the attention he lavishes on the princess. Why will he not see that we are of his blood, of his magick? We wait one swollen moment, but his head does not turn and his eyes do not look upon us. So we cross the distance between us. We hear the handmaids stir in alarm, hear Tinder squeak, and the princess turn, but they don’t matter. We will not be ignored.
Chapter Twenty-Five

“Next time, could you give me a warning before changing personalities?” Tinder hisses. She hovers in the air in front of me with her arms crossed and a scowl marring the delicate features of her face. It was her quick thinking that saved me from what would probably have been a really painful death. Before the Croi-inside could touch the Tine King and incur the wrath of all present, she flew into me, scattering pixie dust in my eyes, causing me to stumble and fall. My dignity needs to be scraped off the floor under the dining table, but I’m still breathing.

I don’t understand why the Croi-inside is so volatile where the Tine King is concerned but I do know that she is keeping secrets from me. How can she keep secrets from me if we are the same person? We are not the same person, are we? I am me and she is…I don’t know what she is but I do know that I don’t like her. What will she gain from keeping secrets anyway? Is she planning something she does not want me to know? Can she do that? Ah, my head aches. I look at Tinder who has settled on a lavishly embroidered cushion and is now flinging irate looks at me.

“Listen, I do not plan these things. You think I want my body to be taken over by a blood-thirsty…whatever she is?” I say sourly.

“What? What do you mean? Are there two versions of you? Which one am I talking to right now?” Tinder’s irritation immediately changes to fascination. I suppress a sigh of annoyance.

“No. Forget I said anything. I cannot explain things I don’t understand myself. I can’t control my changing; didn’t I tell you that?” I rub my eyes with hands that shake slightly.

The Tine King may cause the Croi-inside to spark and burn, but he makes me sad and I don’t know why. I never know why or how or, I take a deep breath, who.
“Why are you keeping secrets from me? I gave you my word that I wouldn’t reveal anything you told me!” Tinder says, looking upset.

“How can I tell you a secret when I don’t even know what it is?” What am I supposed to do? Battle the Croi-inside?

“I don’t know anything about you, do I? What if you do something like this again?” Tinder says. I shrug. I didn’t ask her to follow me around.

“You can leave anytime you want to,” I say. I ignore the hurt on Tinder’s face and the pang the thought of her leaving causes me.

We are sitting in an antechamber of the dining room where the guards deposited us after Tinder told them that I wasn’t reaching for the king but the food in front of him. According to her, I cannot control myself when I am hungry and in the presence of food. The excuse is not far-fetched. She didn’t exactly lie. Food is important to me but not so much that I cannot control myself. I don’t think Lorcan was too convinced because he gave me a black look before I staggered out of the dining room. Well, Lorcan’s rage does not matter to me because I don’t care about him. He won’t harm the princess’s handmaid—my safety is practically guaranteed.

“Do you think someone will give us food?” I get to my feet and move in the direction of the door that leads out to the dining room. Aislin enters the chamber just then and I nearly crash into her. Thankfully, she is much quicker on her feet than I am and moves out of the way before I can bump into her and send everything she is carrying to the floor. That would have been an absolute tragedy as she comes bearing a platter full of delicious food.

“Here,” Aislin dumps the platter unceremoniously on the short table between the two divans. “Our princess sent this for you.”
Her words give me pause and I look at her suspiciously. “The princess did?”

“Our princess has a heart made of gold.” It must get so heavy in her chest. “She felt sorry that your hunger was so intense that you fainted.” The fire princess didn’t believe Tinder’s excuse either then. The platter contains meat cooked in gravy and served with tiny white puffy grains. There are nuts and other strange but obviously delicious things on the plate.

I remove the veil, pick up the fork, tune out the handmaid and start eating. The first bite is a burst of flavour in my mouth. I am certain a tear or two escapes my eyes at how good everything tastes. After my hunger is slightly sated, I emerge from my eating haze to see Aislin and Tinder gaping at me.

“What?” I swallow and ask.

“You…really were hungry,” Aislin says as though she had doubted Tinder’s words. Tinder can’t lie any more than I can. It is just that there are as many truths as there are perspectives. My hunger is one truth and the Croi-inside another.

“Yes,” I say with a happy sigh. “Could you get me some of that red drink? It looked so delicious.” Aislin opens her mouth to perhaps refuse, then gives a quick shake of her head and exits the room, leaving me to my rapidly disappearing feast.

“Oi, Tinder,” I say between chews. Tinder pauses in her act of thievery. She’s removing a succulent morsel from my plate.

“I didn’t get to finish my meal because I had to stop you from…what were you going to do to the king anyway?”

“I don’t know. Probably demand some food from him.” I do not want to think about the king and upset the Croi-inside any farther. “You said the Robber Queen’s father had
Ceara’s mother’s family killed, didn’t you? Ceara’s mother too?” The fire princess’s history feels less like reality and more like the bad stories humans like to tell.

Tinder’s mouth is smeared with gravy and I hide a smirk as she furiously chews, looking a lot like one of the squirrels that lives near the Hag’s dwelling in the Wilde Forest. It takes her a while but finally she manages to swallow her mouthful of food. “No, well, yes. I heard that Ceara’s mother was wounded in the massacre that killed her family. Monca helped her escape to a cave. That’s where she gave birth to Ceara and then died.”

“What was Monca doing there?” This Monca-brownie has been around a long time.

“She’s originally the Ceara’s mother, Maebh’s brownie-mother.”

I take a big bite of a soft squishy fruit and its juices dribble down my chin. I almost wipe it on my dress but then remember that I am wearing something incredibly beautiful; it would anger people if I destroyed it. “But if she was married, wait, do kin get married? If she was married to the Tine King, why was she in Talamh? Where is she buried? Do kin bury their dead?”

“I don’t know why she was in the Talamh Caisleán. I don’t think anyone does.” Tinder takes another bite and I have to wait for her to finish the mouthful before she continues. “Yes, we emulate the human tradition of marriage. We also bury our dead but Monca says that the Maebh turned to dust. That there was no body left to bury.”

“They believed her?”

“We can’t lie, remember?” Of course I do, but I’m sure that the Monca-brownie could find a way. “Besides,” Tinder dabs at her lips with a small white scrap of cloth, “Monca’s presence alone convinced everyone of Maebh’s death. Brownie-mothers only separate from their royal charges when one of them dies; their loyalty is the stuff of songs and legends.”
“Why would Maebh turn to dust?” I ask.

“Monca said it was the grief.”

“Grief can turn people to dust?” Tinder shrugs. I am amazed. I will do my best never to get that sad.

My stomach full, I push the empty platter away and glance at the door to see if Aislin is back with the drink. She is certainly taking her time.

“I know what you are going to ask next.” Tinder lies down on the table in front of me and pats her slightly protruding stomach. Anyone who knows how to appreciate food is wonderful.

“I want to know, too, what questions and answers hold court here,” the princess’s voice reaches us. I turn to see her framed in the doorway to the chamber. She is carrying the drinks I requested—all right, demanded—from Aislin. Walking over to us, she places the jug of the red juice on the table next to a golden goblet before sitting down across from me. I help myself.

“The Robber Queen who lives in Talamh Caisleán murdered your family, or so everyone tells me. I am inclined to believe them. Why then would you and your father be on your way there? Are you not afraid that they will try to murder you too?” I ask after a swig of the drink. I was right. It is as delicious as it looks.

In the light from the torches burning on stands in the corners of the room, the princess’s face looks pale, tired and nothing at all like the fiery creature from a few hours before. She sighs softly and leans back against the uncomfortable divan. “We cannot miss the Saol ceremony,” she says, her voice all aches and regrets.
The Saol ceremony? From the expectant looks the princess and Tinder direct toward me, I am clearly supposed to respond appropriately. Did the Hag teach me this and I just failed to learn or did she not mention it at all?

“You don’t know what the Saol ceremony is?” Tinder asks disbelievingly when it becomes clear that I have nothing to say.

“Is that a crime?” From the way she is gaping at me, it probably is.

“I really would like to meet the creature who raised you,” the princess says with an equal note of incredulity in her voice. I think of the Hag and agree silently. There are questions I need to ask the Hag as well.

“Well, are you going to tell me or will you keep me in suspense?”

“Every seventeen years, the monarchs of each of the four kin kingdoms gather in the heart of the Talamh Caisleán. There they have the Saol ceremony, the details of which are not known except to the monarchs themselves. Well…I do know that there is a blood binding involved. Oh and that the presence of the HeartStones –” the princess says and I start.

“Wait, HeartStone? What is a HeartStone?” I interrupt her. Is it like Uaine’s HeartSeed?

“It’s the essence of the element, the link between the kin and the element magick they wield,” Tinder recites as though she has memorized someone else’s definition of it. “For Talamh kin, the Talamh HeartStone is the link between them and the earth.”

“So you are going to go bleed on the Tine HeartStone and bind it to yourself?” The thought nauseates me while the Croi-inside thrums at the idea. She and I may need to have words soon, that is, I need to talk to myself soon. It will be an interesting conversation.

“My father is,” the princess says.
“So why are you here?”

“The Robber Queen requested my presence.” The princess’s lips curl in a smile that has nothing but jagged edges. “She didn’t say why but there are rumours.”

“Rumours…” The word sounds deliciously wicked. Almost as wicked as the Robber Queen is said to be.

“That the land rejects her reign and she needs Ceara’s blood to complete the Saol ceremony,” Tinder chirrups, weaving unsteadily. She has drunk a bit too much of the red drink.

“The Tine King agreed to her request?” Do fathers usually push their daughters into danger? Not having had a father, I don’t quite know.

“He has no choice if he wants to attend the ceremony. Taking part in it is crucial for the replenishment of the magick in our lands. I don’t think the Robber Queen would deny him entrance but it’s a risk my father does not want to take. Without the completion of the Saol ceremony, the elemental magick will start dying and with it, everything else.”

That sounds dire. The princess has a complicated life. I find in myself the tiniest bit of sympathy for her plight. I offer her a slight smile but she dismisses it with a look. Oh well, I’m magnanimous enough to forgive the slight. After all, I am not the one being taken into enemy territory. Oh no, no one needs to take me; I’m waltzing in there all by myself. At least I don’t have to bleed for anyone.

“Any more questions?” the princess asks.

“Just one.” I give her a toothy smile. “Why seventeen years?”

“I don’t know,” the princess replies and turns to Tinder who has settled comfortably in my empty drinking goblet. “Do you know?”
“Nuh,” is what I hear.

Quiet descends upon the three of us and we sit, in the waning light of the torches, until Aislin and Caoimhe come to fetch us. Everyone else has retired for the night and we are told that sleep would be a good idea given that we’ll be expected to be up and ready to leave at dawn the next morning. I end up in the same room I was in earlier with Tinder making a little nest for herself beside my pillow. The room adjoins the princess’s quarters though the door between our rooms is locked. There are two guards in front of the princess’s room. Aislin and Caoimhe will sleep on either side of her bed in order to protect her from midnight assassins and other scurrilous creatures. I guess the handmaids have talents I am not aware of. The brownie-mother also has a pallet in the princess’s room for the night. It must get crowded in there.

The compassion I felt for the princess earlier becomes more pronounced until I can’t dislike her without feeling guilty. I do try but somehow, her life, though more abundant than mine in both love and wealth, is more defined by what she doesn’t have than what she does. She has a father who loves her, but it is her lack of a mother that everyone sees first. She has power but no freedom to wield it; land, but no security to explore it.

At least she knows who she is, what she is and where she belongs. What do I have? A HeartSeed that’s fast losing its warmth, the fading memory of a Hag, a pixie who may be my friend, and this breaking body. But ah, I will have freedom once I have given Uaine’s sister the message and the HeartSeed. Freedom. What else do I need? I drift off to sleep on those thoughts and where the hours go, I do not know because soon it is morning, the camp has been packed up, and we are riding hard and fast on a path toward the Caisleán.
We stop only twice that day, once at midday for food and an hour’s rest and again in the evening for dinner and sleep. The camp is set up and taken down through magickal means and all the soldiers do is look fierce and ready for kin with murderous intentions. Their attention is unwarranted as we are not attacked by anything or anyone. In fact, not even a rabbit crosses the road on which we travel. I ride with the princess as I cannot yet ride on my own, something that gains me a lot of sneers from my traveling companions. The princess does not converse with me; it seems that the closer we get to the Caisléán, the colder she gets on the inside. She seeks comfort from Tinder who sits on her shoulder and chatters about what flowers taste best. The Monca-brownie looks at me with stony eyes. I don’t understand her hostility. There is no sign of the Tine King; Tinder tells me that he prefers to ride ahead and await the rest of the group at the designated stopping areas. I suppose his power is great enough that he does not need to fear horrors like the Redcaps but the Croi-inside worries for him. Worrying, I learn, is similar to being stung by sharp nettles. It is an unpleasant feeling and I don’t understand why the Croi-inside insists on feeling it.

I am extremely glad to stop for the last time on the second day. The Caisléán is near, Tinder tells me, but even if she hadn’t, I would have known. I can feel it, hear it even. Just as the compulsion spell tugged at my limbs, the Caisléán tugs at my chest, in the space where my heart is supposed to be.

The princess’s pavilion, with all its luxuries, is set up and I am sent to the bathing rooms with stern orders. Tinder accompanies me not because she wishes my company but because she wants to ensure that I do actually scrub myself clean and don’t just pretend to. I think I’m offended that she doesn’t trust me to clean myself but I let her tag along without making too much of a fuss. The truth is, the princess’s pavilion with its many rooms and
impossibilities unsettles me. The heat-heavy air caressing my skin makes it easier for the Croi-inside to come out which makes me feel like I am disappearing faster than I should. When the Glamour is fully broken, where will I, the something-that-used-to-be-a-brownie, be? Who will be wearing my skin? Will it be the Croi-inside? Will I be consumed by her? I stop walking abruptly and Tinder nudges my shoulder with her foot.

“Why have you stopped?” she asks.

“I’m scared,” I say and cannot quite control the tremble in my voice. I take deep breaths and Tinder darts around me, her concern turning her magick a pale green.

“What scares you?” She settles on my shoulder and I push open the door to the bathing room without answering her, only pausing to lock it behind me. I remove the veil and then my clothes while Tinder sits on a windowsill with her back to me. The room, dominated by a large pool that takes up the majority of the space and smaller, enclosed squares for private bathing, is another impossibility. Where does the pool come from? Where does it go when the pavilion is dismantled? What kind of magick does making such a room take?

I have come late enough that everyone else has used the bath and I can luxuriate in the pool without having to share it with anyone. I get in and sink into the steaming water until the only thing visible is my head.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Tinder says.

I shrug; content to keep my thoughts to myself. My fear is not something that can be discussed and washed away by the cloudy waters of the bath.

“We will reach the Caisleán tomorrow,” I choose to say instead. Tinder’s features tighten at my elusion. “Do you still intend to stay with me?”
“I have not changed my mind. Being with you is infuriating and a bit smelly at times, but it is more fun than I have ever had,” she responds with a sniff. I glower at her and start scrubbing. I didn’t bathe one night, just one night, because I was too tired, and now she won’t let me forget it.

“Oh, I need to send a message to my mother!” Tinder jumps to her feet and I watch, fascinated, as she concentrates her focus until a single thread of earth magick appears in her hand. She doesn’t seem to see the thread, but she knows it is there because she closes her fingers around it. She squeezes it briefly, mutters a word or two and flexes her fingers until a spark charges the magick thread, traveling through it like a pulse, so fast that it is gone in less than the time it takes to blink.

“What did you just do?” I rise halfway out of the bath. Tinder raises an eyebrow and I sink back down.

“I sent a message to my mother.”

“Magicked message?”

“How else would I send a message?” she says as though it is common knowledge.

“Could you teach me how?”

“The most important thing about the spell is the intent. Pluck a thread of magick from the earth and think of the person you want to send the message to. Then think of what you want to say, give it a push, and let the magick go. Oh, but I don’t know if you can do it, being Tine and all.”

Her words send me into a quandary once again. I am some kind of Fae; I can no longer deny the shape my body is turning into. My affinity for fire makes me Tine, or so Ceara insists, but do I belong wholly to fire? What of my ability to hear earth magick? I look
down at my hands. My magick is green with strands of brown running through it. Does that mean I belong to both fire and earth? What about my double-ringued eyes? I haven’t heard of anyone being able to wield more than one element magick. There is no one I can ask. Or perhaps there is, perhaps Tinder has some answers. But how do I tell her the truths about my unbecoming?

“I’m going to find Ceara,” Tinder says, cutting into my reverie. “Make sure to clean properly!” She slips through the space between the door and the floor and is gone before I can respond. I sigh and dunk my head in the bath, seeking a little peace from the silence in the water.

Much later when I am in bed and holding my pack tight, trying to infuse the HeartSeed with my warmth, it occurs to me that while talking to Tinder may not give me answers, a conversation with her could, perhaps, ease the knot that is growing tighter and tighter inside my chest. I look at the empty space beside my pillow. Tinder has chosen to spend the night with Ceara. I close my eyes and court sleep, deciding to speak with her before we reach the Caisleán tomorrow.

I am almost in sleep’s embrace when they attack. They do not give me a chance to scream, cry, or defend myself. A piece of cloth wrapped around my mouth gags, silences, overpowers me. My hands and legs are tied, and I am trussed up like the chickens whose bones I have gnawed upon in the past. My attackers are Tine soldiers though none of them are ones I know. It takes two of them to carry me out of the room, through the corridors, out of the princess’s pavilion and into the night. The guards around the pavilion avert their eyes when they see me; for the first time since this started, fear pricks my insides awake. I reach
for the Croi-inside and find her quiet and wary. She is content to wait and see how this adventure plays out before making a move. I hate her.

The soldiers carry me some distance away from the camp to a little clearing where a tremendous fire is burning. It is malevolent, this fire, with red flames and smoky breath. Fear drums harder in my chest. I look around and see a dark figure detach from the trunk of a nearby tree and walk into the light. Lorcan. Why would Lorcan have me kidnapped from my bed?

The soldiers place me on the ground before the fire. I glean some comfort from the earth pressing against my skin. Lorcan drops to his haunches before me and with one hand, rips the gag out of my mouth. I take a deep breath, wheezing as the cold night air stings my throat on its way in.

“Tell me who you are,” he says softly, almost kindly. I stare at him stupidly. I still do not understand why he had me brought here. Did the princess order him to do this? Or was it the Tine King? Did I trust Tinder wrongly? But why would he do this? I mean no one any harm.

“I heard that you hurt the princess, almost killed her,” he continues in that eerie voice, and I shudder. He is right, I did. “How much pain do you think she felt?”

Without warning, he pushes me into the fire. I barely have time to gasp a breath before the flames reach for me. The heat has no bite but the flames feel solid; they feel like they have the serrated edges of the swords beloved to the Tine soldiers. Lorcan holds up a hand and the fire stills, revealing his mastery over it. I am afraid now, not of the pain, but of what the fire will do to me who diminishes slightly every day. The Croi-inside loves fire; it builds her bridges from the darkness she exists in to outside, where I do. The fire lets her take
control of our body, and become stronger than I am willing to let her be. I can feel her
fevered anticipation for the flames. I will fight and I do, clenching my fists against the
inevitable invasion.

“Will you not tell me who you are and why you are going to the Caisleán?” Lorcan
whispers, his voice losing its soft edges for the first time.

I try to call his magick to me but the Croi-inside will not cooperate. I tighten my lips,
grit my teeth and ready myself for pain as Lorcan waves a hand, allowing the fire to ravage
me. The flames gain tangibility, become solid, and rush at me, cutting my skin with their
edges as they continue through my skin and into me. And yes, it is every bit as painful as I
had thought the soldiers’ swords would be. The Croi-inside lets the fire in, revelling in the
heat, welcoming the flames and the malevolence into our blood, lungs and heart. I do not
realize I am bleeding until the first drop of my blood falls onto the earth.

It is just one drop, but the effect is instantaneous and immense. The Croi-inside is
shocked still when the earth reacts to our blood and our pain with an enraged roar. I see
Lorcan turn pale and the soldiers pull out their swords. I see stooping trees stand straighter. I
see the Monca-brownie’s shocked face as a soldier pulls her out from under the leafy shade
of a rowan tree. Another drop of my blood falls to the earth and the roar resounds. My back
arches as pain slices through it in two different spots.

I feel like the world is ending and I am going to go to glory in an inferno. There is fire
within me and fire without me. Anger spreads from my fingertips to my toes. I am going to
break into pieces until even the memories that contain my existence disappear. When the fire
tries to eat me, I have no choice but to become us to continue breathing. When it seems the
world has shrunk to us and to our pain, we feel a hand on our shoulder, and the chaos inside
retreats. The cadence of the magicks inside of us harmonizes with the magick of the kin holding us up. We know before we turn that it is the Tine King, the father. We breathe easier as he wraps a cloth around our arms, staunching the flow of blood and giving peace to an earth that no longer wants it. But what do we do about the fire inside? There is too much of it and we cannot contain its wickedness.

“Give me the fire, child,” the father tells us and we, without question, oblige. It flows out of us and into him and through him, tamed, to its original place.

Lorcan has fallen to his knees in front of the father as have the soldiers. Of the Monca-brownie, there is no sign, though we know she was here; the trees will not keep secrets from us.

“I do not recall asking you to do this, Lord Lorcan.” The father is angry and his anger creates a welt on Lorcan’s face.

“We were told that she harmed the princess, sire.” Lorcan’s voice is even and controlled, betraying none of the darkness that colours his swirling magick. We shrug off the father’s hands and walk closer to the kneeling Fae. He lifts his head at our approach and his irises flare, hatred filling the red depths. We do not understand why he hates us, but we cannot let his actions go unanswered. We sing a single note and when Lorcan’s magick stills, listening to our call, we rip it out of him. He crumples to the ground unprepared for the pain and we watch him scream. We watch him hurt just as he did us. Nobody moves to intercede on his behalf; nobody dares. When his voice thins out with exhaustion, we let his magick go and it slithers back under his skin.

Then we turn and we look at the father with the fiery eyes and the wild hair for a long minute before we walk past him, past the soldiers, and past a little cat snacking on a careless
bird. We walk into the camp and follow the magick to our room. We change out of the
nightgown the princess gave us and into the dress we are supposed to wear tomorrow. Then
we sit on the bed in the dark and wait for the dawn.
Chapter Twenty-Six

The candle flame celebrates his arrival long before he appears.

We are sitting in front of the window, gazing out at the desert painted with night colours. A full moon commands the horizon and looking out at the terrain stretching in front of us, we wonder if we are the illusion or it. The candle on the windowsill provides the only light in the room. The Croi-false struggles to get our body back but for the first time in ever, we refuse to let go. We are always captive to the darkness while she lives free but for a little bit, we are the one who breathes the warm air, who feels the cool floor, and who tastes magick that built this room. We are the Croi-true while she, tainted by brownie-glamour, is the Croi-false. Yet we love her because she is of us and she loves us because she cannot otherwise. A knock sounds on our closed door, and it opens after a pause.

The candle burns brighter, fortified by his presence.

We rise and turn to face the Tine King, the father. Our magick is too similar; he cannot be anyone else. We keep him a secret from the Croi-outside because she is too full of hurt to understand why we must not speak of, or admit to, this relationship. The Tine King looks us over for a moment and walks farther into the room.

“Forgive me for what happened, child. I do not know why Lorcan acted as he did, but I will ensure that he is punished.”

We watch this Fae king speak; his words have the sweetness of truth.

“I must ask you, how do you come to be?” His words surprise us.

“Do you not want to know who I am? That is the question I am most often asked. That is the question you asked first, do you not remember?” The Tine King has no hair on his face but he looks like he should. His eyes are piercing and his power immense but we feel no hostility from him. He will not hurt us intentionally. The emotion he feels right now has the
taste of liquorice, something the Croi-false tasted in the human city. He is bewildered because we are unexpected.

“That question will be answered later,” he says. The veil that usually hides our face lies on the bed, abandoned. We feel no need to conceal the features of this in-between face. “Will you not answer my question?” the Tine King asks again.

“We do not know who created us and for what reason. We were still, and in the dark for a very long time, not asleep but trapped, seeing the world through the cracks in the Glamour. Tasting the world in sips or through remembered sensations. Now we are stronger and this body is sometimes ours.” The Croi-false will not let us become one because she is afraid, but neither of us has a choice. The becoming will be completed once the Glamour has broken. Poor Croi-false, she is all prickle and no sting.

“What of your mother?” he asks with an intensity we are prepared for. He knows who we are though he is not prepared to speak it loud and make it true.

I think of the Fae woman the Croi-false glimpsed. Her wide eyes, her shock, and her desperation coat the memory of her in our mind.

“What about her?”

“What did she do to you?” the king whispers. His palms cup our face and like before, our magicks harmonize.

We do not answer.

The king shakes his head twice as though trying to dislodge an upsetting thought and retreats from us to stand by the closed door.

“We cannot talk more until the Glamour is completely broken. You are fragile in both mind and body. I will not risk causing you harm. You need not worry about Lorcan anymore
but you do have to be careful in Talamh Caisleán.” He adds heat to his warning to make us understand the importance of it. “Keep your broken self in control. I will protect you as I must.”

He leaves. The candle flame flickers once and dies.

The Tine soldiers speak in voices that sound like the wind playing with the sand in the deserts they call home. They do not speak much and when they do, it is to convey an order or accept one. They walk gingerly on the land in the forest, as though they expect the earth magick to bite. It can. The Hag taught me about Talamh’s magickal defenses, but the earth magick only reacts if Talamh feels threatened, and these Tine soldiers do not frighten her.

I am standing outside watching with the Tine soldiers as the camp falls apart in preparation for the final leg of the journey. The soldiers are all dressed in the black tunics and leggings so beloved to all the Fae soldiers I have seen. Their skin is shades of orange, red and brown. All of them have swords with serrated edges, but some of them also have bows and arrows slung over their shoulders. They expected to be attacked but alas, the forest has retracted its nightmares to assure them a safe journey to the Caisleán. The soldiers are frustrated by the lack of action and it shows in the way they act and move. It would take only one spark for this group to become an inferno.

The four soldiers who took me last night are nowhere to be seen. Neither is Lorcan but he must be breaking his fast with the king. I am hungry, but I’d rather endure the hunger than eat with those who have betrayed me. The Monca-brownie told Lorcan about the happenings in the Redcap camp. It was either the princess or Tinder who told the Monca-brownie. Something like grief tries to choke me at the thought of Tinder being the one who
gave me away. We do not have much between us but I would have liked to call what we do have friendship.

The Croi-inside mulls over the thought of a lost friend. We have lost so much, what is one more thing? Yes, but we didn’t know that we could have a friend to lose and that gives this loss a deeper flavour.

“You didn’t come to breakfast!” Tinder’s high-pitched voice reaches us and I turn to see her exiting the pavilion perched on the princess’s shoulder. The handmaids and the Monca-brownie follow close behind. The princess regards me with a tranquil expression, her eyes clear. The brownie-mother, on the other hand, has her eyes downcast. Is her refusal to meet my eyes an admission of the guilt that paints her magick purple?

“Why do you look at Monca so?” the princess asks me coldly. The brownie-mother looks up and puts a wrinkled hand on the princess’s arm, to quieten her perhaps. I cannot presume to know the workings of a brownie mind.

“How am I looking at her?” I ask, surprised by the sound of my own voice. It sounds different: deeper, and hoarser. Like something that has been burnt.

“Like I would the Robber Queen,” the princess responds. Ah.

“Maybe you should ask her that,” I say and raise an eyebrow at the Monca-brownie whose face drains of colour.

“Saoirse?” Tinder flies over to me looking uncertain. I am fiercely glad for the veil covering my face and hiding my expression. No one would like what it shows right now. I give her a quick glance but keep silent and am glad I do so when I spy Lorcan over the princess’s shoulder. His eyes widen and his nostrils flare when he sees me. For a minute it is unclear whether he will join us but then his lips tighten and he moves toward our group with
long unhurried strides. The Croi-inside perks at his arrival in our midst and revels at the careful distance he maintains between his body and ours. She enjoys his discomposure.

“My lady, we will be leaving in fifteen minutes. Please prepare yourself.” It would be unbecoming of a man of his stature and authority to give in to fear so he steels himself and meets my eyes. Whatever he sees in them must add to his disquietude because he turns on his heel and leaves abruptly.

Tinder looks at his retreating back and then at me and frowns. “Did something happen?” The brownie-mother flinches at the question, and the princess’s eyebrows draw together.

“It was a long night,” I say and turn to the horses. I don’t want to tell them the story of my broken trust. I don’t want to listen to their voices, and I don’t want to look at their faces.

“We will discuss this later,” the princess says but she is all too willing to keep moving forward. Yesterday, I would have tried to understand the forces that drive her. “Tinder, you and Saoirse will ride with me as usual.”

“That will not be necessary, Ceara,” the Tine King says from behind us and once again, everyone sinks to their knees. Apart from me, that is. This time though, the slight is intentional and noted by everyone present. I expect some reaction from the Tine King, some unkind word reminding me of who I am not but though I wait, he does nothing to rebuke me. Instead, he gestures everyone up and pulls on the reins that he is holding so I see the beast he has led to us.

The sandhorse is as magnificent as the princess’s Dahy, and I watch as it whuffs, releasing smoke into the chilly morning air. It is softly golden with large orange eyes that have a
strangely gentle look in them. The sandhorse looks at me and I feel a curl of its magick in my mind but rather than being invasive, the magick is pliant and questioning as though looking for a place to belong. The Croi-inside pounces on the magick and binds the sandhorse to us swiftly. At that moment, the sandhorse ceases being an “it” and becomes a “he” for us.

“Father, surely you do not mean to have Saoirse ride a sandhorse by herself. They only respond to Tine Fae,” the princess protests.

“Does she not have Tine in her?” the Tine King asks and answers his own question. Who would deny a king his peculiarities? “Well child, will you try riding him?”

All eyes swing to me and I, shining with the attention, nod and step forward. The sandhorse makes a soft growling sound, and I stop mid-step, unsure. I glance at the king and he nods. I walk until I’m standing so close to the sandhorse he could take a big bite out of me. I hope he resists. I stare into his very red eyes and rethink my enthusiasm.

“Name him,” the Croi-inside whispers. How wonderful, now she is speaking to me.

“I name you Fergal, for the courage you will need and for the human I met,” I say, taking her advice anyway and as soon as I name the creature, he drops to his knees and bows his head, and through the bond between us, I feel his wordless devotion to me. It’s a strange feeling, this bond; it tastes rather like tears at the back of my throat when I’m trying not to cry.

“Is he mine now?” I ask the king who is looking at me with a curious expression. A mix of pride and sorrow. Perhaps the fire princess had more difficulty with her sandhorse so he is impressed by how quickly I tamed the beast. I glance at the princess and find her looking at me through narrowed eyes. Her expression is less than pleased.
“Not until you ride him,” the king says. All right, fine, I will ride the beast. I go to the sandhorse’s side and after slipping off once or twice, manage to get myself settled on his back. The saddle is soft and supple and when I’m comfortably seated, the sandhorse rises to his feet. I grab his mane in panic as I wobble in my seat. Tinder alights on my shoulder and we survey the world around us.

“How do I make him walk?” I ask the king who has moved to stroke Fergal’s mane.

“Use the bond,” he replies, stepping back. I find the bond stretching between us, a thick thread of amber magick, and send a mental picture of walking, slowly. To my pleasure, the sandhorse, Fergal, obeys my thought-request and takes a few steps. Elation floods me and I beam at the world. I won’t have to hold onto the princess anymore and she won’t look at me as though I smell bad. Though to be fair, I did smell bad when we started off.

“Is he mine now?” I ask again. “Will I have to give him back? Can I keep him?” The questions tumble out before my mind realizes that this is the king I am talking to. One usually doesn’t make demands of kings. However, the Fire King doesn’t appear to mind my lack of reverence and smiles at me with a look in his eyes that I cannot name. I smile back at him under my veil.

“The sandhorse is yours,” the king pronounces and it becomes fact.

Tinder is a silent weight on my shoulder. I am content, for the moment, to spend all my energies and devote all my attention to the sandhorse. His life flickers hotly in my consciousness and I know that if I wanted to, I could destroy him. The knowledge is frightening because I have never had that responsibility before. I am not sure I like the fragility it gives the animal breathing fiercely underneath me.
While we were talking, the camp was completely packed up and after the traditional thank you to the earth for giving us shelter, we are on our way. The king is at the head of procession with the princess beside him. The handmaids and I follow and behind us are carts containing diminished supplies. All around us are marching soldiers, tense and ready for anything that even remotely looks dangerous. We could still be attacked; in fact, from the eager looks the soldiers throw around, it seems as though they would rather be attacked than continue on this disappointingly peaceful journey.

Though the forest gets denser as we continue uphill towards the center of Talamh where the Caisleán is located, the road we are traveling on is well kept. No obstacles, magickal or otherwise, block our way. We can hear things hidden in the underbrush though, things that do not show themselves, perhaps the Robber Queen’s spies. Muted sounds of roaring animals and other beasts reach us and, for once, I am glad to be surrounded by soldiers. The scenery is peaceful and would not worth be commenting on were it not for the increasing lassitude in the magick.

The magicks of the various trees are pale in colour and that is concerning enough but it is the magick in the earth that sends a sharp pulse of fear through me. The strands of the earth magick are so faint as to almost not be present. The thinness of the air bodes ill for Talamh life. The Croi-inside is keening and breathing becomes difficult all of a sudden. Fergal reads the tumult in my emotions and stops abruptly. The entire procession comes to a halt and the princess and her father turn to look at me.

“What’s the matter, Saoirse?” Tinder whispers in my ear.

“The magick…don’t you feel it?” Unbidden, my eyes fill with tears and fall. I feel their wetness on my fingertips.
The princess’s face whitens and she gives her father a look laden with meaning. Her father says nothing, and, apart from an inscrutable look directed my way, gives no indication that my words have meaning. He nods at the soldiers to resume their march. Fergal sends me warmth across the bond but it is not enough to reassure me. I wish the Croi-inside would control her emotions because if she is falling apart on the road, I don’t know what will happen when we reach the Caisleán proper.

“What happened, Saoirse? Talk to me.” Tinder’s voice is soft in my ear and I jolt, remembering the fire from the night before.

“Did you tell the Monca-brownie that we tried to kill the princess?” I keep my voice empty of emotion. I will not let anyone know how much yesterday’s fire still hurts. To distract myself, I pet Fergal and then snatch my hand back when he growls. A feeling of amusement transfers to me across the bond. I’m glad I entertain magickal horses.

“No. We?” Her voice sounds disconcerted and with a start I realize that I have been referring to myself in the plural. But am I not more than one?

“Never mind that. Did you really not tell her that?”

“Of course I did not!” Enraged, Tinder flies to hover in front of me, a magnificent scowl distorting her features. “My alliance is with you! Your well-being and mine are linked. I would not do anything that jeopardizes that! If you cannot believe me, tell me, because if we cannot have trust, we cannot have anything.” Despite her hurt, I cannot bring myself to regret asking the questions.

“Wait, why do you ask? Something happened, didn’t it? Did Monca find out?”

Several emotions flit across her face: anger, horror, and lastly concern. The concern feels like
a balm. The Croi-inside protests but I let myself thaw toward Tinder. She is the only friend I have and I’d like to keep her.

“Nothing I want to talk about,” I say and look around to see where the Monca-brownie is. I don’t see her and say as much to Tinder who informs me that the brownie-mother usually travels in one of the supply carts as she is not fond of horses and riding.

Horses are probably not fond of her either.

“Did you not feel the urge to bow before the Tine King?” Tinder says after we have been riding in silence for half an hour.

“What do you mean?” I say, dragging my eyes away from a patch of darkness in the forest on the right side of us. I could have sworn I saw menace-filled eyes blinking at me from in there.

“Well, no one I know can meet a Fae monarch’s eyes without falling to their knees. It has to do with the power Fae monarchs have, the potency of their magick compared to regular kin like us.”

“Do you mean that the kin don’t choose to bow to the king? They have to bow?”

Tinder makes a sound of assent.

“Didn’t you feel it?” she asks when I don’t say anything.

“No. I did feel like asking him to comb his hair but that would have been hypocritical of me, don’t you think?” I look at the king’s long tawny, tangled hair, no doubt missing the ministrations it would have received in the Tine Caisleán.

“Very, considering I don’t think your hair even knows what a comb is.” Tinder’s response is swift and wry but undeniably honest.

“How much farther do you think we have to travel?” I ask.
“I don’t know. I have only been to the Caisleán once when I was very young. Pixies don’t travel much,” Tinder replies with a grimace.

Our conversation falls away and excitement fills me though I confess to some dread as well at the thought of reaching the Caisleán. I am not a fool. I know that the Glamour will eventually break completely. I know there will be a struggle between the Croi-inside and me and I know that one of us will win while the other will be subjugated. I also know that whatever is going to happen will happen at the Caisleán. But even with all this knowing, I feel the thrill of adventure tingle in my toes. I am going places and doing things. I am no longer stuck in the Wilde Forest being a shadow of myself.

We have been traveling for about three hours when I feel the calling for the first time. It pulls at the deepest parts of me, the parts where I exist only in thought. The feeling spreads until my body is straining toward whatever is calling. It’s not something I can hear but it is something I can feel. I urge Fergal to go faster and while the sandhorse does try to obey me, he is restrained by the kin around him. I wriggle impatiently, nearly upsetting Tinder from her perch on my shoulder. She snaps her annoyance and her wings almost slice my cheek open. I mumble a distracted apology but she flies to ride with the fire princess instead. I do not call her back. This is not an experience that I can share or even translate into words.

The trees we pass, though lacking the vibrant magick found farther from the Caisleán, are taller and more imposing, as though they too are aware of their exalted position at the heart of the land. The forest seems to go on forever, so I am almost out of patience when it falls away and we come out into open space.
The entire group comes to a rest on the edge of a mountain. The Caisleán is in a valley surrounded by mountains. Numerous waterfalls cascade down these mountains and then become many streams that join a river that meanders its way through the valley, dipping below ground and then appearing again until its path is hidden by the dense wall of trees surrounding the Caisleán. From our vantage point, we can see the Caisleán in all its glory. And its beauty is more than my mind is capable of comprehending.

Moss covers the walls of the Caisleán; structures such as arched verandas partially enclosed with wooden railings, terraces overlooking gardens, colonnades creating open corridors and large windows are many. Numerous towers reach for the sky and countless pathways link one portion of the Caisleán to the other. Brightly coloured bridges have been built to cross the several streams and the lone river. The forest that forms a wall around the Caisleán breaks in two places, once to allow the streams to join the river that leads into the mountains and again, to allow for gates.

A happiness so potent that it feels like pain fills me at the sight of the Caisleán before us. The Croi-inside echoes the feeling. I gasp as my heart heats and a song builds in my throat. I work hard to contain it because I don’t want to sing magick without knowing what I am doing.

The soldiers, with the Tine King at the front, lead the way down the mountain. I follow them with my eyes open as wide as they can be so I don’t miss anything.

The forest, which continues at the foot of the mountain, is richer, greener somehow, though a quick glance is enough to tell me that the magick is still washed out and weak. The road we are on leads to the large imposing gates that I saw from above. The gates—which are made of wood and magick—are barred by several Fae who are wearing shades of green and
brown, the Talamh soldiers. They all have bows and arrows though a group of them carry swords.

The dirt road we are traveling on turns to a cobbled pathway midway to the gates. The air is sweet and I can hear birds singing. The view of the Caisleán, what I can glimpse of it through the bars of the gates, is unlike the human city. It hasn’t been built against nature but as an extension of it. The trees used for the multiple buildings that compose the Caisleán are still alive and their magick is a curious green, a lazy green, displaying the same lassitude as all the other magick here. My attention is caught when a stray ray of sunshine glints off the golden bell that hangs in the belfry of a tower just inside the gate. Though it gleams in the afternoon sunlight, the bell looks untended and sad. My eyes keep returning to it though I do not understand what attraction it could have for me.

The Caisleán beats like a heart. I can feel its connection to the land. I remember what Uaine told me about the different Caisleán and their importance to Tír na nÓg. She said that the four Caisleán in Tír na nÓg connect the kin to the element whose magick they use. The Talamh Caisleán connects the Fae monarch, and all the kin who live in Talamh, to the earth and its magick.

As we approach the gates, the Tine soldiers tense and strengthen their grip on their swords while the Talamh soldiers remain stoic and silent, looking stiffly in front of themselves. They betray no awareness of our approach even though we are not exactly quiet. I am so intent on peering through the gates that the Caisleán catches me unaware. Even the Croi-inside is unprepared for the onslaught and she takes over in that moment of panic.

We feel a rush of emotions: fierce gladness, anger, despair and sorrow. The emotions are followed by mind-pictures, just like the ones that Uaine showed us, of male kin with long
solemn beards and merry eyes, of female kin with jewelled dresses and laughing faces. The images flood us, moving from happier times to sad times to times of blood and horror. When we are barely hanging on to our sanity, a gravelly voice whispers deep in our head,

“Fáilte Abhaile.” Welcome home.

“Go raibh maith agat. Thank you,” we reply. The Caisleán hums with pleasure. We can feel the Caisleán preparing herself to receive us and when our procession is perhaps ten steps away from the entrance, the large golden bell up on the tower begins to peal crystal notes that echo throughout the valley.

The Talamh soldiers who had remained stone-faced at our approach are undone by the sound of the bell. They start and some of them look at our group uneasily, their eyes lingering on the fire princess who holds herself straight and proud on her beast. She is the picture of deposed royalty returning home to claim her heritage. The gates remain barred though the Caisleán extends her welcome to us through the peals of the golden bell. We are excited, an effervescent excitement, like drinking a drink with bubbles in it. The Croi-false had just such a bubbly drink once in the human city. We remember how delicious she thought it and how loudly it made her sing.

The procession stops before the gates and we wait for the Talamh soldiers to move aside and pull it open. They do not move and we anger. Minutes pass without action until our patience is no more, and we entreat the Caisleán to open her doors for us.

A magicked heat plays warms the Tine King and he turns around to fix a reproving look on us. Though he cannot see it, we give him the sweetest smile we can. Then we wait for the Caisleán to welcome us into her fold. She does not disappoint us. She throws the gates open and the bell peals anew while the Talamh soldiers scatter from the path. The fire
princess leads the way into the Caisleán and though it pricks us to let her go first, we do not bleed. Instead, we smile a secret smile and follow her in.
Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The gates open up to a narrow path lined by more Talamh soldiers. The Tine soldiers bristle but a look from Lorcan is enough to subdue them. Our party is directed up the path and into a courtyard that leads to the entrance of the Caisleán.

Murmurs gain momentum at our approach. It seems as though all the kin in the Caisleán have turned out to welcome the Tine King and the fire princess. They fill the corridors, gardens, pathways and patios; they are peering out windows and crowding balconies, each of them shining bright, each of them becoming the word beauty and then going beyond it. Each one is coloured a shade of the earth and what grows on it: green, brown, and the grey of stone. Some have wicked antlers with sharp tips and some have leaves instead of hair. They wear strange and beautiful clothes fashioned from the wings of butterflies, the silk of spiders and the leaves of trees. Several Fae are veiled like us and this makes us unworthy of comment.

The whispers crest and fall. Waves of emotions, hidden and stark, barrage us. All eyes are on the fire princess and she, in turn, looks at no one; her back is straight and her face must be devoid of expression. She has probably made this journey a million times in her dreams: walked these unknown paths to the heart of the Caisleán and asked it to confirm her existence.

Can the princess hear the Caisleán like we do? Does the princess feel her too?

The watching Fae whisper louder as our procession gets nearer to the center of the courtyard where several servant-kin are getting ready to receive us. The Croi-false wants to look at them longer so we spare the high Fae another glance but they matter little to us.
because at this moment we are drunk on the Caisleán. We feel sorrow, sharp and heavy. Though we do not know why she mourns, we feel her grief chalky on our skin. The Caisleán is not just wood and stone; she is the stronghold of Talamh. To possess her is to possess the land; to possess the land is to rule the land. She gifts us this knowledge. We stop our beast, we close our eyes, and we breathe the Caisleán in.

The Caisleán settles around us, becoming quieter, softer as though our attention reassures her. The chaos retreats and we become aware that the Fire King is beside us. We look at him and meet a question in his eyes. We nod and his expression eases; we are still all right.

The air is redolent with the scent of roses even though I cannot see a single rose bush. The bird song that was so raucous in the forest outside is peculiarly absent here. Not that it matters as the whispers of the Talamh kin thicken the air instead. We have become a spectacle for them and I wish fiercely they would disperse or disappear so I would not feel the pricks of their attention on my exposed skin.

I look around the busy courtyard, making sure not to meet the eyes of any kin. Several Fae who seem to be servants are unpacking the various carts we brought with us. The imps stick to the Tine Fae who mill around uncertainly, waiting to be shown to their quarters. None of the Talamh kin make any friendly overtures; none of them even approach us to give us welcome to the Caisleán. The Robber Queen does not seem to be around which is disappointing. I had been looking forward to comparing her with the Redcaps just to see if she was scarier than them. Still, I am sure we will meet her sooner or later. I look at the grand doors of the Caisleán, thrown open in a hesitant welcome and wonder where her heart is.
I am wondering if I should dismount when Tinder flies back to me, looking as overwhelmed as I feel. “What did the Tine King want with you?” she asks and I frown.

“What do you mean?” I cannot remember him talking to me.

“Just now he came to you, didn’t he? Ceara seemed mightily annoyed by the attention he gave you,” Tinder says in my ear.

Fear chills me at her words. I do not remember the Tine King coming to me. I do not remember if he said anything or if I did. I have no memory of the last ten minutes of my life. What else do I not remember? Am I being absorbed into the Croi-inside? Am I already beginning to disappear?

I wrest myself from the fear that threatens to engulf me and make myself listen to Tinder as she talks about how she has only visited the Caisleán once with her mother when she was a wee one. I dismount and wait while Lorcan and the Tine soldiers make a protective circle around the fire princess and the king, who dismount gracefully. Much more gracefully than I did but no one was looking at me. The gathered Talamh kin show no sign of dispersing and the Croi-inside suggests we move them along but I ignore her. I will no longer let her take me over, no longer be vulnerable to her machinations.

“What do we do now?” I whisper to Tinder as we stand in a group, surrounded on all sides by the Caisleán and the Earth Fae. If they want to kill us, this is the appropriate moment.

“They’ll welcome us in the way of the Talamh,” Tinder replies sounding breathless with anticipation. And what is the way of the Talamh? Should I ask? Do I want to know? No, I don’t think I do.

“And the Robber Queen?”
There is no reply to that question, only a very pointed silence. I suppose it does not do to look too eager to meet an evil queen.

After keeping us waiting for a long three minutes, three Fae women, wreathed with garlands of small red flowers, approach the king and the princess who stand at the head of our party. The Fae women are dressed in gowns made of the scraps of trees: twigs, leaves, vines and bark. Their skin is dark brown with a filigree of gold that I recognize as their magick. Their eyes are the same gold ringed by thick green. They stand shoulder to shoulder in front of the king and the princess, with their backs straight and their eyes downcast, silent. They have delicate, slightly avian features and their hair is a speckled nimbus with a pattern that resembles the feathers on sparrows.

“Who are they?” I ask Tinder.

“Half-kin. One of their parents is of the Aer kingdom. They are enacting the welcome of the Three.”

“What is the welcome of the Three?”

Tinder gasps. “Surely you know the legend of the Three?”

I sigh loudly. She should be used to my ignorance by now. If there is anything I can count on in this world, it is on my lack of knowledge about the things that matter.

“Well, this is not the time to tell you. Remind me to do so before we sleep tonight.”

The Fae women start singing and silence falls like a blanket on the Caisleán, stealing the whispers of even the boldest Fae. They sing pure notes, coaxing the magick up from the Earth. The Croi-inside and I watch as the women try to manipulate the Earth magick into the shape of a physical key. Though their song is more beautiful than any other I have heard before, their magick is weak and refuses their efforts to shape it. Finally, they cast a tenuous
Glamour on a pair of pebbles that one of them concealed in her hands, making them look like ornate keys. The last notes of the Making Song, for that is the song they’re singing, tremble as the women finish their singing, and I see many of the gathered Talamh Fae dab at their eyes. Even Tinder’s voice is thick as she waxes poetic about the magickery of the singing Fae. The Fae women hand a Glamoured pebble each, with great solemnity, to the Tine King and the fire princess and depart the courtyard with small, unhurried steps as though they have not just committed a fraud.

“That was the welcome of the Three?” I ask incredulously. I had been expecting a truly sacred ceremony, not the pretence of one.

“Yes, I will tell you about the Three later,” Tinder says sounding distracted. Before I can ask her anything else, she has flown off in Ceara’s direction. I wonder if she is reporting to her about me. I can well imagine how their conversations must go. Too little time has passed between Tinder and me; our memories together are not yet thick enough to withstand the insecurities and the suspicions this world insists on. Every time I see her being friendly with the fire princess, I realize that our relationship cannot compare to the days and minutes they have known each other. I do not know how to get her to like me better, and the Croi-inside does not want to bother. To her, Tinder is just one more cog in this wheel we are turning.

The Tine soldiers are led off by a stern looking Talamh soldier who looks as though he was poured into his uniform, and the horse goblins take our beasts and horses away to be fed and watered. With some regret, I watch Fergal leave. I don’t know if I will be able to see him again. Our numbers are greatly reduced by the departure of the soldiers though Lorcan retains a number of them for a show of protection. Our group consists of the handmaids, the
Monca-Brownie, Lorcan, the princess, the King, Tinder and me along with four Tine soldiers. The other Tine Fae were taken to their quarters after the Making Song. As we stand in the courtyard, waiting for our escort to be assembled, we are pierced anew by the eyes of the Talamh kin who make no effort to hide the subject of their conversations. Once again, I am fiercely glad that I am not the princess. I wouldn’t handle being on display with the equanimity she is showing.

A number of servant-kin lead us into the Caisleán, across drafty halls, through long corridors and up winding stairs to our assigned quarters. More servant-kin follow, carrying our luggage. A thin-nosed servant-kin with bulbous eyes and a forked tongue informs us sibilantly that we are to stay in our quarters until we are summoned to the presence of the Robber Queen.

Our living quarters consist of five bedrooms and one large living room that is furnished with chairs and little tables. Lorcan moves from the main room to each of the smaller rooms connected to it and I follow him, unable to suppress my curiosity. The rooms are beautiful, furnished with beds and wardrobes, curtains covering windows, and thick rugs softening the hardness of the stone floors. There are no flower vases but once again the air is light with the fragrance of roses.

I am enamoured by the Caisleán. I touch the walls that gleam blue stone in parts and are thick living wood in others. The floor is a mosaic of patterns, shifting and changing, earth one minute and stone the next. Trees bend themselves to provide canopies for the beds in the rooms given to us. Tapestries on the walls give colour to wars fought a long time ago, windows open up to patios and balconies that look over gardens and pavilions where the
Talamh Fae make merry. Were it not for the fact that the magick is dying here, I could almost believe the idyllic scenery before us.

As soon as Lorcan pronounces the rooms safe the handmaids scatter to ready the princess’s clothes. They are scared of him and were I smart, I would be too. But the Croi-inside insists that he poses no harm to us anymore and I believe her. The Monca-brownie clings to the princess and Lorcan to the King. Tinder is sitting on my head because she likes the view from there; I have long since given up any efforts to look dignified so I let her.

“She has no right to treat you like a fief, sire!” Lorcan erupts as soon as the doors close behind the servant-kin. “You cannot let her get away with the disrespect she showed you!”

“What disrespect?” I whisper to Tinder.

“Her absence at the welcoming ceremony is a slight,” Tinder whispers back.

The princess looks startled by Lorcan’s display of temper while Tinder trembles on my head. Though whether from fear or the anticipation of a fight, I don’t know.

“What would you have me do, Lorcan?” the king asks in a weary voice. “Go to war for a land whose magick does not speak to me or to my daughter? Fight to possess a Caisleán alien to me? I am not a threat to her, Lorcan. I never was. We need to complete the Saol ceremony peacefully to renew the magick of the desert.”

“This may not be the right time to tell you then that the magick here is dying,” I say without wanting to. Everyone in the room turns to look at me with varying degrees of shock on their faces.

“What did you say, child?” the Tine King says urgently, fear flickering in his eyes. Why does he insist on calling me child? The endearment feels wrong and makes me angry.
“The magick, it’s dying. Can you really not see it?” Surely the great king of the Tine Fae is able to see magick.

“She says she can see magick,” the fire princess says, breaking the disbelieving silence.

“I proved it, did I not?” I say to her.

“She did!” Tinder surprises me by jumping to my defense.

“Why do you say it is dying?” the king asks. Does he believe me? It seems like he does unless he is merely humouring me in which case I will be appropriately angry.

I look at him, wondering how best to say it. “Magick has no song here,” is what I finally decide on. “I don’t know why, but it is weak and pale. The magick in the trees is sluggish and the Caisleán, can you really not feel her mourn?” The Caisleán’s sadness is constant; I don’t know the reason for it but I am immersed in her sorrow. I feel it inside of me and outside of me, in my lungs, in my toes, even under my fingernails.

“Feel the Caisleán?!” the princess snaps, her eyes full of fire. “That’s absurd. Why would you be able to feel the Caisleán? How can we believe you when every time you open your mouth, lies spill out?” She storms across the main room into a bedroom and bangs the door behind her. I watch her go, a bit flummoxed by her outburst.

“What did I say?” I ask Tinder who shrugs before flying after her. She knocks on the door and one of the handmaids opens it for her. The king gives me a grave look while Lorcan looks everywhere but at me.

The Monca-brownie moves to follow the princess but the king stops her. “Wait, Monca. I would speak to you.” His words hold her in place, much like the butterflies pinned by humans in the city I left behind. She is pale and sweating, her eyes downcast and her
desire to be elsewhere is written in the way she holds herself stiff and unwilling. I wait, eager to hear what the Tine King will ask but he foils my plans.

“Go to Ceara, child. Talk to her. Understand what makes her so upset.” I open my mouth to argue that there is no way the princess would utter a single syllable to me but another glance at the look on the king’s face convinces me to leave the room. I don’t go to the room the princess has claimed as hers though; instead, I step through the large open doors to a balcony attached to the main room and sit on one of the chairs provided. The Caisleán is spread out like a feast in front of me. Now that I am here, I want to know the nooks, the crannies, the shady alleys and the hidden corners of this place. I wonder which hidden corner is the heart of the Caisleán.

The warmth I feel for the Caisleán scares me. I am not going to stay, of course, I did not even want to come here, but now that I am here, I cannot bear the thought of ever leaving. The attachment I feel to the Caisleán frightens me because I am not sure whether it is me or the Croi-inside who feels this way.

“Why do you think you and I are separate?” the Croi-inside whispers.

“Because this conversation would not be possible if we were not,” I say out loud.

Tinder alights on the railing in front of me, giving me a quizzical look. “Who are you talking to?”

“Myself. I have wonderful conversations with myself,” I say breezily.

Tinder raises an eyebrow at the comment but does not respond. She is perturbed by something, probably something the fire princess said. The princess is extremely good at perturbing people.

“Can you really feel the Caisleán?” she finally asks.
“Yes, is that so strange? I thought everyone could,” I say and get up, feeling restless all of a sudden. Itchy as though I want to crawl out of my skin. Maybe the Croi-inside does. Maybe she no longer wants to be inside. The thought sobers me and I return to my chair, pulling my knees up to my chest.

Tinder looks like she is carefully choosing her words. “No, not everyone has that honour.” She stresses the word “honour” as if to convince me of its truth. “Even Ceara can’t because she cannot wield Earth magick.”

“Her mother was Talamh Fae so why isn’t she able to use Earth magick?” I ask curiously.

“Half-kin, as the children of Fae of different kingdoms are called, can wield either the magick of their father or their mother, not both, and usually their magick is weak.”

“The princess’s magick is very strong.”

“That’s why I said usually. Her mother was of royal blood but her father is the Tine King. He had stronger magick so it surprised no one when Ceara turned out Tine. But she’s bitter about it,” Tinder says, her face turned away from me. The Croi-inside listens avidly to her while I am much more interested in why the princess spoke to me the way she did.

“She has a lot of anger,” Tinder starts and turns to see me rolling my eyes and her lips twitch. “All right, fine, that is somewhat an understatement. She wants to take back what is rightly hers but she cannot because the Caisleán will not accept a Queen not connected to the Earth. Then you come along and claim that you feel the Caisleán without even wanting to.”

“Ah!” I jump to my feet, a sense of wonder buoying me. “Can it be true?”

“Can what be true?” Tinder asks warily.
“She is jealous of me! She is, isn’t she? This is the first time anyone has ever been jealous of me. I must savour this feeling!” I laugh out loud, exulting in the idea that someone would want what I have.

“If you are done cackling, it is time to get ready for the evening,” a sour voice says from behind us. I spin around to see Aislin standing at the entrance to the balcony with an expression that is as sour as her voice.

I try to repress my glee but it is difficult. It takes a pinch from Tinder and several disapproving looks from Aislin to reach an appropriately sombre expression before we enter the princess’s room.

Two hours later, clad in an orange dress that shimmers like the stars have lent it their luminescence and with a matching veil to conceal my face, I follow the princess and her handmaids out of her rooms and into the main room where the king and Lorcan, similarly dressed up, are waiting for us. The princess has outdone herself tonight; she has on a dress so darkly green it is almost midnight, silver shoes that sparkle enticingly and hair tied in a complex style so that waves of it cascade down her back. Her lips are red and her cheeks are flushed. She looks beautiful but she didn’t spend any time in front of the mirror admiring herself. I don’t understand why. If I looked like her, I wouldn’t want to move away from the mirror, but I don’t so I avoid any reflective surface. Tinder has procured a yellow dress from somewhere and is looking charming in her get up. The handmaids are, as they are wont to be, well dressed in expensive dresses in shades of red.

The Monca-brownie looks muted, as though someone has turned off her vitality; she has not levelled a single glare at me since she came out of the meeting with the king. I have
grown so used to her hostility that her timorous demeanour now is disconcerting, but the Croi-inside feels a dark satisfaction at her diminishment.

“Can’t you leave your pack behind?” The princess more than makes up for the Monca-brownie’s new personality, snapping and glaring at me whenever she can get away with it. I forgive her because she’s jealous of me.

“I can’t. I will not separate from it,” I reply patting the ragged pack fondly. It will not fall apart just yet; there are still some ways to go.

“Father,” the princess says, ignoring my response, “I do not think it wise to take my new handmaid to the dinner.”

What? She cannot do that, can she? I turn beseeching eyes to the Tine King with the fleeting hope that he will tell the princess that she is bad at thinking and should stop doing it before she hurts herself.

“You have seen how disruptive she is. What if she refuses to bow to the Ro-the Queen?” the princess says with unnecessary flourish. I narrow my eyes at her and wish I knew how Uaine shut the princeling up.

The king turns a contemplative look in my direction. “Well, child, will you bow to the Queen?”

I open my mouth to say yes of course but the Croi-inside speaks for us. “No, we shall not.”

“There, you see! We cannot take her with us! Her actions will reflect on us and we are in a precarious position already. What if she offends the Talamh Queen so much that we are barred from the Saol ceremony?” I wonder why the princess is so adamant that I not meet the Robber Queen.
“All four houses must be present for the Saol ceremony to be complete,” the Croi-inside says and everyone looks at me. How does the Croi-inside know what I don’t?

“She is right,” the king says gently to the princess who flushes. “But so are you. I’m sorry, child, we cannot risk offending Saraid.” I look at the princess and she smirks at me. Lorcan looks at the king with unease limning his features as though the king has played his hand by choosing to keep me here.

“Could you not have made this decision before I put these clothes on?” I grumble loudly. I make my way to one of the chairs in the room and sit down with a thump. Tinder harrumphs her agreement.

“Stay in the room. Lorcan will have someone send food for you,” the king says and gives me a look before leaving, Lorcan on his heels.

The princess lingers a while on the pretext of fixing her dress. “You can come with us, Tinder.” The Monca-brownie and the handmaids stand on the side, waiting for her.

“I’d much rather stay with Saoirse, Ceara.” Tinder says and after a pause, asks, “Why did you prevent her from going to dinner?”

“She’s too brash; she would give herself away. If the Robber Queen finds out that she can see magick, what do you think she’ll do to her?” the princess says in a harsh whisper surprising us both. “She’ll see her as a threat and you know what she does to people she thinks are obstacles. Or worse, she may try to use her and I don’t think your Saoirse is any match for the Robber Queen.”

“You could have just told me that instead of staging this charade,” I say, anger giving my words sharp edges.

“Would you have listened to me if I had?” the princess retorts.
I think for a second and shrug. She is right, I wouldn’t have.

“Stay here and stay out of trouble.” The princess leaves and I curl up on the uncomfortable chair, Tinder a warm weight on my shoulder.

“Are we really staying here?” she says after five minutes of pensive silence.

“Of course not,” I reply and she brightens. “We must not let our pretty dresses go to waste, you know. We shall take them out and show them the Caisleán.”

“You should leave the pack behind. It’s too conspicuous. Your dress has a pocket, doesn’t it? Why don’t you put whatever you need in there?” Tinder’s voice is carefully devoid of any emotion though I sense her curiosity. I consider her words and it is true that the ragged pack does not match the shininess of the dress. I wonder why I am ready to accept her advice but not the princess’s.

“Ask me no questions about what you see next because I will not, I cannot, answer them,” I say to her and lean forward to drop the contents of my pack on top of the table in front of my chair. Among the items in the pack is one clean scarf I filched from the human city, my dresses—they are so small now that it seems almost absurd that I was ever able to fit in them. Now they would barely cover me to my thighs. Also among the things is the salve the Hag gave me that I used only once and the two books that shine to me but that Tinder ignores. And finally, the HeartSeed, wrapped in a scarf, worringly cool and heavy in the palm of my hand. I unwrap it and Tinder flies to stand on the table next to it, her curiousity so thick and alive that I can feel it pressing against my skin, but I resist giving in to it. The HeartSeed barely pulses, its light has diminished gradually until its glow has all but faded. The need to get it to its proper place, to Uaine’s sister, grips me and I stand, roughly
rewrapping the scarf around it and putting it in my pocket. Tinder looks up at me with a mouth full of questions but I give her a quick shake of my head.

“Let’s go,” I say and march to the door. I pull it open to find two extremely large Tine soldiers barring my way.

“The princess told us to ensure that you stay inside,” the gold-magicked one says. I slam the door in his face, anger lacerating my insides. She has left me a prisoner here.

“What are we going to do now?” Tinder says, her wings humming anxiously.

“We go down the balcony,” I say decisively, moving toward the windows. I step out onto the balcony, peering right and left just in case the princess has left some kind of winged beast to foil my escape. I wouldn’t put it past her.

I had noticed earlier that the walls of the Caisleán are covered with vines and when I check, I find that they are likely sturdy enough to support my weight as I attempt to shimmy down. We are on the third floor of the Caisleán and the ground does look far away. I have climbed many trees in the Wilde Forest though, so I am confident about my ability to get to the ground. I take off my shoes and drop them over the railing, and pat my pocket to reassure myself of the HeartSeed’s presence. Once satisfied, I swing myself over the railing and grab the vines next to the balcony. I perch, for a moment, like a lizard on a wall, and then start descending. I realize much to my chagrin, that climbing in a pretty dress is not just inconvenient but very annoying. Caoimhe will plot ways to hurt me if I hurt her dress so I try to be careful with it, which makes my descent slow and perilous. I’m about halfway down and rethinking the entire venture when I hear Tinder’s squeak of alarm. Startled, I slip and though I grab wildly for the vines, the earth’s call is too strong and I am hurtling through the air straight to its hard embrace. I have squeezed my eyes tightly shut and am wishing I had
been able to eat one last dinner when I collide with something hard, something with wide shoulders, something that smells like the sun on golden summer days when the grass is green and life is full of honey.

We are suddenly filled with uncharacteristic languor and this frightens us so we scramble away from him, for our fall was broken by a male Fae. He is dressed in the opulent clothes of the high Fae and his magick, the swirling colour of freshly tilled soil, marks him as Talamh. We crouch, still and ready for our world to erupt into words, when he looks up, and we see his eyes. They are soft shades of green and dark rings of brown with a little swirl of yellow as though some of the sun lives in them. We wait for him to speak, to call for the guards or to castigate us. Instead, his mouth slackens, his eyelids flutter shut, and he falls back, unconscious. Our eyes widen with horror.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

We breathe deep of the night air and feel the Caisleán close around us. She lacks the tangibility of a living being yet we feel her alien presence too closely, too intimately, as though she has reached out and touched us on the wrong side of our skin. We ignore her and kneel on the dew-drenched grass, paying no mind to the dress. He breathes shallowly, our unintended victim, alive after all.

The moonlight is kind to our Fae. It brushes the planes of his face and the hollows in his cheeks a pleasing tint. His nose is straight and thin, and his forehead, narrow and elegant. The Croi-false is fascinated by the shape of his lips. They are full and look firm and she wants to touch them to test their softness but we do not think it wise to touch strange Fae men.

His hair is inky, black like the shadowed heart the Robber Queen must have. He is tall and slender and presents a conundrum. We want to leave him here, to the mercy of the stars in the sky and the wavering magick of the earth, but the Croi-false is adamant that we don’t. She feels responsible for his condition. We look at him in repose, and we see the aura of sorrow that clings to his surfaces. His magick is strong and pulses at his throat, the short beats reiterating its existence before racing around his body. It has a roiling quality to it, his magick, quavering with the shades of the earth. We feel our magicks react to his as though answering its wordless invitation to give in to chaos. His magick intrigues us a bit more than we are willing to admit and we remind ourself of distance.

“Have you killed him?” A voice in our ear startles us and we gasp slightly before we recognize the speaker as the pixie the Croi-false calls her friend. It is a quaint concept, friendship, and we are not sure we approve. A friend betrays and a friend hurts. Our blood is most certain of this.
“No,” we reply, “we most certainly haven’t.” The pixie’s eyes widen at our voice. We wonder if it sounds different from the Croi-false’s voice. “What do we do with him?”

The pixie gives us a long searching look and looks down at the Fae, flying to hover over his supine form.

“We can’t leave him here,” she says finally, flying back up so she can look into our eyes. She has a puzzled frown on her face.

“Why not?” we ask and the Croi-false bristles, fighting to take over from us. We resist because we know that she will do something impulsive. She always does.

“Because he is High Fae and he can make trouble for us when he wakes and finds himself on the ground. Fae do not suffer indignity very well,” the pixie replies, surprising us. She is much more pragmatic than we had thought. “Who are you?”

The question catches us by surprise. We look up to see her remove a shiny sword we did not know she had on her person. She presents no danger to us; in fact, it is absurd how easily we could defeat her. Her bravery moves us. We smile at her but the infernal veil shields our expression.

“You do not know us?” we ask her because we are curious about her reply.

“I know Saoirse and though you wear the same skin as her, you are not her!” the pixie hisses, bringing her sword up.

“I am not her, that is true,” we reply. “But she is most definitely part of us.”

The pixie’s brow furrows and she gives us an intense look as she thinks things over. Then her brow clears and an immense sadness fills her eyes.
“Are you what’s waiting on the other side of the Glamour? Is the Saoirse I know going to disappear once the Glamour is fully broken?” she asks softly. She wants me to say no. She wills me to say no.

“We do not know what waits for us once the Darkness is gone. We do not know whether we will survive its breaking,” we say. For us, the Glamour is the Darkness, shutting us away from ourself.

“You will die? Saoirse too?” The pixie sounds horrified at the idea of death.

“She is a part of us. If we cease to be, how can she continue to exist?”

“Can you not stop the Glamour from breaking?” The pixie’s voice trembles with panic.

“Would you stop breathing?” Anger raises our voice, and we stand up. “We will take the risk; we welcome the breaking even if death is the only conclusion. We will no longer exist in pieces or in this Darkness. We refuse. If we die, we will die whole.”

“But…” The pixie’s eyes brim and spill over with tears. Is she crying for the Croi-false? Why? She barely knows us.

“Do not speak of this to her,” we say and return to the darkness.

I open my eyes to find the unconscious Fae man at my feet and Tinder hovering in the air before me. I remember hearing Tinder gasp and looking down, falling, and hitting this poor Fae.

“Why did you gasp?” I turn to Tinder and demand. Then I notice the look she is giving me. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” she mumbles, turning her face away.
“Like someone has died or is in the process of dying. Wait a minute. Why am I on my feet?” I look around. A familiar sense of loss grips me. I have lost time once more; I disappeared again. “What happened, Tinder?”

“That’s not what’s important right now,” Tinder says, avoiding my eyes. “What are we going to do with him? We can’t just leave him here.”

No, that is true. We can’t.

I sink down to my haunches beside him and notice that my dress is stained with grass and dew at the knees. A sliver of fear shakes me, and I take a breath, turning my attention to the unconscious Fae. Should I wake him as I woke Caolan? I notice his lips and feel a familiarity with them that I do not understand. This is the first time I am seeing them. The Fae has on dark pants and a shirt that looks so fine it has to have been spun of spider silk. My eyes drift to his lips yet again and my cheeks warm. What is this feeling?

“How do we wake him?” I ask Tinder who has composed herself enough to meet my eyes without flinching.

“There is an old story where a maid woke a prince by kissing him,” Tinder suggests with sly mischief lilting her voice.

“Kissing?”

“You do know what it is, right?”

I think about it. Two sets of lips meeting and then, well, I suppose something will happen after that. I’m just not sure what. I don’t hate the idea though. His lips are rather nice and kissing him sounds much more pleasant than bleeding over him.

I look at him again and frown, not missing the bemused look Tinder gives me. All right, maybe I don’t really want to wake him. Maybe I just want to touch his lips. What harm
is there in touching his lips with mine? Then again, kissing him when he is not conscious seems like cheating. I wouldn’t like it if someone kissed me while I was sleeping.

“I was not being serious?” Tinder looks at me worriedly as though I am going to attack the Fae. “Maybe you could first sprinkle some water on him.”

“I’m not going to kiss him!” I say and look down at the Fae with some consternation and find him looking up at me with his eyes wide open and aware.

“I don’t think we need to do anything,” I say to Tinder, gesturing with my chin. “He is quite awake.”

“Sane. We need to know if he is sane,” Tinder says in a loud whisper and the Fae struggles to his feet, his eyes not leaving mine. Ours. I feel the Croi-inside try to wrench control of our body from me and I hold on tight, determined not to let her steal my time again. I get to my feet as well and retreat a few steps away from the Fae.

“Fire,” the Fae man, boy really, says to me. He cannot be much older than me but what is age to the Fae?

“Fire?” I repeat, shooting Tinder a nervous look. Is he going to try to burn us?

“Fire and heat. Pain.” He looks down, dragging a slim fingered hand over his face and through unkempt hair. I wonder if his hair is as soft as his lips look and I don’t know why I persist in thinking of this Fae in this manner. It is extremely irritating.

“Who are you?” he asks me softly. Then he notices Tinder and his eyes brighten first with delight and then with caution. He asks me the same question so many others before him have asked but it doesn’t annoy me because I want to ask him the same question. So I do.

“Who are you?” My question surprises him and his face warms with pleasure as though he is happy that I do not know him.
“Are you with the Tine Fae?” he asks next, smiling as though we are playing a game.

“Are we going to converse in questions?” I ask politely and Tinder snickers on my shoulder.

“Will you remove the veil?” he responds archly and brings me down to earth with a thump I am surprised no one else can hear.

“No. I most certainly will not,” I say stiffly. “Well then, it is unfortunate that I fell on you but it was mostly your fault for being where you were at that moment. Since it seems that you suffered no damage from the encounter, we will leave now. Come along, Tinder. We have things to do.” I turn to go and step on something. I look down and find a glove under my shoe. Two gloves. I pick them up and turn back to the Fae.

“Are these…”

He snatches them from me before I can complete my question. I notice that he is careful not to touch me. He hasn’t even seen my face and I am already abhorrent. It is peculiarly painful to be considered repulsive by this Fae. I do not mind if Ceara or Faolan flinch from me, but this stranger’s reluctance to touch me hurts. I don’t understand why. The Fae doesn’t make any attempt to stop us when we walk, or in Tinder’s case, fly, away but it is not until we are at least two corridors away that I feel both the sharpness of relief and the dolour of disappointment. I know why I feel relief but I don’t want to think about the disappointment.

“He was rather mesmerizing,” Tinder chimes in my ear. The corridors are empty of courtiers though servant-kin seem to be constantly around. Everyone must be at the dinner that I am not allowed to attend. Just as well. This gives me time to search for Uaine’s sister. I
pat my pocket to assure myself of the HeartSeed’s presence and look around, determined to
ignore any talk about the Fae.

“Let’s go this way,” I say, pointing to an ill-lit corridor; I start walking without
waiting for Tinder’s answer.

And thus begins our exploration of the Caisleán. We find rooms laid out warmly,
plush in invitation, and rooms empty of furniture and light, cautioning any who think to
trespass. We come upon rooms that are cavernous chambers filled with tall trees, stuck in the
middle of winter and another door lead to corridors that become forest paths in autumn. We
follow a path that leads to wooden gates that open up to gardens in spring.

One door leads to a drawing room and another to a meadow and just when you think
you will find something more fantastic behind the next door, you are returned to a room with
a plain bed and chairs. Space seems to be defined differently in the Caisleán than in the
outside world. Different parts of the Caisleán have different seasons and we find autumn,
summer, spring and winter. We spend hours walking around and seeing wondrous rooms but
nothing that feels like the heart of the Caisleán.

Finally, exhausted and hungry, we enter a hallway we haven’t yet explored. It is
warmly lit by lanterns set in ornate sconces on the wall. The ceiling in the hallway is high
and the shadows are darker here. The floors have dark stains, and it is here that we first feel
the sibilance of danger. We hear a slithering sound, like we have disturbed a slumbering
sorrow. The hallway culminates in two large doors that have been scoured by time and the
beings who have gone through them. We approach these doors with some trepidation; neither
Tinder nor I feel any need to talk. I reach out a hand to push the doors open but they don’t
budge. Frustration fills me at the thought of yet another road barred.
“Locked?” Tinder’s whisper is discordant in the silence.

I nod, and for reasons I do not know, whisper, “Open.”

I hear a click when the Caisleán fulfills my request. I didn’t know I could do that. My heart heats in my chest, and I hiss because it hurts. Shoving the pain aside, I reach out to shove the doors open.

“What are you doing?” a voice says from behind us. I spin around, dislodging Tinder from my shoulder.

The Fae I knocked over earlier stands behind us, no hint of warmth on his beautiful face. He looks different now; the air of bewilderment that surrounded him earlier has been replaced by a quiet intensity and an unsettling arrogance. His hair is still unkempt but his gloves are on his hands. Has he been following us?

“We are exploring the Caisleán!” Tinder chirps. She doesn’t know what I have been searching for and she hasn’t asked any questions, but she knows that we are doing far more than simply exploring the place. Perhaps she doesn’t care and I don’t really mind. For her, I am an adventure and for me, she is someone to be silent with.

“The doors are locked,” he says, looking beyond us.

“No, they’re open,” I say, wanting badly to see what lies on the other side. “I’ll show you.” I turn to finish what I began and am surprised when the Fae moves with incredible speed, his arms going around me, physically restraining me from opening the doors. Tinder’s magick sparks red, a sure sign of outrage.

I freeze, wondering what I should do first. Do I hurt him for daring to touch me or should I savour the feeling of being touched and then hurt him? Tinder makes the decision
for me, bringing out a sword from somewhere and charging at him. He lets go of me and steps back, putting his hands up and rising in my estimation. He could hurt Tinder easily.

“Don’t,” he says so softly that his words are almost a part of the silence. “Opening those doors…”

“Is anything the matter, my prince?” A Talamh soldier peeks into the hallway and our Fae moves to hide us behind him. We peek around him anyway and Tinder breathes in sharply when she sees the soldier accompanying the one who spoke. It is Faolan; a dark and impassive Faolan. What is he doing here? What have the rebels concocted and more importantly, is it going to hinder my errand? Does the princess know Faolan is here and if not, do we tell her?

“I am simply wandering the Caisleán, Brian. Am I not allowed to do that anymore?” Ice would be warmer than our Fae’s tone.

“Forgive my impertinence, my prince.” The soldier bows his head and says. “Your mother awaits you in the Red Room.”

“You may tell her that I will see her when the time comes and not before then,” he says and the soldiers, Faolan included, depart, leaving us with the shadows, the silence and a newly discovered prince. I don’t know what Tinder is thinking but I have a feeling that I do not want to know the identity of his mother. What are the chances that I would jump off a balcony and fall on the Robber Queen’s son? The thought is absurd.

While the Fae is talking to the soldiers, I motion to Tinder to fly away and insist when she shakes her head. There’s no point in both of us suffering the same fate. She finally, unwillingly, flies away swiftly.
“Well, I shall be going now,” I say and try to slink past him but he turns, pinning me to the wall with his gaze. Looking into his eyes is dangerous as it makes me want to do silly things, like giggle loudly or simper, which is a matter of grave concern because I don’t think I even know how.

“Wait,” he says. “You haven’t yet told me who you are.” He comes closer to me and I extend a finger to push him away. My finger touches his chest and the feel of his shirt momentarily distracts me. I haven’t felt silk this fine before.

“You are too close,” I say. “I don’t think I mind it but you may once you see what lies beneath the veil.”

The sun in his eyes brightens as a reluctant smile tugs at the lips I had so admired earlier.

“Who are you?” he asks again, as though the answer is important to him.

“I...hmm. Let’s see. Oh yes. I am an idea.” I say and then nod enthusiastically. “An idea that is on its way to being realized. Half-formed, nebulous but—” My stomach chooses this moment to growl. Stupid stomach.

“But...hungry?” The Fae chuckles. It is a smoky sound and makes me think thoughts about his lips that the Hag would not approve of.

“Are you sure I cannot go into this room?” I look at him beseechingly. I am so close to fulfilling Uaine’s request. So close that it hurts to have to leave without completing it.

“I’m sorry,” the Fae says but I am not convinced. He doesn’t look sorry at all.

“Well if I can’t go into that room, I must return to my own,” I tell him grumpily and move down to where the hallway connects to the corridor. He follows me.

“Do you know where to go?” he asks, coming to a stop beside me.
“Yes, of course,” I reply without thinking and catch the surprise on his face. “Why is that surprising?”

“The Caisléán has a mind of its own. Some would say its sentient but no one has seen the avatar of the Caisléán since—let’s just say it hasn’t been seen for a while. Rooms change locations, insides and often dimensions without warning. Stairways shift and shuffle, doors open to different rooms.” He shrugs.

“It has behaved remarkably well with me,” I say with a shrug of my own. “I must go.”

“Your name before you do.” He catches hold of my hand. I look down at our hands and a moment of longing twists us. Such casual intimacy is beyond us, however, so we try to pull our hand from his but he holds fast.

“What is yours?” we ask him, the Fae with the sun in his eyes.

“Irial,” he says.

“Irial,” we repeat, tasting his name on our tongue and liking the feel of it on our lips.

“And you?” he insists.

“You’ll find out,” we say and leave before he can stop us again.

I find Tinder waiting for me in an alcove a few meters away. She settles on my shoulder and says in an accusing voice, “You were flirting with him!”

“I was not!” I deny hotly. “And what do you mean I was flirting? I don’t even know what flirting is or how one flirts. Have you flirted a lot?” She refuses to respond to that and rides the rest of the way in grumpy silence.
The corridors are still empty though the rooms have the heavy feeling of being occupied. We walk quickly, sticking to shadows and looking down whenever we pass anyone. Luckily, no one tries to stop us, or even gives us any attention, and we reach the rooms given to us in less than ten minutes. The number of Tine soldiers outside our rooms has increased and they jump to attention when they see us. Inside, we find everyone in the living room. The king has a thunder cloud on his face; he seems to be making a habit of angry expressions. When he sees us, he walks forward in two large steps and grabs me by the shoulder. The Croi-inside comes to the front of my mind and Tinder flies off my shoulder in alarm. We all wait for his next action. To my surprise, he shakes me and when he does, I disappear.

“You were told to stay here, were you not?” the king says to us, his voice barely containing his worry and his fury. “You were told to remain inside and out of danger.”

“We will not be bound,” we tell him, removing ourself from his grip. “We have things to do and Glamour to break. We have stayed in the Darkness for the past seventeen years. We will no longer be bound.” We look around the room; the princess looks at us, her eyes wide, confused and hurt. Her father’s concern for us hurts her. We feel a vicious pleasure at that. We look at the brownie who whimpers beneath our gaze, and at Lorcan, who does not remove his eyes from his king. The handmaids do not matter and so we dismiss them. Our pixie stares at us with a storm kindling in her eyes.

“Give her back,” she says. “Give her back and go away.”

“We found the heart of the Caisleán,” we ignore our pixie and tell the king. His lips tighten. “The final breaking will happen soon.”
He nods, an expression more of grief than understanding on his face, and gathers us close. So close we can feel his heart beat. We let him hold us because everyone else wants the Croi-false. No one wants to know what our world is like. The king may not understand us either, but blood is blood and blood will triumph.

When I next open my eyes, I am changed and ready for bed in a room with the princess and Tinder. I have no veil on, and though it makes me feel bare, I am glad for its absence. There are no mirrors in the room. The handmaids and the Monca-brownie are nowhere to be seen which is good because I feel thin and insubstantial. My back hurts in the same way my bones did when they were growing. I feel too weary to consider what other changes are coming so I look down at the soft white night clothes I am wearing and wonder where the ruined dress is and if Caoimhe will ever forgive me its loss.

“Can’t I just sleep? Do I have to talk about what happened? I don’t know what she said or did.” I sit on the bed and pull my knees up to my chest, hugging them close. I am afraid to look at the princess and Tinder, afraid to catch them looking at me at this stage in my unraveling.

“Who is she, do you know?” the princess says, her face uncharacteristically gentle. I feel annoyed by the change in her mien.

“We saw Faolan, did Tinder tell you?” I say instead. One look at the princess’s face tells me that no, indeed, Tinder did not.

The princess sits down on the bed beside me in an entirely graceless manner. I am shocked; I didn’t think she was capable of it.
“Is he all right? Was he hurt? Where is he?” she asks rapidly and Tinder sighs loudly, shaking her head.

“He is fine. Infiltrating the Caisleán under the guise of a soldier. Well,” Tinder pauses, “he is a soldier. Just fighting for the other side.”

“What are the rebels planning?” I ask. I don’t expect her to tell me, and she doesn’t.

“There are things happening here that neither I nor you have any control over. I will say this though, I feel lucky that I am not you,” she says and I laugh. It is a bitter sound I did not think I was capable of making.

“I was thinking the exact same thing earlier,” I tell her. “But tell me, did you see the Robber Queen? Is she as evil as you had thought she would be?”

Tinder flies to sit on my knee, her candid gaze making me feel wrong in all the worst ways. The princess leans her back against mine; I am stiff for a while but sit easier when I feel the warmth between us.

“She wants me to marry her son,” the princess says after a good five minutes of silence, the majority of which I have spent ignoring Tinder’s attempts to meet my eyes.

“Who does?” I ask, not looking away from the open window. The night is lambent; the Caisleán glows in the darkness.

“The Robber Queen!” the princess answers impatiently and succeeds in garnering both mine and Tinder’s full attention. I turn around to face her.

“Is she insane?” Tinder exclaims.

“Most probably,” I say. “What does your father think of this?”
“He’s too busy worrying about you!” the princess says bitterly and I flinch. I don’t understand why I feel guilty when I don’t even know what relationship the Croi-inside has with the Fire King.

“At the dinner today, the Robber Queen told my father that she intends to see me betrothed if not married to her son before the Uisce King and the Aer Queen arrive,” the princess continues, flames in her eyes. “As if she can command who I marry!”

“Can she?” I ask because I honestly do not know.

“She can coerce the king, can’t she?” Tinder says. “By threatening to bar you from the Saol ceremony?”

“She can’t,” I insist. “The Saol Ceremony cannot be completed without the monarch of the Tine kingdom.”

“You didn’t even know what the Saol Ceremony was three days ago! How do you know so much about it suddenly?” the princess snaps.

“I don’t know anything! The one inside me has a lot more knowledge.” I say and have to suffer the suddenly nervous looks the other two give me. “According to the one in me, the purpose of the Saol ceremony is to renew the bond between the land/sea and the monarchs of the kingdoms and by doing so, renew the elemental magick of the kingdoms.”

A thoughtful silence descends upon us after I speak as we all think about what I just said.

“Do you remember when we had that conversation about the HeartStone?” Tinder asks me after a minute, her wings humming at a dizzy-making speed.

I freeze and look around for Uaine’s HeartSeed. Tinder reads me correctly and gestures to a set of drawers across the room.
“The one inside you put it there. We didn’t open it and see what you are trying to conceal,” the princess says. “Even though I really wanted to, Tinder didn’t let me.”

I breathe a little easier and remember Tinder’s question and tell her that yes, I do remember that conversation. Mostly.

“It’s the heart of the Caisléán. Having the HeartStone of a Caisléán allows a Fae to have mastery over the magick. All the other kin, the non-royal Fae included, can only wield the magick, not control it. My father holds the HeartStone of Tine, so he is its master. He alone is able to control the fire magick so he is the only one who can rule in the Tine Caisléán,” the princess says.

“I sense a ‘but’ coming merrily along,” I say and the princess glares at me, letting me know my irreverence is not appreciated. It never is.

“Kin are whispering that the Robber Queen does not have the HeartStone of Talamh. That it went missing seventeen years ago during the Betrayal, when the Forever King was killed. That’s why, the rumours say, the magick has become weak. Remember the mines that Caolan and the other kin were being taken to? It is said that the Robber Queen is looking for the HeartStone there. That’s why she needs as many miners as possible. If she doesn’t have the HeartStone by the Saol Ceremony, things will get dangerous,” Tinder finishes with a sombre look that is fast becoming the only expression I ever see on her face.

“Do you really think she does not have the HeartStone?” I whisper.

“If she did, the magick here wouldn’t be so weak!” the princess retorts.

“What happens if the Saol Ceremony comes along and she still doesn’t have it?”

“We don’t know,” Tinder says. “That has never happened before.”
“The Saol Ceremony requires all four of the monarchs and all four of the HeartStones to be present. That is the only way the balance between the kin and the magick can be maintained. If there is no balance, the magicks will not bind with the kin and if the magicks do not bind with the kin, the kin will start dying. Talamh kin will fall first. And when Talamh falls, so will Tír na nÓg,” we say.

“How do you know that?” The princess stands up, her skin ashy with shock and fear.

“Our blood tells us secrets. Does not yours?” we say to her and smile when her face falls.

“Where does Saoirse go when you take over her body?” our pixie asks, managing to ignore our speech about the end of the world and we shrug.

“She is still here, now a part of us. We are not separate beings, you understand? We have just been cleaved in two by the Glamour.” Our pixie looks troubled as though she has difficulty believing us.

“How will marrying you to her son benefit the Queen?” I ask the princess and she blinks. She and Tinder exchange a look that I don’t understand.

“My blood. If I’m part of her family, she can use my blood under her name. But that will only work if she has the Talamh HeartStone,” she says shortly.

“And will you marry her son?” I ask.

“Are you daft?” I suppose that means no.

“But what if she has the HeartStone and I refuse to help her? I don’t want to help her but what if I don’t and the magick dies? What then? We’ll die too, won’t we? Unless we can find another place to go to, another way to harness the magick to us. My father won’t leave though, he’d much rather die along with Tine.” The princess’s hands find mine and clutch
them. I look down at our joined hands and feel the honeyed bitterness of finding a friend when it may too late to appreciate her.

“Where is the Monca-brownie? Will she not help you with your dilemma?” I ask, wondering if it is all right for me to pull my hand from the princess’s tight grasp.

“She told me that she has an errand to run. Maybe she went to see Faolan.” The princess looks at Tinder and me, hope, fresh like a sunrise, on her face. “I’m going to send him a message. Maybe he knows something that will help us.”

She leaves, and I am left with a silent Tinder, the glowing night, and the weary Caisleán. I lie back on the bed and feel exhaustion blur the edges of my consciousness. The world may end and the magick may die but the Glamour will still break and I will still deliver Uaine’s heartseed to her sister.

When all is quiet and the moon pretends to rule the heavens, I whisper, “Tinder?”

“What is it?” She’s lying on the pillow beside my head.

“You promised me a story,” I say.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I did promise you a story, didn’t I?” Tinder muses. “Morning seems so long ago.”

She is quiet and I wait. “A promise is a promise though. The legend of the Three is the earliest story my mother told me.”

There is a soft little silence and then she begins.

“The books say they came to life at the same time that Talamh did. That the green of the forests owe their verdant nature to the glory of the dryads. The books also say that when Fionar, the hero Fae, separated Tír na nÓg into the four kingdoms: Aer, Uisce, Talamh and Tine, she gave to Talamh not just the strength of magick but also the Guardian dryads, the only ones of their kind.”

“The books say quite a bit,” I muse out loud and get a pinch for my efforts.

“Uaine, the oldest of them, was the protector of the Talamh.” She is talking about my Uaine. Her great age and her greater power make a lot more sense now. “She meted out justice to the Talamh royalty when they crossed lines forbidden to them. Blanaid, the middle sister, was the negotiator. She soothed ill feeling among the royals, and ensured that the hot blood of the Fae did not redden the grounds of the Caisleán. Enya, the youngest dryad-sister, presides over the magicks of Tír na nÓg. She is the one who leads the Saol ceremony.”

“Tinder, how can you speak the names of these powerful kin without dying?” I interrupt.

“The dryads are or were, I suppose, our Elders. No other kin, royal or otherwise, are more powerful than them so no one can impose their will on them using their names. Because we do not have the intent to control them, as if we could, we can take their names without coming to harm. But their names can have power. My mother told me that the dryads used to present their names dipped in their magick as gifts to those they chose to protect.”
Ah.

“Can I continue with the story now?” Tinder asks.

“I am not stopping you.”

“Enya was the keeper of the heartstone of Talamh. She still is; it is not a position you can give up or hand over to anyone else. No one has seen her since what happened seventeen years ago but then again, the heart of the Caisleán has been closed off and forbidden to everyone since the death of the Forever King.”

“And that’s exactly where I need to go.” I sigh morosely.

“Stop interrupting me!”

“Sorry.”

“The stories say that for millennia the dryads guarded Talamh from ill intentions and danger; they defended the magick and the Caisleán from those who would exploit them for their own gain. They would give magicked keys to visitors from other kingdoms, keys that read the intent of the visitors and acted accordingly. Those with malevolent intentions would find themselves turning the key to enter rooms outside the Caisleán, or in the dungeons of the Caisleán.

“They carried out their duties fairly because above all, the dryads were created to be neutral in their dealings with the royalty. They were bound to be objective, to place the well-being of Talamh above the well-being of any of the Fae ruling it.

“There are many truths to the story, and some of these truths say that Blanaid fell in love with a young prince of the ó Maoilriaiann line, an ancestor of the Forever King. They say she helped him survive a plot to take his life and by doing so broke her vow of neutrality.”

“Probably not a good thing to do.”
“Indeed. Dryads can live forever, but if their tree is destroyed, they will die. Blanaid’s preference for the ó Maoilriain prince made her a target for his enemies. One account of the night the dryads fell says that Blanaid was with the prince when the enemies burnt down her tree. She would have died had it not been for Uaine who was forced to break her neutrality to save her sister. Though she succeeded in saving Blanaid, a large portion of the Caisleán was destroyed in the fight.” Tinder stops speaking.

“What happens next? Is that the end?”

“I just paused to catch my breath! Anyway, the ó Maoilriain prince gave Blanaid a new form because her tree was beyond saving but accepting the new form cost Blanaid the heart with which she had loved him.”

“Oh...” I know someone without a heart.

“I know. Songs are still sung about her sacrifice because though Blanaid lived, she could no longer love him. Her relationship with Uaine soured, and they became estranged because Uaine blamed Blanaid for forcing her to break her vow. Uaine left the Caisleán, unable to carry on protecting what she had helped destroy. Blanaid left next; the reasons for her departure are not recorded by the books. The youngest dryad, Enya, retreated to the heart of the Caisleán, no longer venturing out to walk the grounds and sing the songs of magick. But everyone says that on days when the wind doesn’t blow and the air is still, the echoes of the songs she sang sound in the halls and corridors of the Caisleán.”

“That’s the legend of the Three?” I ask softly.

“Yes,” Tinder replies. “That’s the legend of the Three.”
Chapter Thirty

We open our eyes to the smell of fire and ash and for a moment we are certain that we have reached our end. Our eyes clear and we realize that we have been dreaming of burning. It is night outside and too early for us to be awake. Then we feel it again: the tug at our senses that caused us to break our slumber. Our pixie is fast asleep on the pillow she shared with us and we find ourself straightening the tiny blanket she uses to stave off the cold. We slip out of bed, taking care to be quiet so we do not alert her. We dress quickly, thanks to the princess’s largesse, in a blue dress with pockets for the dryad’s HeartSeed. We eschew the veil, wash our face with cold water, and leave the room, closing the door behind us.

Lamps burn low in the corners of the main room, their golden light subdued. The air is crisp and cold, heralding the approach of dawn, and a look out the glass windows shows the slow retreat of the darkness.

We see no one at first but it doesn’t occur to us to be afraid. Fear is for those who cannot defend themselves. We hear a sound out on the balcony and we move toward it, stepping through the open doors and outside. The Fire King stands, leaning against the railing of the balcony, and beside him is a creature of a kind we have not previously seen. Neither in the Hag’s books nor in our travels so far. We look upon him/her and we cannot fathom him/her though we try. The creature has white skin upon which are traced, in the darkest green, drawings of vines, flowers and tendrils. Upon closer look though, what we thought were tracings are actual plants that grow on the inside of this creature; they shift and twine under his/her skin. Ah. The solid green is the creature’s magick, coiling under the skin and in his/her eyes that glow green. The creature has a sharp chin and high cheekbones, and his/her hair is kept hidden under a headpiece decorated with the feathers of colourful birds. We look at him/her for a long moment until the Tine King chides us for our rudeness.
We bow our head in apology, and the creature inclines his/her head. There is a cool assessing look in his/her eyes.

“This is Maon,” the king says, looking at us with an intensity that we do not reciprocate. “They are a healer.”

“A healer?” We look at the creature with renewed interest. “Can you mend us? Put our pieces together?”

Maon says nothing. Perhaps they prefer to be silent or perhaps they cannot speak. We retreat to silence as well, content to let it rule our little gathering.

“I need to taste your magick first. Will you let me?” the healer finally says.

“Before you do, we will have your oath of silence,” the king says and unexpectedly, the healer smiles, the expression ill-suited to their sombreness.

“You have it, Sire.” The healer bows their head.

We extend our hand, waiting to see what sorrows the healer will taste in our magicks. The healer cups their palms underneath our hand and we let our twin magicks spill over and into them. We see our magicks disappear into their skin and we see the healer gasp at the potency of our power. The healer’s magick blooms with the infusion of ours and they drop to their knees, trying to endure what they have not been made to.

We watch them flounder and wait for them to regain their equilibrium. We do not wait long. The healer pulls themselves up using the railing and breathing heavily, looks us over once again. Sorrow glimmers deep in their eyes.

“Is there a way for her to survive the breaking of the Glamour?” the king asks.
The healer closes their eyes and when they open them again, the answer shines through. The king flinches and we feel ourself turn into stone. We have lived with the shadow of death for so long but having it confirmed is a still a shock.

“Glamours are not meant to be cast long term. They erode the self, repress the true, and champion the false. Her core self was sundered and unless the parts can be merged into one again, the self will not survive the breaking of the Glamour.”

“Can you not make her whole again?” the king asks and the healer shakes their head.

“That requires a magick far older, far stronger than I have…than what remains in this world.” The healer’s words linger in the silence that follows. The freshness of the coming morning does nothing to remove their bleakness. “I am sorry.” The healer bows low once and leaves without another word.

We stand beside the king and look out at the Caisleán. The sun is rising, caressing the walls, the towers and the grounds of the Caisleán. The king is grieving. His sorrow has the smell of a doused fire, but he does not speak a word, gives no indication that he is aware of our presence so we, too, keep our silence.

“I will not give up,” he says just when we have made up our mind to leave. We turn and look at him. “I will–”

We stop him with a hand on his arm. We do not want his sentiments. We understand his need to express them but we will not accept them. It is far too late for him to assume responsibility for us.

“We have made peace with our end,” we say and the Croi-false protests.
“I am your father and I will not let you die,” the king finally says and the Caisleán bears witness. Her presence is sudden and intrusive and makes his words louder. We did not want him to name our relationship.

The word ‘father’ is empty for us. The Croi-false has dreamed about having parents ever since she saw the humans loving theirs. For her, a father is someone who protects, someone who heals, and someone who makes things right. For us, a father is just another person we cannot call our own. Just another way we have been betrayed.

“What will happen at the Saol ceremony?” we ask the king, deliberately ignoring his admission. He looks at us, his expression inscrutable, and turns away, refusing to answer. Will the princess’s blood bind the magick of the four houses? Will the Caisleán recognize her? Will the Fire King stand beside her proudly? Is she our sister? We do not know and perhaps we do not want to.

I don’t get to eat break fast. When I come into myself again, I am sitting in the main room with Tinder on my knee, looking annoyed, and the princess in front of me looking angrier than usual. I gather that something has gone very wrong. I wonder if it was something the Croi-inside said. She is as good as the princess at riling people up.

“What is happening?” I ask in what I hope is a pleasant voice. It does nothing to ease Tinder’s expression and the princess’s scowl becomes blacker. “Have we had breakfast yet?”

“Stop thinking about your stomach!” the princess snaps most unfairly. If I don’t think about my stomach, who will? My back picks this moment to twinge sharply and I wince. The pain is worsening. I wish my bones would grow and be done with it.
“Your other persona did nothing but stare at Ceara with the most unsettling expression. Oh here, your veil. I assume you want it?”

I snatch the veil from Tinder and tie it around my face, shuddering at the thought that everyone was looking at my face for however many hours I have been gone.

“What are we doing today? Where are the handmaids and the Monca-brownie?” I ask looking around.

“Monca has gone away on an errand. Aislin and Caoimhe are with our seamstress, getting our dresses ready for tomorrow’s ball,” the princess responds stiffly. She fidgets, looking restless.

“We are going to be spending time with the Robber Queen’s son,” Tinder says tightly.

“We? Why do we have to spend time with him when you’re the one marrying him?” I ask, jumping to my feet. I don’t have the time to hang around with evil amorous princes. I need to find a way to get into the heart of the Caisleán. I would have been done with Uaine’s errand last night had it not been for him. Wait a minute, the prince who stopped us from going into the heart, surely he is not the Robber Queen’s son. I cannot be that unlucky, can I?

“I refuse to suffer alone,” the princess replies haughtily.

I open my mouth to say something that will most probably get me cursed but a knock on the door curtails my reply. One of the soldiers opens the door and the magick in the room brightens. We all turn to see who has dared the dragon’s lair.

It is him. Our victim from the night before. The one who spoke of fire, burning and pain. The one with the lips that make me think delicious thoughts and stopped me from
entering the Caislean’s heart. He is the Robber Queen’s son. I am that unlucky. Tinder sighs loudly and I look at her to find her looking at me and shaking her head.

“You’re not going to marry him,” I tell the princess and ignore Tinder’s scowl.

She frowns, looking suspicious. “Why do you say that? Not that I want to but how do I get out of it?”

“Because,” I say and stop, at a loss for words. Why can’t she marry him? Because I don’t want her to. But why not? Why do I dislike the idea of his lips being in proximity to hers? I don’t know. I just won’t let it happen. “Because I have other plans for him,” I finally reply.

“You can’t have plans for him, Saoirse,” Tinder hisses. “He is the Robber Queen’s son. He’s the enemy!”

“No, he’s the son of the enemy. There is a difference,” I whisper back. It is important to make that distinction.

“He will inherit her sins!” Tinder forgets to lower her voice and the princess shushes her loudly.

“My lady,” a soldier leads the prince forward. “Prince Irial, heir to the Talamh kingdom.”

Two spots of colour appear on the princess’s cheeks and she looks like she’s going to explode in anger. It is very entertaining but Tinder pinches me hard to curb my enjoyment. She doesn’t succeed. Prince Irial is very nice to look at.

He bows slightly to her before turning his attention to me. He bows to me as well. I beam at him though the veil hides most of my expression. I like the attention.
“Let me make this clear. There is no way I am going to marry you.” The princess gives him a defiant look. He, resplendent in his silk shirt and black pants, smiles softly, taking no offence. The princess bristles.

“Shall we take a walk and talk about this predicament we find ourselves in?” he asks, offering her his arm. She sweeps past him, nose held high and he follows her. I watch them go, wanting to follow but knowing I do not have the time to.

“What are you waiting for?” the princess calls us from the door. Tinder and I look at each other before going after her. I squash the guilt I feel at not focusing on Uaine’s mission; I still have a few days left to get into the heart of the Caisleán.

The princess walks beside the prince and we follow some distance behind. Tinder is uncharacteristically quiet but when I ask her what the matter is, she doesn’t respond.

Everyone we pass on our promenade looks at the picture the prince and the princess present. They are both playing parts now: smiling, convivial, conversing about all the things that do not matter and about none of the things that do. The news of their planned betrothal must have reached the masses; whispers follow hotly on the heels of their presence. Unease rustles the eaves of the Caisleán because their union is a blasphemy. Her maternal family was eradicated by his; isn’t asking her to forgive that expecting too much?

The Croi-inside and I dislike seeing the two of them together as well because I feel as though the only one who should enjoy the prince’s lips is me but I am inclined to my fancies. We have walked the length of the corridor outside our rooms twice when the princess suddenly turns into another hall, this one leading away from the guest quarters and to an inner courtyard where soldiers are practicing their soldiering. She pretends to pay attention to the prince’s banal remarks about the weather, the upcoming Saol ceremony and pumpkins,
wait, pumpkins? I give the prince a sharp look and find him grinning merrily, completely aware that the princess is not giving him any attention.

Tinder hisses at the princess and she starts, a blush suffusing her cheeks and making her lovelier. I make sure my veil is tied on properly.

“I’m sorry! I have just remembered an errand I have to complete. Will you forgive me?” she says, her eyes lighting on her quarry on the far side of the courtyard. Faolan stands as still as stone looking at us, his features grim.

“Only if you leave your handmaid behind,” the prince says to her, still smiling.

The princess narrows her eyes and answers carefully. “You mean Saoirse? What need do you have of her?”

“That’s what I’d like to find out,” he responds and confuses all three of us. What does he mean? The princess glances in Faolan’s direction and then looks uncertainly at me. I shrug. We can take care of ourself. Tinder stays with me at first but the princess motions her over, her eyes pleading.

“I’ll be back,” Tinder says in my ear. “Don’t do anything foolish.”

I am not certain I like what Tinder is implying. I don’t do foolish things.

Then they are gone, and I am left with Irial, whose name still tastes sweet on my tongue. Like a song in spring. I wonder if I am sick.

“She’s gone,” I say unnecessarily. “You know, you are not doing a very good job of courting her.”

“I have no intention of marrying her,” he says, the bland smile leaving his countenance.

“What of your mother’s commands?” we ask.
“My mother can command all she likes. I will not make the same choices she did.”

His voice is carefully modulated, as though he is exerting a tight control over his emotions.

“What do you want from me?” He cannot be struck by my beauty for I have none.

Perhaps he is enamoured of my wit.

“I have yet to find out your true name,” he replies. I stiffen. I remember what happened the last time someone took my true name. How does he even know that Saoirse is not my true name?

“I will go now,” I tell the prince.

“You will not,” he responds easily, too sure of himself.

“You will stop me?” I lift my chin, annoyed.

“My charm will,” he says and laughs a little as though realizing how pompous he sounds. His laugh is wonderful and perhaps I am charmed after all. The Croi-inside warns me to be cautious; we do not yet know what this Irial wants with us.

My stomach growls loudly and I sigh, remembering the breakfast I haven’t eaten.

“Hungry again?”

I nod. I am always hungry around this prince.

“May I fix that?”

“How?”

“How do you usually fix hunger where you come from? Here, we offer food,” he says with a smile that has a little too much polish. He is accustomed to flirting, this Irial.

“Why would you offer a handmaid food?” I want to trust him but he is the Robber Queen’s son. The Croi-inside insists on caution.
“Why wouldn’t I?” he asks. Does he go around curing handmaids of their hunger all the time? Still, he is very nice to look at. I will accept his invitation. I am hungry after all. And who knows when I will have a chance to look at him again.

He leads me through sun-soaked corridors and across a room that is an herb garden to a place that looks, feels, and smells like the paradise the humans in my city speak so reverently about.

It is a large room, with wide windows that open up to the herb garden. Green pots of fragrant bushes line up the windowsills, inviting light in. There is no silverware as one would expect in a kitchen, no metallic pots and pans. Instead there are cauldrons and stoneware. Enchantments are used to bake and cook. A dozen or so servant-kin bustle around a red-faced brownie, the cook, who barks commands and sends kitchen-hands scurrying. The smells make me swoon. I stagger and clutch the doorframe to stop from keeling over. I don’t think keeling over to express delight is normal.

I can smell a cake in the air, something filled with chocolate and my mouth waters in response. Competing with the sweet smell of the cake is the savoury smell of meat roasting, crackling in the hearth almost makes me cry. Vegetables, chopped and ready, line the grand table in the middle of the kitchen, and jugs of nectar sit pretty on a corner table created from a block of ice. The kitchen-kin are preparing the feast for the evening which means I missed something like this at the dinner I was forbidden to attend yesterday.

One of the kitchen-kin notices us standing in the doorway and comes forward, bowing all the while. “My prince, do you need your room?”

Room? He has a room in the kitchen?
“Can I live here too?” I ask before I can stop myself, and the prince lets out a surprised laugh.

“I’m sure I can find you some accommodation here, but the room Ailey is talking about is not a bedroom but merely a cooking room. One I use when I wish to bake,” he says, and I forget all dignity and gape at him. He bakes. *He* bakes.

“Will you be baking now?” Ailey, the servant-kin, asks.

“Yes. If you could ready the ingredients…?” he asks as if she could refuse. The servant-kin, a hobgoblin, nods her head twice and leaves.

“Should I call for food or will you wait to eat what I make?” he asks, gesturing for me to follow him through the chaos. Servant-kin bow as we pass, moving aside to open up a path for us.

“How long will it take for you to bake?” I may enjoy looking at him but not enough to endure hunger for him any longer than I absolutely have to.

“Twenty minutes. Can you hold on that long?” He looks at us with a pleasant gaze and we meet his gaze with a warning glinting in ours.

“Only if we have a snack to tide us over till then,” I respond and he gives me a sharp look. I wonder why.

The room is located at the back of the kitchen beside a storeroom. It is small and cozy, set up with humble furnishings. The room is furnished with two wooden chairs and a wooden table on which ingredients have been placed. A small window lets in tepid light and bushels of spices hang from the ceiling. The air is fragrant with the smell of the food cooking outside. I could live here.
The prince goes to get some snacks for us and we settle on a hard chair and breathe in the room. The Caisleán’s presence expands in our senses until we can almost feel her as an extension of ourself.

“What are you doing?” The prince’s question shatters the moment and I find myself staring at him, unable to explain.

“Food,” he offers, not insisting on an answer. He comes inside the room and closes the door and we are struck by the him-ness of the prince. His presence in the midst of others is intentionally subdued but now, in this tiny room with no one to diffuse his self, he is potent.

I feel him like a storm in my senses.

The plate he sets in front of us contains two pastries shaped like half-moons. I don’t know what they contain but the smell alone is enough to make me salivate. I wonder if I can restrain myself and eat in a manner befitting a royal handmaid.

We watch Irial slip off his gloves and roll up his sleeves, revealing muscular arms that probably wield swords expertly. His fingernails are short and blunt.

“Please eat,” he says, gesturing to the food but we ignore the hunger, preferring to watch him instead.

He adds flour, water and some other ingredients to a bowl, his movements precise and sure. I reach for a pastry, lift my veil a little, and take a bite, unaware I am doing so until the flavours burst on my tongue. I must make a sound of contentment because he looks over and smiles.

“I like what you said,” he says after a minute has passed. I swallow my current mouthful and look askance at him. “About being an idea,” he elaborates.
“Oh?”

“Yes. I have similar thoughts though rather than being an idea, I’d call myself a collection of moments,” he says, looking down at his hands. There is something despairing about the way he says this.

“Good moments?” we ask.

“No. Bad ones,” he says with a twist of his lips too raw to be called a smile. “All the bad ones.”

“Someone told me we are all words,” I say, remembering Uaine. “Words that come together to make a story.”

“What word are you?” He kneads the dough expertly.

“I am not sure. I don’t think I’m even a word. I’m just a few letters gathered together pretending to be a word but knowing we don’t make sense.” I take another bite of my pastry and chew, thinking. “I think people have different meanings, are different words to different people.”

“What word am I to you?” he asks me, smile absent for once.

“I don’t know you well enough to say but…”

“But?” he prompts.

“No,” we say and shrug. “The word ‘no.’ What other word could you be?”

“Because I’m the enemy?” He stops kneading the dough and looks at me, his face tense.

“Because you’re beautiful.” It’s difficult to admit that, but it is much better than entertaining impossibilities.

“I wasn’t aware that friendship required beauty,” he says.
“It wasn’t friendship I was thinking of,” I mumble, looking down at the pastry.

Silence follows my statement and I look up, wondering if I have offended him. But no, he is looking surprised as though he cannot believe I said what I did. Perhaps all the pretend handmaids he knows are more timorous than I am.

“If not friendship, what then?” he asks.

“I’m not exactly sure, but friendship is rather pallid and I suspect it doesn’t involve kissing. I find myself extremely curious about kissing now that I have met your lips.”

He laughs out loud. I’m glad I amuse him.

“Will you show me your face?” he asks.

We slip the veil off our face and let him look his fill of us. We are not ashamed of our in-between face.

“Well? Will you tell her we’re not ugly?” we ask him and his brows draw together; he looks confused.

“Who are you?” he asks us.

We shrug. We still don’t have an answer for him.

“Can I ask you a question?” He wipes his hands on a piece of cloth, covers the dough with another and comes to lean against the table beside me.

“Only if we can ask you one first,” we say, looking up at him.

He looks wary but nods.

“Why do you wear gloves?” we ask. He stiffens at our question and is silent for a long minute.

“My magick lets me see the history of any object or person we touch. The experience is overwhelming and because I want a choice in whose or what past I see, I wear gloves,” he
says nonchalantly but we can see from the tremor in his hands the strain that comes with his magick.

“You saw fire when you touched us?”

“That is one question more than we bargained for. Do I get to ask two too?” We agree and he continues, “I saw fire, burning and pain, the colour of death. That is all.”

We want to ask him to touch us again but we hold our tongue.

“My turn now.” He drags his chair around and sits beside us. “The princess called you Saoirse but that isn’t your true name, is it? What is your true name?”

We will let Croi-false answer him.

“Why would I divulge my true name? That would be inviting everyone to try to control me,” I say.

“Not true. When our sires name us, they remove the magick in our name, the magick that allows others to control us via our name, and dissolve it in our blood.” He sees our uncomprehending look. “You didn’t know that, did you? And you don’t trust me enough to believe me. Fair enough. Will you answer my next question?”

“I will try,” I say.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

“I grew up in the human world.” I think about the Hag, the human city, the Wilde Forest and the princeling. “I’ve only been in Tír na nÓg for a week but it seems far longer.”

“Because it has been longer,” the prince interrupts us.

“What?” A cold feeling trickles down our back and our shoulder blades twinge insistently.
“One day in Tír na nÓg is equal to two in the human world. Time moves differently here.” I stand up before he has finished speaking.

“Is that the truth?” We ask him, afraid of his answer.

“You know we cannot lie.”

I grab my veil and move to leave and he stops us without thinking, a hand on our arm and following that, shock on his face. What did he see? We do not have the time to ask.

“I need to go. Don’t stop us.”

“Your name. I will not try to claim it. I give you my word.”

“You would not succeed even if you did.”

“Tell me, please.”

I look at him and wonder who he will become to us in the future. We take just one moment to decide and then give in to our heart. “Croi. My name. Keep it close.” Then we’re gone.

We run through the corridors, ignoring the angry yells from the kin we bump into or knock over. The Caisleán leads us through a maze of corridors to the dark hallway from the night before. We stop just in time for there are soldiers lined up outside the hallway, preventing anyone from accessing it. We retrace our steps until we find a small cupboard full of empty flower baskets.

It is uncomfortable in the cupboard but at least it gives me a secret place to check on the HeartSeed. I take it out of my pocket and unwrap it carefully. What I see has me moaning my disbelief. Why did I not think about the way time moves in Tír na nÓg? Why didn’t anyone tell me? Why didn’t Uaine tell me? Why wouldn’t she tell me?
There is very little magick remaining in the HeartSeed. Just one little flicker of it and that too looks like it is going to disappear soon. I try to give the HeartSeed my magick but I’m unsuccessful. Finally, we have no other option but to settle into the cupboard and wait for the guards to leave or change or for an opportunity to present itself so that we can get into the heart of the Caisleán. I know we cannot fight those many soldiers by ourself though the Croi-inside would try.

I don’t know how many hours we spend in that dank dark cupboard that smells overpoweringly of our guilt. We should have found a way before this moment. We cannot let Uaine die. We gave her our word and we cannot break it. We will not break it.

But the soldiers do not move from their spots; no one brings them food, and no one comes to offer them release or relief. They stand there, backs erect, hands on their swords, tireless Fae dancing to the whims of the Robber Queen.

I think of Tinder. Maybe she knows a way to distract the soldiers or another way into the heart or maybe I just need the brightness of her light. She may be in our rooms, waiting for me. I leave the cupboard and find it dark outside. Apart from the soldiers guarding the heart, the corridors of the Caisleán are deserted. Everyone is at dinner.

Two soldiers stand guard outside our rooms but they neither acknowledge my presence nor do they protest when I slip past them and into the main room. I do not hear Tinder’s voice and I wonder if she accompanied the princess to the dinner feast. I check the rooms and find no one. When I return to the main room, I am surprised to see the Monca-brownie sitting in the shadows. She gets up when she sees me and starts laying the table for a meal. A food cart in a corner is piled high with covered dishes.
“Your dinner,” she says gruffly. She uncovers the dishes and the scent of food assaults me. I almost go weak kneed when the hunger hits. I haven’t eaten much the entire day. Still, I am unsure whether I should trust her. She did try to have us killed.

“The king said to make sure you ate,” she says, not looking into our eyes. Her words are not a lie; they have the clean taste of the truth. Reassured, we move towards the chair in front of the table and sit down looking at the food spread in front of us. We think briefly of Irial and wonder what he is doing and who he is bestowing his smiles upon now. I push the wistfulness aside and pull the first dish toward me. It is fish cooked in some kind of sauce and dressed with some greens. It smells succulent and my mouth waters. I pick up a fork but pause and look at the Monca-brownie who has retreated to the shadows.

“Where are Tinder and the princess?” I ask.

“They are where their presence is required,” she answers, expressing her dislike of me with every syllable of the sentence.

I shrug and start eating. I will think about what to do once my hunger is appeased which it finally is when I finish a plate of fruits. The Monca-brownie moves closer to the table and sits down in the seat across from me. She seems at ease now, as though some great weight has been taken off her.

“I did not want to do this,” she says and we frown, not understanding what she is talking about. “But you left me no choice. The king left me no choice.”

The first prickles of unease march their way down our aching back and we look at her, the food we have consumed becoming rocks in our stomach.

“What have you done?” We gasp in horror as our magick curdles, finally detecting the poison that was cloaked by spells.
“You have to die; there is no other way,” the Monca-brownie says sadly. “Can you not feel the poison yet?”

We stare at her. I am frightened. We are not frightened; we are angry.

“My princess will lose everything if she finds you. I cannot allow that,” the Monca-brownie continues speaking and we feel the poison enter our blood. My body, our body, we, I, us. I breathe. We get up and push away from the table. Sweep away the dishes. We try to call out but the poison is vicious and we fall onto the ground, our limbs arrested. Our magicks flail, not knowing what to do, how to heal us. We are helpless.

The Monca-brownie stands above us. We gather our dignity, thin though it is, close to us and sit up. The pain inside us intensifies and our back contorts in reaction to the pain.

“If you had just waited, Monca, we would have died anyway,” we say, our voice ragged and breaking. We flush hot and cold and hot again. Our magick builds into a crescendo and tries to save us.

“I could not leave it to fate, my lady. Forgive me.” She is crying, the Monca-brownie. Why is she the one crying when we are the one who is going to die? “Your mother entrusted the princess to me. She has all of my love and all my loyalty. I cannot knowingly let pain come to her.”

“Our mother?” We almost laugh then. Our mother, the puppet master. She is the one who started this. We hate her. We will die hating her.

“Forgive me,” the Monca-brownie says. Before we can plead with her, before we can beg her, she is gone, closing the door behind her so that even if we yell, the soldiers outside won’t hear us.
Chapter Thirty-One

There will be no laments sung for us. We will be a momentary grief in the Fire King’s heart, and the mother who halved us will never know how we came to our end. We lie on the floor and watch the shadows congregate in the corners of the room and wonder if it would not be much better to let death call us his.

The poison’s first victim is our mobility; a weakness grips our limbs so tightly that moving gets dangerously close to impossible. Our shoulder blades feel like they are breaking and we convulse, two steps past agony. We feel the poison diffuse into our blood and start to eat our insides.

We are always being consumed.

Will we die without finding an answer to ourself? Who we are and why we are? Will our questions remain unanswered?

The Monca-brownie’s face, arrested in the dim light of the main room, was somewhere between satisfaction and sorrow. She would rather commit a murder than see her beloved princess suffer. Such is her love, such is her loyalty. Have we ever evoked such feelings in anyone? If we had the chance, would we have been able to?

What kind of life would we have led? What flavour of happiness would we have tasted? Would we have loved anyone? Would anyone have loved us?

Were it not for the pain, we would have laughed at this moment. Even at the end, we are made of questions.

We close our eyes, too tired to fight the destiny shoved upon us. Darkness swoops over us and we confess, we turn to it gratefully.

Then the HeartSeed burns white hot in our pocket, tearing through our apathy, shocking us awake, and we remember what we are always forgetting. It is fine for us to end,
but we gave our word to Uaine and we cannot, we will not, we refuse to not keep it. We gather strength from all our corners and let it accumulate in the hollows of our heart. We are even less than what we used to be if we do not fight.

We sit up with difficulty and immediately, the Caisleán floods our senses with images of Tinder and the princess talking to Faolan, of our father sitting at a table full of austere and imperial Fae. We see Irial, in an ending of his own, looking at a laughing Fae maiden dressed in the green of spring. We see the soldiers outside our rooms talking to each other. We try calling them but our voice is like a bird that flew away.

“Help us,” we think to the Caisleán. “Help us,” we plead, demand, command the Caisleán. Our plea is soundless and for a moment, we do not think she will respond. Then we feel her bewilderment. She has forgotten how to draw her magick together in a shape that can talk. From our vantage point, with the mounting pain, we see gold and brown magick motes, coming together to form a wavering female shape that blinks in and out of existence. After a minute or two of flickering, the shape acquires enough stability, and I am able to look upon the avatar of the Talamh Caisleán.

She is dressed in a bloody white dress; her hair is completely white and long, flowing down her back. The pupils of her eyes are also white but ringed thinly by dark green. Her skin is brown; a deep nut brown. She stands above me, in the same position the Monca-brownie occupied not five minutes ago. Her face is blank as though she does not know how to twist her features into an expression, but her emotions are so strong that we can taste them on our tongue. Right now, the taste is the sour lime of panic.
Our magicks spark feebly in her presence as though they want to sing a song but can no longer comprehend the melody of it. We try to push ourself up from the floor and realize with growing detachment that the feat just may be impossible for us.

“Help us,” we think again and the Caisleán’s eyes widen. She walks to the door leading outside and looks over her shoulder. She wants us to follow her but how are we supposed to get to our feet? We take two breaths and feel the air burn its way down our throat. We are fading fast. We grab the back of the chair nearest to us and confront the torture of getting up. It takes us a while, we waste precious minutes, and the Caisleán bears witness to our efforts but we finally regain our feet. We stagger after her and when we are close to her, she reaches out and opens the door, disappearing through it.

We follow her, not stopping to think of where she is leading us. At this point, she is the only ally we have and choices are a luxury we no longer believe in.

We go through the door and instead of coming out into the corridor, we find ourself at the top of a grand staircase that leads down into a hall that is in the process of decay. Ivy has dried over walls that, as the few places that remain uncovered show, used to be covered with finely woven tapestry. The floor of the hall is covered with thick light green moss; the ceiling of the hall has been reclaimed by bare branches, trees stuck in perpetual winter. Grief permeates the air, and we find it fitting that the Caisleán brought us here.

The staircase leads down to the center of the hall where a withered tree grows on a dais. We stagger down the staircase and fall down twice. Each time, it gets more difficult to get back up but giving up is out of the question. When we get to the dais, the Caisleán returns to her incorporeal form and we feel her, like a hand on our shoulder, steadying us.
We look at the tree in all her dying glory. Her branches, that reach the ceiling, must have been majestic in happier days but now they are bare, the knots on the joints mourning the absence of the green. An empty pedestal stands in the barren shade of the tree. We move past it to the trunk. We pat the trunk as if that is enough to wake the dryad within because surely this is the tree that contains Uaine’s sister. I don’t see the HeartStone of the Caisleán. Perhaps the rumours are true; perhaps the Robber Queen has lost the HeartStone.

The tree doesn’t react and no dryad manifests herself magickally or otherwise. We think hard but we cannot remember how we woke Uaine or if we even did. We do not have the time to think long; even though our magicks have been slowing its progress, the poison is nearly to our heart. Once it reaches our heart, we will die.

We take out Uaine’s HeartSeed and unwrap it. It is cool in our hands, the flicker of magick we saw in it earlier almost gone. How much did it cost the HeartSeed to stop us from giving in to death earlier? Did it sacrifice itself for us? What are we doing?

We do not want to fail and yet it seems we already have. The thought of failure hurts us more than physical pain ever will. How do we wake Uaine’s sister? Have we been defeated by our lack of knowledge?

Our knees buckle and we fall to the ground a little ways from the withered tree. There, we make a decision, most probably the wrong one but at this point, the only one we can make. We dig a little hole in the earth beside us, using what little strength we have and we plant Uaine’s Heartseed, burying it in the earth and pressing the soil on it firmly. The soil is red and grainy here, not at all good for plants but what choice do we have?

We lie back on the ground and feel our life starting to ebb away. The Croi-outside demands control of our body and we have no reason to deny her these last few moments.
My world is made of the forest; rich and earthy, green and fragrant. My dreams are of roads and the freedom to walk them. I want a place to return to, family who will wait for me. I want to look in a mirror and know myself. I want all the little things—a smile from someone I love, a warm hot dinner, a touch from someone who loves me. I want to be sun-kissed and gold. I want to sit with my toes dipped in a cold stream on a hot day. I want a butterfly to land on my nose. I want to know what shape I was born in. All these little things I want are great grand impossibilities.

I cry.

And then I become angry. If death courts me so determinedly, I’ll just give in to him. Uaine’s Heartseed lies cold in the ground. The wall between the Croi-inside and me is very thin; I know everything she has been hiding from me. The fire princess’s father is our father; we are Fae; our mother is the one who halved us. And most importantly, if the poison doesn’t kill us first, the Glamour breaking will. It seems that we are destined for death.

Bitter, so bitter. This pain is our whole world now. Why wait for death? No. I will not. I take the twin magicks we have in us, the Talamh and the Tine magicks, and shape them into a command. We send them to Uaine’s HeartSeed, and I command it to grow. When the Heartseed doesn’t listen, we use the dregs of our strength and sing a line of magick, forcing it to grow.

I don’t know what happens next; my eyelids are too heavy and our entire body burns as though someone is trying to push us into a space we do not fit in. Control of our body switches between us when the pain increases too much for me alone; the Croi-inside and I try to exist separately and together at the time as the poison ravages us.
Then a cold hand is on our forehead and a voice we have heard before, a crotchety hoarse voice, tries to bring me back to consciousness but our shoulder blades hurt, our insides hurt, our outsides hurt and we would just much rather be asleep than endure this pain. But the voice is relentless, refusing to leave us to our peace. A green-gold magick spills into us, cleansing us of the poison.

The cleansing doesn’t take long. Minutes, though it feels like hours. We open our eyes, the pain having receded a bit, to find Uaine sitting beside us on the ground. She looks older than she did when we last saw her. There are more lines on her face and the green-gold of her eyes is faded. We wish she was the Hag.

“You must have made someone very angry,” she says softly. “The poison was laced with magick. Just in case the poison failed to kill you, the magick would.”

“We know,” we rasp. The admission raises her eyebrows and she gives us a long look before turning to look around at the ruined hall. “This is the heart of the Caisleán?” we ask. Uaine’s tree now shares space with the desiccated one; it is odd to see the fresh green-gold leaves of Uaine’s tree among the bare branches.

“It is.” She nods, moving to stand before the empty pedestal. “Though the heart itself is missing, and the hall is more decrepit than I remember it being.”

“We couldn’t wake your sister,” we say to her, our apology falling off our tongue in a gasp as our shoulder blades pulse with pain.

“She has gone into the deep sleep,” Uaine says, getting to her feet. She walks over to the withered tree while we sit still, besieged by the trenchant pain. Death may have been a mercy.
Uaine puts her hand on the trunk of the tree, closes her eyes and we see thin lines of her magick enter the tree. The magick shoots downwards towards the roots of the tree and Uaine opens her eyes, steps back and waits. A moment later, the figure of a dryad forms on the trunk of the tree and much like we saw when Uaine first emerged from her tree, Uaine’s sister emerges from hers.

She is as withered as her tree. Tall and ethereal, she has a pointed face and eyes the colour of faded, late summer grass. Her hair is mostly dead twigs and her skin is the colour of parchment. Her magick is pale and dim. She looks old in a way Uaine doesn’t, and from Uaine’s reaction to her sister’s appearance, she, too, doesn’t remember her like this.

The newest dryad doesn’t say a word. Instead she simply stands, drawing in shuddering breaths as though the air is too thin, and she is suffocating. Her eyes dart around the ruins of the hall and to the empty pedestal. A cry escapes her and she moves toward it, her hands outstretched. We wonder if the deep sleep Uaine talked about has damaged her in more ways than one. We watch as Uaine catches her sister’s hands and pulls her close in an embrace,

Then I can watch no more because the pain is our sky and it surrounds us. It tries to join me and the Croi-inside into one and our face burns as the final change overtakes us. We scream out loud, and the Caisleán magnifies the sound so that even the walls shake. The moment of disappearing approaches us and we bend in two, not being able to go with grace.

We will fade and let the earth reclaim us.

“Get up,” Uaine commands us. I ignore her. We did her bidding; we got her here and to her sister. The least she can do is let us die in peace. “Get up, Croi!” She adds a sting to
her command, along with a little bit of magick; we find ourself, impossibly, getting to our feet.

Our world is hazy with the pain but we are able to see the desiccated figure of Uaine’s sister standing slightly behind her. She has her eyebrows furrowed and is looking at me as though I taste, unpleasantly, of mystery.

“You have a choice,” Uaine states. I can feel her gaze on me but I do not raise my head. It hurts too much.

“Do we?” We are uninterested in choices. What we seek is an escape from this pain.

“Yes,” Uaine says. We can tell it’s her because her voice has a growl in it. “We can either join your two selves into one or…”

“Or?” we prompt.

“Or you can die.”

Choices, she says.

“Maybe we’ll choose death,” I say. True death would be easier, more complete, than this half-dying.

I thought I would be happy once I knew what I was. It turns out that I am nothing. Just a splinter of something bigger than me. Not even a fully formed thought. A half thought, that’s what I am. “Maybe death will be better.”

The Caisleán manifests herself suddenly, her face stretched into grotesque proportions. She works her mouth but she cannot make a sound and the foundation creaks expressing her anger as effectively as if she had screamed it.

We ignore her theatrics.

“I don’t want to die!” I whisper.
“She doesn’t think she is a part of us,” we tell Uaine and her sister. Even though she is all the colour that is in us.

“How can I die like this? How can you ask me to die like this?” My anger makes the air smell like it does before a storm. “Is this how you repay me, Uaine? I am breaking!”

“You are already broken,” Uaine’s sister finally speaks. She is right. We are. I am. The admission is all it takes to make the decision.

I stand here on the cusp of forever, knowing that this is my end. Yes, I will exist in some watered down form of myself but really, it will be her who gets to taste the sweetness of summer, feel the bite of autumn and smell the softness of spring. Death was never an option for her.

“Join us,” we say.

“Do it quickly,” I beg. I take a deep breath and relinquish control of our body for the very last time.

We stand, wishing we could comfort her in some way, and reassure her that what we give her is not death but another way to live.

Uaine and her sister stand on either side of us and bid us close our eyes. We do. Uaine says that the joining will be as painful as the breaking; that we should prepare ourself for the pain. We should pay attention to her instructions but it is difficult when the Croi-false is grieving for herself. She is thinking so carefully of all the things she has seen, all the things precious to her: the market in the human city, the food she filched, the princeling, the Wilde Forest and the Hag. Most especially the Hag. She collects all her yearnings and places them inside our heart where they will stay as reminders of who she was.
Uaine and her sister start weaving their magick. We feel our two selves coming together. Our Tine magick and our Talamh magick entwine tightly as the dryads stitch us into one. Their magick buoy us when we fall to the ground and writhe. When our shoulder blades tear and a strange mass unfurls on our back. Wings. We have wings. The damp on our face are the tears the Croi-false sheds until we cannot feel her anymore, until we cannot feel ourself anymore, until we are no more.

Then there is silence.
Epilogue

I open my eyes in a room lit only by the moonlight that has crept its way in through the open windows. One thought and a flame burns in a lamp that stands in a corner. I watch with satisfaction as the light rips the darkness apart. I sit up and the tenderness in my back makes me wince. Wings, I remember wings. I wonder what colour they were. I look at the half-moon of my nails, the pale gold of my skin, and the entwined green and orange magicks underneath it.

The blanket on my bed is coarse and chafes. The pillow I was resting my head on is hard. A sweetness infuses the air, as though flowers are blooming somewhere near me. A mirror on the wall opposite the bed invites me to take a closer look at myself, but I turn away. Not yet.

Has it always been so silent inside of me?

I get out of bed and stumble when my feet touch the ground. The floor is cold. I have grown even taller. My feet are long and narrow. I take a step and my toes curl.

I am not in the Caisleán anymore. I cannot feel her around me but if I’m not in the Caisleán, then where am I? I look at the door to the room and wonder what waits beyond it. I take the few steps to the window and look outside. All I see are trees.

I could burn them all. Burn them and set a desert growing under my footsteps. I won’t though. Not yet.

I walk to stand in front of the mirror. Let’s see what secrets it reveals.

The princess’s blue dress is in tatters. First Caoimhe’s dress and now the princess’s. I do not have good luck with dresses. Then I bring my head up and the first thing I see is my neck. It is long. My chin looks like a chin now instead of a mistake. My lips are generous and look like they smile a lot even though I cannot remember the last time they did. My nose is
straight and my cheekbones sharp. My eyebrows are thin and arched, and my eyes are still heavy with pain. I have a narrow forehead, and hair as black as a night crow except where it is interrupted by the orange of the fire I love. I am beautiful. Just like all the other Fae.

Minutes stretch and pass as I stand before the mirror, looking at my reflection. Then I hear voices outside my door, and curiosity nips me once again. Where am I and how did I get here?

I move to the door. It doesn’t occur to me to be afraid; I can protect myself. I am no longer a broken brownie-something. I am Croi, and I am dangerous in ways kin cannot even begin to comprehend.

Outside my door is a dank, dark hall that must culminate in a room. The voices get louder as I get nearer to the room, and if I concentrate, I can recognize the familiar sound of a pixie’s pitch. I move forward and stop in the doorway. The first thing I see is the fire princess standing in front of a desk, hiding the person sitting behind it. On her shoulder is Tinder and beside her is Faolan. Standing beside the desk is a large bearded kin with horns on his head and a glower on his face. His magick is the colour of stone.

He sees me first.

I meet the curiosity in the bearded kin’s eyes and smile a salute to it. The others follow the bearded kin’s gaze but no recognition sparks Tinder’s eyes and no vitriol passes through the princess’s lips—they stare at me as though I am a stranger. Faolan’s eyes narrow; I remember the sword he wielded against me. I will not forget that easily.

When I take another step into the room, my magicks start singing the same way they sing when they are near the Fire King, my father. I hear a chair being pushed back and the
swish of material coming in contact with a wooden surface. I watch as time slows down to seconds and a Fae woman walks around the desk.

She has a destroyed kind of beauty. She wears her hair short, cropped close to her skull; this brings her fine features into stark relief. Her eyes contain the wreckage of a tragedy, and a gleam that casts doubts upon her sanity. She is dressed in a plain black tunic and black leggings, and on her feet are black boots. A scabbard hugs her back. This Fae looks as though she has scrubbed the softness out of herself; like all her edges have been filed sharp.

I look into her eyes again and another piece falls into place. I saw these eyes once before, when the compulsion spell broke.

This Fae with the anger limning the cracks in her magick, this Fae without the softness and the sweetness, she is the one who halved me. I yearned for her for years and now she stands before me.

“Hello Croi,” my mother says. Her voice has the wrong sort of happy in it. “I have been waiting for you.” And she smiles.

End Book One